

Dana: Welcome to I Swear on My Mother's Grave. My name is Dana Black, and in 2016, I lost my mom. And now I'm talking to other people who have also lost their moms. And I don't just mean in death, because there are so many ways you can lose a mother. And we're going to get into it. So, let's talk about our moms.

Happy September! My mom was a high school biology teacher, and I was—and still am—obsessed with school supplies. I loved shopping for them. I still go down the aisles at Target, and touch all the pens and folders. I love those really big pink, rubbery erasers, just the feel and the smell. Oh, it brings me back. So I just wanted to give a shout-out to all the teachers right now who are navigating this crazy new world of remote learning, or staggered learning, or teaching your students while wearing a mask. And all the parents who are making this work from home while you have full-time jobs and other responsibilities, you are all incredible, and I just wanted to send my love and support, and remind everybody to just keep holding on, and breathing, and being kind to yourself. 'Cause we're all human, and we've never done this before, and we're in the middle of a live experiment. So I just wanted to send my love and support. I don't have children. I have a dog. And that's not the same thing at all, and so my hat is off to all of you.

Today's guest is an amazing artist. They are an actor. They are a writer. They are a social justice advocate. They are a circus performer. I met this artist a few years ago, doing a workshop of a play at DePaul University, and then a few years later, we were both cast in the same role, at the exact same time, in the same play, in two separate theatres, in two separate cities. We were both cast as the role of Anne de Bourgh in a play called Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley by Lauren Gunderson.

It's sort of a retelling, reimagining, Part II of Pride and Prejudice. And the character of Anne de Bourgh, you might remember from Pride and Prejudice—she was in the book, but she had a very small role—is the daughter of the very overbearing, overprotective, domineering character of Catherine de Bourgh. But in this play, Anne gets to kind of have a life of her own, and a narrative and a story of her own. Because by the time Act II begins, her mother, Catherine de Bourgh, has passed away. And by the time I played this role, and by the time my guest played this role, we had also lost our mothers. And so there was this meta thing happening, where we were playing the character of a woman who's going through grief in real time throughout the play, and trying to figure out who she is and what she believes, outside of the shadow of this woman who told her told her everything she knew about life. And so Anne de Bourgh has to come into her own while she still feels separate and different from the Bennet girls and the Bennet family. She feels like she's an other. She feels different. She feels left out. She feels resentful. And so you're watching her go through grief in real-time, which was bringing up a lot of personal grief for both of us, as actors playing this role. And

we would reach out to each other through texts, and send photos of ourselves in character and our costumes, and just send love to each other from our respective theatres as we were going through this journey.

I said this line, and it felt so honest to me: in the middle of the scene with Lizzy Bennet, Anne de Bourgh turns sharply to her and says, "(accented) I would ask you to kindly not speak of my mother. I feel her loss quite deeply." And yes, I had to do the accent. I mean, I had to. It's a British play, I'm an actor. There's also an ask-word. It's literally in the line. I had to do it. I think that line really moved me when I said it, and I know it moved my guest.

I wanted to start this interview in the middle of a story about a well-intentioned white mother in the Midwest trying to her adopted daughter feel at home. This is Deanna Myers. [end intro]

Deanna: My mom's version of displaying recognizable faces in our home was putting up pictures of Asian children. (laughs)

Dana: (laughs) For real? Did she know them?

Deanna: No!

Dana: No! Just from the internet?

Deanna: There was just this poster—I remember this poster of a group of small Asian children in similar school uniforms, looking at the camera, and laughing. And it almost looked like the front of a school brochure. (laughs) Do you know what I mean? And then on the bottom—I can't recite it verbatim, but it said, "Gems of Asia." And it was this poster my mom had found and framed [05:00] and hung up in our family room! (laughs)

Dana: (laughs)

Deanna: She was trying. God bless her, she was trying. She did not know what she was doing, and she did not know how to handle a kid who did not look like her. But she certainly tried, God bless her.

My mom was a big feelings person. We had a very complicated relationship. And I've done a lot of thinking about this, of course, of course we do. She had very volatile mood swings. Her feelings were very big. She, in every way, was very big. And her moods and her changes, they were very mercurial. They could be very unpredictable for me. And I was a really, really sensitive kid.

So for her, a mood would come and then go, and she would not think anything of it. For me, she would have these big explosions, and then I would still be sitting there, trying to figure out what happened and work through my response, and she was already eight steps ahead, trying to get me to catch up. And so we had a lot of clashes because of that. She'd get angry about something that I didn't quite understand, and I'd still be sitting there in that, trying to figure out what happened, and trying to nurse my hurt feelings. And she'd be like, "We're already over here! What is the problem?"

Dana: And you're still in the wake, like the water wake. You're in the wake of this violent—you're still out there, lost in the aftershocks.

Deanna: Yeah. And what's funny is that because she was that kind of person, she never really talked about or examined a lot of those feelings. She only just felt them and sat in them, and didn't really know how to deal with them. I'm not sure; maybe it's because of that that I did become a person who unpacks and thinks about those things a lot, and talks about those things a lot. I think we're always developing in response to the things that we were influenced by.

What about you? You had a really close relationship with your mom.

Dana: For a long time, yeah. For a long time. Really close, till about I was maybe 23, 24 is when sort of it got tricky, 'cause she got really sick, and physically sick, and dealing with neuropathy and opioid addiction and pain and the divorce from my dad. But I felt like I was becoming more estranged from her as I moved towards my late twenties. But I would see her. It was just really hard to see her. And I didn't want to talk to her. I didn't want to call her, 'cause my mom was always crying or big emotions, of course, the same. But the emotions were also clouded in liquor or hydrocodone or oxycontin or lack of sleep. Or she couldn't stand after a while. She would fall. I mean, it was bad.

But I think a lot of my mom's stuff, like you just said: didn't go to therapy, would try to do therapy but never followed though. My dad said, "Let's do couples therapy." She didn't want to do it. But there was so much pain from her mother, or from the death of her sister, or the loss of her father: all these things that she could have been talking about. Doesn't mean that she wouldn't have developed neuropathy. It doesn't mean she still didn't have addiction issues. But like you're saying: I want to spend a life talking about it. I want to process it, get it out, figure out how to do so as a younger generation. And I think, for my mom, she didn't. And what could have happened if she had? Some of that pain, I know—what killed her was drugs, and all of that didn't help her—but I think if she wasn't holding in all that energy, would it have her body recover. I don't know.

Did your mom watch her mom have violent outbursts? How did your mom talk about her mom, too? Was it hereditary for her? Was it something she witnessed growing up?

Deanna: My mom's mom—her name was Carolyn—I never met my grandmother. I was adopted after my grandmother passed away. And my mom would speak about her in these really reverent ways that made me think that she idolized her. And by all accounts, my mom was pretty similar to her mother.

Dana: How old was your mom when she lost her mom?

Deanna: She was pretty young, too. I think my mom was probably in her mid-thirties when her mother passed away. And she and my dad took care of her for the last few months of her life. They literally had a hospital bed in their home. And they had my brothers. So it was three very young children, all who were born less than a year apart. So I don't know how they did it. Props to them.

Dana: They're all biological, your brothers, [10:00] is that correct?

Deanna: Yes. So my brothers are all biologically related, and I'm the only (laughs) the only girl. I'm the only adoptee. And I'm the youngest by ten years.

Dana: (laughs)

Deanna: (laughs)

Dana: That's a lot!

Deanna: But I think honestly, if you are a sensitive and smart human, you see how sensitive people are treated in the world, and there is an armor. I will not deny the fact that, when I walk out my door, for a variety of reasons there is an armor that goes on. I am somebody who walks around the world by myself a lot, too.

Dana: You live alone.

Deanna: I travel alone. I move about the city by myself. And I'm somebody who experiences a lot of street harassment, and do a lot of advocacy work, and I'm out in the protests. And there's just a specific kind of self-preservation that has to occur in order for me to just get from point A to point B on a day-to-day basis. And I have found that being an other for the entirety of my life has created a need and a constant kind of process of learning how to take up space, and learning how to fend for myself.

Dana: Even inside your family, you're an other, right?

Deanna: Ye.

Dana: And then in the world at large, you're an other.

Deanna: Right.

Dana: Or, the idea of being a person of color. So you saw it from a micro, and then you see it in the macro world. So did you feel it when you were small, then?

Deanna: I think I did.

Dana: Were you the only person in your town, where you were growing up—did you know other adopted people?

Deanna: Oh god no. (laughs)

Dana: I was like, "Michigan?"

Deanna: The funny thing is...

Dana: That's not to say—I knew one adopted kid in my very religious, white town of Wheaton. So I do laugh, because no, there aren't many.

Deanna: (laughs)

Dana: There was one! There was one!

Deanna: "An" adoptee.

Dana: "An," that I knew. And I know there were others, I know there were others. I just didn't know them very well.

Deanna: It's a weird thing. So I've done a little bit of research, and actually there are a large number of Asian kids who were adopted in the Midwest in the '80s. There's such a stigma in Korea, in regard to single mothers. The familial structure is something that's very, very important there. So a lot of young Korean women, who I would imagine did not have a lot of conversations around contraception and have safe sex and et cetera et cetera, and then were getting knocked up, and didn't know what to do: didn't have a place to go, didn't have support systems. I've heard stories of women wanting to keep their children, as single parents, and being disowned by their families, and having no support. And there become this big trend of women giving up their children.

That was a tangent. But there were a small smattering of people of color in my community, growing up. But where I grew up was largely white, and very affluent, and

pretty conservative. And I don't know that I had the vocabulary and the tools to articulate what I was feeling, but I always knew I was different. I mean, all I had to do was look around. And not only that, but I knew I was queer from a really young age. So I was little. I was brown. I was a little speck of brown sugar in a sea of white (laughs) granulated sugar.

Dana: (laughs)

Deanna: And I always knew that I was different. And I didn't know how to interact with that. I didn't know how to talk about it. I didn't have any examples for how to move around the world. There was nothing on TV. And even the people who looked like me growing up didn't have the same experiences. So even if I knew East Asian people—which I knew a small handful—they were not Korean. They were not adoptees. And so it was always trying to navigate on my own, and figure out how to fit in, or how not.

I didn't have a lot of friendships with them. I do remember—okay, so there was this one Chinese girl who I was friends with in elementary school, and her name was Diana. (laughs) So there's Deanna and Diana.

Dana: (laughs)

Deanna: And I used to try to tell people—oh my god, this is really embarrassing—I used to try to convince people that we were sisters. (laughs)

Dana: (laughs)

Deanna: [15:00] And she hated it. She hated it! Well, like, I would hate it too! I would try to force her into (laughs) telling people this story.

Dana: You were already an actor back then. You're like, "Play this role."

Deanna: "Play this role."

Dana: "This is the story we're telling."

Deanna: "This is your part."

Dana: "These are your lines." (laughs)

Deanna: (laughs)

Dana: "You are my family. Put this hat on."

Deanna: Right!

Dana: You didn't have any sisters.

Deanna: I had no family. And now I look back on it, and it was like, oh god, what an odd and yet seemingly textbook situation, trying to find identity and belonging everywhere I was, all the time.

I do have a distinct memory. We were in a community where I lived by the Big Three, which were the automakers of the time. So I grew up in metro Detroit. We constantly had a rotating number of students coming in from other countries, but they would kind of come and go, because their parents would be hired by one of the car manufactures. Normally their parents were things like engineers. And then they'd be there for a year or two, and then they'd leave.

And I do remember very distinctly my first experience with Asian nationalism, which was that this Japanese kid came in, and because I was the only other Asian kid in class, our teacher assigned our desks right next to one another. And I was always such like a puppy dog. I was always so excited when a new person came around. I was the kid who would talk so much that the teacher would put me in a corner by myself...

Dana: (laughs)

Deanna: ...and then I'd just talk louder. (laughs)

Dana: That sounds about right.

Deanna: "Oh, you think you're going to stop me? Cool, cool, cool. I'll just project." But anyway, she put this kid next to me, because she was like, "Well, you alike, and I know that you'll be welcoming." Every time a new came into class, I'd give them some of my snack, and really, really try to sidle up and see what their deal was. And so this kid sitting next to me, Yosuke, looked up at me as I gave him my grapes, and he put his fingers to the side of his eyes, and pulled. And I was so confused. I was like, "White kids do that to me. Other Asian kids have never done that to me. I am so confused." And he would not talk to me ever, unless it was to say something really mean. And I just was so taken aback. And I think we were in third grade.

And I think the reason I still think about it, is because that now I do all of this social justice advocacy, or it's something that's so important to me, and I'm like, "Oh, that was my first experience with actual nationalism." That's what that was. I was blown away, because that was when I knew. That was a definitive moment that I knew: I really did not belong to anybody.

Dana: What did you say to him when he would do that? How did you feel? How did your body feel? Where did you feel rage? Sadness?

Deanna: All I can remember is deep confusion and sadness. I just remember going, "Why is this person who looks like me trying to make fun of me? I'm so confused." (laughs)

Dana: And who could you talk to about that? Was there anybody?

Deanna: Nobody! Nobody. Nobody in our classroom knew. Nobody who I would talk to would have been able to handle it. I grew up in such a white-bread place.

And then the other thing that really strikes me now is this idea of generational healing. I think we are talking so much about our mothers, and the trauma and the pain that they experienced, and how they didn't know how to deal with it.

Dana: Yes, it's come up in a couple calls. Rusty's mom, her generation, my grandmother: there's so many things they could have done differently, or the tools are there now for so much healing.

Deanna: Right, the tools.

Dana: And they just didn't have that, not only in terms of addiction, but in terms of therapy, and how we talk about it, and going online and finding resources. It's just a different world.

Deanna: I think that this comes up a lot in conversations about social justice as well, when I hear people say, "Well, that's history. That doesn't have anything to do with me. That is something that happened 50 years ago, or 100 years ago, or 400 years ago before me. What does that have to do with me?" And there are a lot of shoulds in the world. And there's a lot of things that we think of as being fair or not. [20:00] And is it fair that we are living in a time, in a generation, in a moment in history that we are having to fix a lot? No. There's a lot that I feel like we say should or shouldn't be. But the shoulds are irrelevant if the healing isn't happening. And the responsibility has to fall somewhere. The responsibility of healing and the task of healing, it has to fall somewhere. And if you move it down the line, all you're doing is shirking that responsibility.

Dana: That's beautiful.

Deanna: Thank you.

Dana: That's so true. You keep passing it down, shrugging it off, drinking it off, or whatever it is, or avoiding.

Deanna: And doing that work is really, really uncomfortable, and it's really painful. And people are really afraid of it, and I see why, and I understand why, and I empathize with it. But you have to do it sometime. And when you do that, you lay the groundwork for healing not just yourself, but the people that come after you. And the hope is not that it's going to be done right now. You never get to say, "Here's my stopping point. All healed! All better!" But you do get to go, "Cool. I think this is a thing that I can cope with better, so that when I go out into the world, and I bump up against other people's journeys and healing, I don't halt it. I don't hinder it. I hopefully encourage it. I hopefully help it along in some ways."

And that is something that I would not have realized or started working on, had it not been for not just my mother's death—I've had experiences with death and loss from a really young age, and then right after my mom passed away, there were several losses that occurred. I genuinely feel like I went on a tailspin for probably a few years.

Dana: Losing friends?

Deanna: I just did not know which way was up.

Dana: Friends, family?

Deanna: Yeah, friends, family, loved ones. I also went through a decision with my family, which was that this is not a structure that's healthy for me. And so I made a very difficult decision to take a step away from that dynamic. I just felt like I was out to sea, for probably a really long time. I think the first time that I really started facing it in a really active way was while I was in Milwaukee. I think that was the first time I really admitted that there was a problem that needed to be addressed. And that was, what, a year and a half ago at this point?

Dana: Doing Christmas at Pemberley?

Deanna: Doing *Christmas at Pemberley*, yeah. And I'm not sure if it was the circumstances or the timing—I'm sure it was a combination of all of those things—but that was the first time I think I was like, "I really need to sit with this." And that I think is what prevents people from healing or coping, is the willingness to sit with it. You don't have to do. You don't have to make lists. You don't have to create a finish line. It's not like this tangible thing. It's actually an orbital journey that you kind of have to be willing to allow. I think that's the theme of my life as of late. It's just, like, allow.

But when we talk about grief specifically, I think the expectation is that, at a certain moment in time, you get over it. That's just not how grief works. Once it's there, it's kind of always there. It becomes this enveloped part of you. And what happens is that you can either allow it—you have a small handful of choices. I'm not an expert, so I can't say that I know what all of them are. But I think we see the manifestation of how people choose to deal or not deal with that grief, all the time. So for me, the choice was: I can keep engaging in this cycle of allowing it to pull the rug out from under me, and then overcompensate by overfunctioning and thinking that I'm okay; or I can allow it to just be this new appendage, and I can learn how to make it this thing that becomes a superpower. I think that, for me, was the thing that I had to grapple with: how do I make this not a handicap, but a superpower? And I think they're actually kind of flip sides of the coin.

And I think what you're doing right now, [25:00] I think that this is your superpower. You are creating empathy. You're creating space. You're creating a moment for moment for people to be able to talk about this thing that other humans often find so uncomfortable, or so difficult to cope with, or so difficult to talk about and acknowledge. That's such a superpower, such an amazing thing.

Dana: And I'm doing it with my bras and underwear just to my right.

Deanna: Which is even so much more brave. #brave (laughs)

Dana: #brave #thongs

Deanna: #radicalvulnerability

Dana: (laughs) #radicalvulnerabilityfromherclosetduringapandemic

Deanna: (laughs) Just really go on that journey with your unmentionables in tow.

Dana: It's totally a superpower. I love that. To use it to your advantage, yeah, exactly. You could choose not to do that, and not to move forward—this weight on your back can make you stronger, because this weight weighing you down, I prefer to use it to make me healthier by processing.

Deanna: I love that.

Dana: And talking about it.

Deanna: I think that's beautiful. Grief and healing, I think, go hand in hand. And at some point, you see the dishes need to be done in your house full of people. And it's like, you can passive-aggressively let that dishes sit, because they weren't yours, but then they're

never going to get done. So at some point, somebody's got to do the dishes, and you just got to suck it up and do them. And then there are going to be more dishes. And (laughs) they're not just going to get done and you put them away. Somebody's got to eat again. You got to fucking do the dishes, man! (laughs)

Dana: (laughs)

Deanna: 'Cause somebody's got to do them. I can sit here and grumble about the fact that the sink is full, but it's not going to get anything done. And then you can choose to take joy from the process of figuring out how to do it, and knowing that it's never going to quite be done, knowing you're always going to make more meals, knowing you're always going to have more dishes to do: you can choose to take joy in that. You can choose to focus on the fact that you're making this delicious meal with people you care about, and breaking bread in communion. And yeah, you're still going to have the dishes to do, but you can be mindful of the moments of joy in between.

Dana: And when you're thinking those thoughts, and you're going, "I'm processing this. I'm doing the work. Look at me: I'm out here. I'm being a superpower. There's joy in this process of getting better and healing," do you ever go, "Why the fuck am I doing all this work? My mom didn't do any of this work. I'm doing all this shit for her." Like, I have to process all this stuff, and I'm resentful that she didn't do these steps, didn't take these steps, didn't get—and again, my mom is different than your mother, and was sick in a different way. And I go, "Well, why didn't you do this? I asked you when you were living, 'Will you go to a therapist? Will you go to a rehab center, for physical therapy and for addiction?'" And she wouldn't, or this, or that. So why am I working so hard? I'm starting a podcast, but she couldn't do her exercises daily, so that she wouldn't lose her leg mobility? So I just wonder about...

Deanna: Hey, I'm sorry.

Dana: This isn't about me. Oh, yes, it is! Hi! Welcome to my podcast.

Deanna: (laughs)

Dana: (laughs) No, I have these moments. People keep reminding me, they're like, "Dana, you have to talk about yourself. That was the whole point of this." But that's the complicated thing for me, but I'm working on it.

Anyway, but do you even think that? Go, "I wish my mom would have experienced these moments of joy, between these outbursts of—" and I don't know if your mom was undiagnosed bipolar—you didn't say anything, so I don't want to put anything on you—or borderline personality disorder.

Deanna: I would imagine there was something, yeah.

Dana: High highs and low lows, you were saying. But I have some moments of resentment, of, "Why am I working so hard? You're the mom." She was the mom. "Come on."

Deanna: Yeah, of course. So often I look back at moments and think. My inclination is always to go, "What could I have done better?" and "What did I do wrong?" and "What did I do to deserve that? It must have been something." And then the pendulum swing was, "But, no. You were the adult." And I think I've settled in between somewhere, which was, "Yeah, you were the adult. And yeah, I feel a lot of anger and resentment in moments. How can there be beautiful days when there's so much suffering." I'm learning how to hold all of those things as well as I can, knowing that I'm allowed to not be perfect at it. You are allowed to be human in it. Developing a skill of healing and compassion, particularly self-compassion: that's the most important.

You're allowed to have resentments. [30:00] Of course there are moments of anger and resentment. And there are moments I look at my mom and go, "Why couldn't you have just..." But the truth of the matter—and this is something I say a lot with friends who are feeling angst over something that has past—the thing I always say is, "If you could have done differently, you would have." And I heard myself saying it over and over again. And then I was like, queen of giving advice that I never take. (laughs)

I started applying it to the people in my life who I had felt hurt by. And particularly my mother—I look at the way she lived her life—she had no instructions. She didn't know what she was doing. And, yeah, would it have been lovely for her to actually do the self-reflection that it would have taken for her to be healthy and happy, and hopefully then nurture that in the people around her? Yeah, that would have been ideal. I would have loved that. But again: she left a sink full of dishes, and I can sit there and stare at it, and let it fester and rot. But what good is that going to do me?

Dana: And you eventually have to eat.

Deanna: I got to eat in this kitchen, boo. And then not only that, but how am I going to go out into the world, and try to heal the world around me, when I haven't done that work myself? I cannot expect the people around me to pursue that, if I'm not setting the example for myself and the people in my community. It's impossible. And those moments of resentment, those moments of anger, and those moments of hurt may always be there. And I think there are some things that we just have to acknowledge may never be totally healed over. It's always going to be a bruise. It's always going to be a little bit of a soft spot. And the journey of healing is not necessarily getting rid of them, it's just knowing that they're there, and finding tools to cope with them.

Dana: Did your parents ever talk about why they wanted to adopt?

Deanna: Never to me. (laughs) My mom always said that it was because she wanted a girl. She had three boys in a row. She didn't want to risk another pregnancy.

Dana: I assume it was wanting a girl, but I was curious.

Deanna: Life is a funny thing. Of course I ended up being a tomboy, like a queer-ass tomboy my entire fucking life. (laughs)

Dana: (laughs) Joke's on you, Mom.

Deanna: Sorry, Carol Jane.

There's this message from a friend of one my brothers, that she sent right after she found out my mother had died. I wish I had kept it. I should have kept it. She sent me this story in a Facebook message, that she had this really, really distinct memory of coming to our family's home, seeing that poster, and making a comment about it, and acknowledging that my brother Dan had told her he had an adopted sister who was Korean. And she made mention of the fact that you must have really wanted a girl, to go an adopt one when you had three boys. And she said, my mom said—oh, this is the part where I get emotional—my mom said that to her, her family always felt incomplete, and that when she adopted me, that was when she knew she had her full family, (cries) and I had never heard that story. And that was something that my mom had never said to me.

And I just remember thinking, why didn't I get that version of the story? Why didn't I get to hear those things? The things that I heard growing up was like, "Oh my god, you're so difficult. Oh my god, you're so dramatic. Oh my god. Like if I had known it was so hard to raise you..." Like, those were the things that I heard. And so I just remember—I think that was the only thing anybody said to me during that time that was even helpful.

I just remember hearing that. And now, six years after my mom's death, those are the things that people need to hear. We hold those things, and expect people to know how great we think they are, or how lovely. Or we assume that if we say it somehow, if we say it out loud somehow, it's so much scarier than complaining about the things we don't like about people. That realization—even if I heard that once—what a difference that would have made for me. I'm not always perfect at it, but those are the things that I try to walk around the world with. I can't assume that you know how much I love you. I can't assume that you know I saw that thing you did, that moved me. [35:00] I think we're all walking around with such deep insecurities and fear and shame, that we forget that we can celebrate those moments.

And to say that to somebody feels really scary, which is so funny to me. It feels so much scarier, even now that I've been trying to practice that, to look somebody in the eye, and say, "I think you're really fucking remarkable." That's such a scary—it's so much scarier to do that, than brush them off, or assume that they already know, or lodge an insult, even if it's in jest. Those are the things that we do to avoid getting to say the real things. But I think that the lesson I learned from that was: I can't assume that people know. My mom spent my entire life never telling me that story. Even if it had been one time, it would have made such a huge difference for me.

Dana: Did you ever feel her show you that, in her actions? She might not have ever said it, but do you remember a moment where you felt like, "This is her showing me that her family is complete"?

Deanna: When I was really young, my mom was a great parent of a very small child. (laughs) When I was teeny-tiny, I have really great memories of my mom. She was so domestic. She really, really loved having young children. And I remember, when I was very young, the first thing I would do when I got out of bed was look for her, and she would always greet me with a song. I remember feeling very loved when I was very little. And then as I grew older, and would do things that she didn't necessarily like, that's when a lot of the angst came in. But I do have fond and lovely memories of that.

And I do (laughs) remember the first time that it didn't happen, I was so deeply confused and hurt. My mom was on the phone. I remember I got up, and I went to look for her, and she was on the phone in a different conversation. And I stood in my kitchen, and I waited for her to greet me, and she didn't notice I was there. And so I didn't get my morning greeting, and I was furious. I must have been four or five. I was young, very young. And I went, and I marched back up to my room, and I slammed my door, and I went back to bed for probably about 20 minutes. And I got back out of bed, and I opened my door, and thought, "Let's try that entrance again." (laughs)

Dana: (laughs) So you try the entrance again. You go back out...

Deanna: I go back out, and she did. She greeted me. The thing that I have come to again and again, is just, "They're just doing their best." I think the moment that you realize your parents are just humans who were fumbling through life, is a really, really huge realization for all of us.

Dana: They're figuring it out just like we are.

Deanna: I think about that. I am the age now when my mom was when she adopted me. And I'm like, "Jesus Christ, wow."

Dana: I was thinking last night, what do I want to ask you. And I just kept thinking of this question that's so cliché. So I look at someone who's adopted, and I go, well, the question people want to know, I feel every time, this cliché of, "Well, do you want to know your biological mom?" How do you feel about that question? Is it, like, "Fuck you, I don't always want to talk about that part of adoption"? And yet, it's impossible not to. It's impossible for me, every time I learn someone's adopted, your brain goes, "Was it open? Was it closed? Has she tried to reach out? Is it something you want to do in your life?" And it just feels like something you have to ask, and yet it feels really sensitive of a question. I'm curious when people ask you that—like me right this minute, through this computer—do you go, "You know what? That's not what I'm here to talk about today." And yet: Are you dying to talk about wanting to get to know your biological mother?

Deanna: (laughs) Well, I think obviously in this context, I feel like that's a subject we're going to broach. And with friends like you, and close people, I'm always happy to have an open conversation, with people that I trust. I think what gets dodgy and sensitive is people who I don't know well, who assume that they have a right to that information, or who approach it in really abrupt ways.

And then in regard to the actual question: I have done a little bit of digging. Ultimately for me, it's always been a really complicated and kind of nebulous journey. I have heard stories of other people saying, "It feels like a part of me is missing. It feels like a part of me needs to have this question answered." [40:00] And I can't say that I know I can name that feeling. And I don't know what the reason is. Sometimes we don't necessarily need to have that reason; we just know that. But now being at a time in our lives when we're watching a lot of people have children and start their families, in different ways, I realize—for example, when I talk to you about your mom, and you say things like, "When I look in the mirror, and I see her," that just—it breaks my heart for you. Every time I hear you say that, or see you write it, there's this moment of swelling that I have for you.

Dana: For me. Not for you going, "I wish I saw someone that looks just like." You're saying, for me.

Deanna: Yeah, I have this feeling of deep empathy and grief for you. And then this realization, like, "Oh. I don't experience that."

Dana: That's so interesting and stunning. I have to keep looking in the mirror, and moments that I go, "Oh god." Or my voice, if I'm crying, and it gets really low...

Deanna: Oh, baby.

Dana: ...and I have a very low voice, so did my mom—and I'll hear what she sounded crying or sick in bed. But then there's moments of laughter and joy, where I'm like, "I am my mom. And I can hear it. And this is when she was crushing it."

Deanna: (laughs)

Dana: "And this is when she was killing a Christmas dinner party." So there's moments of levity, but that's interesting.

Deanna: I see other people, and I'm like, "Oh, you have this part of you, that you see reflected in the world." And that just blows my mind, when people have kids, and they're like, "Oh god, I see the resemblance." Or I see other people—or when other people's siblings look so much like them, that's something that's always, "Oh, wow, yeah." That's an experience that I don't have. And I don't know that I have a feeling about it, but more a curiosity about it. I walk around the world not knowing if somebody else has my laugh. I walk around the world not knowing if there's somebody who I resemble. And I think that the really beautiful thing about it, though, is that because that's been the foundation part of my experience, that family means something very different to me. Community and chosen family is something that I prize, something that I value. And I've created a lot of incredibly close and intimate relationships. I am so deeply thankful for those people and that experience and my community, in a way that I don't think I would be, had it not been for my experiences.

I have done a little bit of research into my history. I have a tiny little informational file about the circumstances of my birth and surrender. And I think this is the contrarian part of me, that part of me that's always like, "Oh you're doing that thing of this community that you're defining by your identity, and I don't want any part of it." But I think that maybe that might be that little part of me that doesn't feel necessarily a huge drive to seek out my biological family—or, I mean, fully ready to admit and acknowledge that there's probably a little bit of fear involved there too. Like, what will I find, and how will it go down. I've heard a lot of other people tell stories about having trouble finding their family, or not being welcomed by their biological families, or it being a really, really difficult experience. And I'm most certainly not a person who's going to shy away from a difficult experience, but if I don't necessarily feel that hole, then I'm not sure that that would be productive. That may change: we're human, and we evolve, and we orbit.

And that may be a journey I want to go on at some point. I think it's beautiful either way. I think it's such a personal decision. And if that feels like a part of your puzzle that needs to be in place, I think everybody should be allowed and should allow themselves to seek out the answers that they need to feel whole and to feel loved.

Dana: For you, my biggest question I was also thinking about is: what's hereditary? And so that's a big thing for me, and I've been talking about on a couple of these interviews, about what am I going to inherit from my mom: addiction, or this, or that, or cancer, or what my dad has, what my mom has chemically. That's something that I'm still trying to get all the information.

Deanna: How is that journey for you?

Dana: Well she's not here anymore, so I can't ask her. [45:00] And they were divorced for almost 10 years when she died. So I can go to my dad. And I can call my mom's doctor, which I did, and said, "Can you talk me through a lot of things that were going on, and can you just tell me some truth? She said she thought she had MS. Then she thought she had fibromyalgia. Then she thought she had this, she thought she had that. What was it really?" And he said, "Of course she had back pain, of course she had this, of course she had that. But it was years and years of drinking, and it was years and years of other things." I'm like, "Oh the opioids you prescribed?"

Deanna: (laughs)

Dana: And then as I'm trying to be nice, I'm throwing a lot of shade. "Well why was she given so many?" So I have to go to the source, and I finally just said, "I'm calling him." But I was also legally allowed to call him, because now she was gone. So then I can ask him the questions that I'd had for a while. He couldn't really talk about my mom while she was living, which is stupid. I wish he'd called me, and said, "We've got a problem here," sooner rather than later. And I can go to my grandma, and I can talk to my grandma, and I can ask some questions, even though those can get muddy.

But if I was adopted, that would be a big question, for me, about what is in my genes.

Deanna: Do you feel like in digging, in your own life and in regard to your own health, that that has been a part of your grief journey as well?

Dana: Yes.

Deanna: Has that brought some things up?

Dana: It has. But also it feels like the person overfunctioning. Well I'll just check off the hereditary boxes, and I'll get all the answers, and then all good. When yet what I'm really asking is: why did she start drinking? Or, was it about the death of her sister? Was it about this? And my grandma doesn't believe she was an alcoholic. Of course she doesn't. She's 93, so she's not going to admit that, or really want to talk about that. She'll say, "What? You really think that's what it was? She was so perfect." It's always

these cliché things of, "But she was so beautiful, and so smart, and so this..." And I said, "You can be all those things, and still be addicted." And addiction can be chemical, so you have to start going backwards in your lineage, going and looking at the uncles, and going and looking at the grandfathers, and going to see where it comes from.

But a lot of it's also about, I make a choice. I make a choice to go to therapy, or I make a choice to be conscious when I feel that addiction—I smoked for 20 years—or when I feel the thing that...

Deanna: (laughs)

Dana: ...that tickle of, "I could fall down that hole." It does bring up grief. It does bring up grief, but more I feel like it is an overcompensation of trying to...

Deanna: Answers.

Dana: ...find the answers. Yeah, answers. And like you say, in a way, there's moments where I don't want to know the answer. I'm nervous of what I'll find. Just like you say, I don't want to open that can of biological beans.

Deanna: (laughs)

Dana: I don't want to know. Don't open it! Don't open it! And there are also times when I'm like, "I don't want to ask this question," but I finally was like, "Can you just tell me?" (laughs) "This wasn't MS, right?" I knew it wasn't, but there were times... she was crippled. She couldn't walk. There was weird stuff happening. And my aunt had ALS and died from that. My mom was taking on all these things around her, too. "She had ALS, maybe I do. He was sick, maybe I have what he has." She was almost putting it on herself. It was weird. It was weird.

Deanna: That sounds so much like a deeply empathetic response too.

Dana: Exactly. And taking on people's emotions, or taking on the grief. Not an empath, but putting it all on herself.

Deanna: And then not knowing how to cope with it. You just take it, and you hold it, and then you can't let go of it.

Dana: I'm anxious about that stuff, so it is more prevalent in my brain sometimes. But I was also so clouded in all of the things my mom would say. I was like, "So what do you have now?" And I was listening to someone addicted to opioids and pain and depression tell me what she had, and I was like, "Wait, maybe you're just an alcoholic

who's also physically not feeling good." Isn't that what we're talking about? And so I finally had to go to the doctor and say, "Hi. She had a bad back surgery, right. And then she got addicted, cool. But she's always been a functioning alcoholic. Got it." Do you know what I mean? Instead of, "Wait, she said it was fibromyalgia."

Now I'm frustrated with my mother. (laughs) That was where I was going. But I'm also not frustrated with her. She didn't know. She also half the time didn't go to doctors. Sometimes she would go to a lot of them. Sometimes she wouldn't go for three years. How would we know what she had? So calling me, saying, "Here's what I learned." Well, did she? Did she actually go to the doctor? Is this from a year ago? She wasn't fully present. But she still had an amazing memory. It was really weird. She could remember plays I did from twenty years ago, but half the time didn't really know what day it was.

[50:00] Through these conversations, I keep remembering a lot of my grief doesn't come from her being gone, because I actually feel like I had her for so long, and I had her at the peak of momdom. She put notes in my lunch. She came and saw everything I did. She made sure I had so much privilege and so much love and so much attention and so much care, working on projects with me, and homework, and coming to my speech tournaments. She was an amazing mother. But my grief comes from how sick she got, and how sad that was to watch. I was so sad and angry that she couldn't fix it. But I was really just angry at the situation. And so so much of my grief comes from remembering her sick, instead of the good times. And I feel like I got her for a long time, and I'm grateful for it.

But I'm sad when I think that she died—she died in her bed, which she wanted to die in her home, so that's good—but probably alone, and... I don't know. It makes me sad. And I'm frustrated that she also didn't ask for help. I kept saying, "People love liquor. Let's talk about it. Let's address it." But she didn't want to, so she would hide bottles, and say, "I'm not an alcoholic," or, "My mother is. Have you ever seen your grandma say no to a drink?" And I was like, "Well, no. You both put ice in your drinks to water it down. But she's not who I'm talking about. I'm talking to you."

Deanna: I don't know if you've heard of this analogy: you can think of grief as a room. In this room there is a button, and it's basically your grief button, or your trigger button, or however you want to put it. And there is a large ball in this room, that's bouncing around. And that ball will hit that button every now and then. And those are the days that are really hard, or the moments that you remember her, or the moments of frustration, or those sticky points where you really, really are feeling those moments of grief. And when something has just happened, when the grief is new and it's fresh, that ball is really big. So the likelihood that it's going to hit that button is very high. And it's a

very sensitive button. So it's bouncing around, and it's just going to be there, and it's just going to hit that button, and there are moments when you're going to fall apart.

And as time goes by, you learn how to accept that there's this room there now, and this button, and this ball. And so as time goes on, that ball may get smaller, that button may not get triggered as often or as readily. But that ball is still going to hit that button every now and then. And it doesn't matter what you do, and it doesn't matter how many answers you try to get, and it doesn't matter your coping mechanisms. You just have to know that that ball is going to hit that button every now and then, and that that's okay. And there may be lots and lots of spreads of time where it doesn't trigger the button. And then one day, out of nowhere, it just bounces at the right trajectory, to just hit that button square in the middle. And the best we can do is know that it's there, know that sometimes that button—and for reasons we don't always understand—will be hit, and then allow. We have to allow it to reset.

And I also find that that's the case with all sorts of trauma, and all sorts of healing journeys. Those days when you're not perfect, when you don't love yourself as hard as you think you should, or those days when you mess up or don't say the right thing. Those buttons, they get hit. And you just have to allow yourself to be human.

And during this pandemic, we're all in a time when that ball feels huge.

Dana: And I'm going to hit that... oh, that button.

Deanna: And the slightest thing: somebody told me a story of how they were trying to make a Pop-Tart, and pull it out of the toaster. (laughs) And you when it just falls apart?

Dana: (laughs) Yeah.

Deanna: They had a crying fit about that. All sorts of hilarious things have set me off during this time. And I think the only thing that's getting me through: (1) Brené Brown, thank you!, and (2) this concept of allowing. You just have to let it move through you.

Dana: Tell me your mother's name. And when you think about her today, right now, in this moment, how do you feel about her?

Deanna: My mother's name was Carol Jane. That's what I called her. She hated it. (laughs)

Dana: (laughs) Was Jane her middle name?

Deanna: Yeah.

Dana: Or was that a nickname... okay.

Deanna: Yeah, that was her middle name. [55:00] I feel so much love for her. I always have. I have always felt so much love for her. I feel a lot of grace. And I'm on the journey of forgiveness as well. But love, always love, a lot of love.

Dana: That's awesome. Take care of your big ball and the button today.

Deanna: (laughs)

Dana: (laughs) Take care of your heart as we go forward. And talk to you soon.

Deanna: Love ya!

Dana: Love ya, babe.

Deanna: Bye.

Dana: [start outro] I remember when I told Deanna that we were release this episode during this weekend. They said, "Sounds great." And then they texted me later and said, and I quote, "It occurs to me that you are releasing my episode the weekend of my mom's anniversary. Oof. How did I not realize that sooner? Man, our bodies and minds imbued with grief play such weird tricks on us. Feels like kismet though. Something in the universe has aligned, my dear. I think that's a good sign." End quote. I agree, friend.

If you wanted to see some behind-the-scenes of this interview, you can check out our website, which is mothersgravepod.com. You can see photos of Deanna and myself as the character of Anne de Bourgh in our respective productions. You can see a picture of Deanna doing aerial circus work. And read about how you can support two organizations that are very important to Deanna: the Chicago Bond Fund and the #LetUsBreathe Collective. The Chicago Bond Fund pays bond for people charged with crimes in Cook County, Illinois. The Bond Fund supports individuals whose communities cannot afford to pay the bonds themselves and who have been impacted by structural violence. And the #LetUsBreathe Collective is an amazing alliance of artists and activists organizing through a creative lens to imagine a world without prisons and police.

I want to thank Deanna for talking with me. I also want to thank Suzi Pond, one of my oldest friends, with Redbird Media Group for editing and producing this podcast; Alice Anderson for sound mixing; Na'Toria Marketing and Design for the website; Meredith Montgomery for the logo and individual episode designs; and Matt Chapman for his theme music. And special thanks to Jill Wolf (my therapist), Heather Bodie, Lora

Nicole, Danny Bravman, Jonathan Baude, and all of my friends for your love and support. Seriously, the launching of this podcast has been so exciting and overwhelming and moving, and I've been talking to people that I haven't talked to in 25 years. So thank you so much for all your support and for sharing it. It means a lot.

And I wanted to specifically shout-out Courtney Rioux, Tyler Meredith, and Michael Turrentine, for their DIY podcast support. They are amazing artists in Chicago, and they have each started their own podcasts. So check out The Whole Artist with Courtney Rioux, Big Disney Energy with Tyler Meredith, and How's Your Heart with Michael Turrentine. Each of their shows are so authentically them, and you will laugh and cry, and sometimes you'll do both at the exact same time.

And also thanks to Anchor, which Tyler told me about, 'cause it's a super-easy and free way to upload and distribute your podcast, right from the comfort of your own home. So check them out if you're starting your own podcast.

And also, by the way, my mom's name, in case you missed it last time, was Shirley Jo. She dropped the "Shirley" in college and just started going by "Jo."

And I have been thinking a lot this weekend and today about my mom's doctor. I talked to a decent amount, because he is still my grandmother doctor. My grandma is my mom's mom, and she's 93. And she recently had to go into the hospital a couple weeks ago, to the same hospital that my mother died in. I had to help escort her into the emergency room, and wait for her to be admitted to the upstairs in-patient floors. And I remember looking around, in this time of COVID, and just the feeling of being in a hospital feels so surreal. But then being triggered by the memories of, "I know this floor. I've been here before," and remembering that it was where my mom had passed away, and where I had identified her body.

And I also remember that day that she died, April 16, 2016, the doctor called me when I was in the hospital, and wanted to reconfirm whether or not I wanted an autopsy done on her body. And I remember thinking, "Why? I'm not going to get the answers that I'm looking for. I could barely get them from you, and I could barely get them from my mom when she was living. What's it going to tell me? What am I going to learn?" I'm thinking about that a lot today, about the questions I still have, and the answers I might never get. That's what I'm thinking about.

Oh, and croissants, 'cause I'm on a diet.

Love you guys. Talk to you next time. [end 59:53]