

Dana: [start 00:00] 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.

Welcome back. After my mom died, I would use the phrase "my mom slowly killed herself" to describe what happened to my mom. It just felt like the easiest way to explain what had happened to her. And I'm not totally sure if I believe it. I'm not exactly sure if I understand it. But it just felt right. My mom's depression, and her emotional and physical anguish, her addiction: that was just the easiest way to explain it. She slowly left this earth. And every time I said that phrase, I felt guilty for saying it around people who might have actually lost a parent or a loved one to suicide. Was what happened to my mom the same as what happened to their mom?

Today's guest is someone that I have been wanting to talk to for months. I have had a draft email in my draft folder since I started this podcast, to this person, and I could just never press send. I don't totally know what I was so nervous about. I think a part of me was nervous that they wouldn't want to talk to me, or it would be too difficult to talk to me. But I think the truth is that I was nervous to talk to them. Our stories are not identical. Our mothers are not identical. But what happened to her mom and what happened to mine, they sort of sit next to each other, and they're really similar.

In this episode, we're going to talk suicide, and then we're going to stop talking about suicide. And instead we're going to talk about my guest's mother's love of nursing, her love of New York City, her love of her children, her love and support of her daughter's comedy career—even though she was nervous that her daughter would one day write a show about her. We're going to talk about how my guest got drunk and fell asleep on her own mother's grave. We're going to talk about my guest's mother celebrating her daughter's first period by taking her to Chicago to see a musical.

In this episode, when I reference my guest's writings, it's because they sent me a document about 24 hours before our interviews, with some musing around their mother. In it, my guest says that her mother was a short, feisty New Yorker living in Indiana, and everyone loved her accent.

This is Caitlin Costello. [end intro]

I knew I wanted to talk to you because your story is so unique. It doesn't happen to a lot of people, suicide. But also the fact that I very casually, a lot of the time, say, "My mom slowly killed herself." I use that phrase. I flagrantly say it because it's true to me. That's what addiction can also look like, and depression and pain. She slowly kind of

just gave up. Even though she wanted to stay here, she was beyond the point of no return.

But you literally dealt with suicide. So there's this weird part of me that feels guilty about saying that. Even though, why do we quantify one over the other? And why do we even need to justify how we interpret someone taking their own life, or leaving this earth? So that's something I really want to talk about.

You said, "Her suicide was the greatest act of love. I have to believe that, because when I don't—when I think that she chose to leave me... Instead, I think about how much she was suffering with her anxiety, how much she worried about holding us back, making us worry. She considered herself a burden to our daily lives and our potential futures. She couldn't have been more wrong. And every day I will wonder what I could have done or said differently."

Caitlin: I do have to actively choose how I interpret her suicide. And when I'm above the line—when it's a good day—I recognize it for what I think, if she could have had any sense of analytical thinking during this height of her depression and anxiety, that she thought she was unburdening her family, that her illness [05:00] was incapacitating to all, and that she thought we would be better off. And of course, she was wrong. But that's what mental illness does. It puts you in a state of not being able to really have perspective.

And then there are the days I'm below the line—it's a bad day—and I think, "She chose to leave me. My mother to leave my life." And I can't go there, because I don't necessarily believe that. It's where I can get to. But I believe depression doesn't allow people to choose between two options. It presents one option. And that is what she had to do.

Dana: And you talk about how you didn't see it, or didn't fully understand what you were seeing, with her weight loss, her anxiety. Many people have panic attacks, and function and keep going.

Caitlin: It didn't occur to me to be the healthy one, to have a role reversal, even for a short period of time. I didn't see all of the writing on the wall, so much so that she came to visit—well, my dad, her, and my grandparents—all came to visit when I was living on the cruise ship, working for Second City, and she was really bad. It was only a month before she died, and she was not doing well. But I had no idea. And her behavior on the ship, I thought was seasickness; or discomfort with small places; or annoyance that she was on this cruise ship again, visiting her daughter, because they had done this same trip two years earlier, not knowing that I was ever going to be working on a cruise ship. And this full-out anxiety attack and huge surge of depression that I witnessed coming from her on the cruise ship, I didn't recognize it to be that.

Until weeks later, she called, and she said, "Your dad is making me call you to tell you that I'm unwell. I'm depressed." And I said, "What do you mean, he's making you call me?" And he then explained to me later that it is so bad that she is unable to get off the couch, all day long, just nails grinding into the arm of the couch, unable to eat, difficulty sleeping; that he knew that the right thing to do was to have her children know that, to call my brother and I.

Dana: That's so hard on your father.

Caitlin: It really was. But it wasn't news to him.

Dana: So he knew on that cruise ship. He saw it on that cruise ship. And you didn't speak about it on that trip. You didn't ask, "Hey, you seem really anxious," or, "You seem dizzy."

Caitlin: No, I didn't have the perspective to consider someone that has always been the caretaker, the nurse, the mother, might not be able to fulfill those roles anymore. And I was being a professional comedian. I was drinking myself to oblivion every night...

Dana: Yes, and.

Caitlin: ...getting paid for it, living the life. Of course, suicide, like they say—everyone's trying to look for something to blame, heart attack.

Dana: "How could I have missed it." You said, "Every day I'll wonder what I could have done or said differently."

Caitlin: Every day.

Dana: It sounds like a cliché, but every day you're like, "Could I have done this? Could I have done that?" Or your dad, I can't even.

Caitlin: Oh, the poor man. He lives the best life one could write for a widower of suicide: 30-year marriage, they were so in love. [10:00] And he has chosen to live the way that I'm trying to, of she's not gone, so that we hold back. She wants us to go do that big bike trip around the Netherlands that we're talking about. She wants us to move across country if need be. So while we're continuing to be in deep mourning, and questioning every day, what we could do differently, what didn't I ask her, why is that the last thing I said to her—he's wondering if he pushed her too hard to try to go on walks during her depression, or if he should have suggested different medication—he'll never have anything else to blame is the problem with suicide. A heart attack or a car crash or anything, we always know where we can point the finger.

Dana: What is the last thing she said to you? You just referenced it.

Caitlin: The last thing she said to me was, "You seem happy."

Dana: Over the phone?

Caitlin: Over the phone. And I didn't respond, because at that point, I knew she wasn't. I had been told by her a few days earlier.

Dana: So you didn't respond because, why?

Caitlin: I felt bad for being happy. Or I didn't quite understand why she said that. I was just on my way to Jo-Ann Fabrics to pick up something for my new condo that I had just moved into. I was off the cruise ship, had a couple job interviews. And she interpreted my just running errands, telling her what I was doing that day—and I think it might have been a goodbye. In whatever way she was able to plan or comprehend what she wanted to do, I'll never know. But it might have been a, "Okay. You don't need me anymore. I can go." But had I had the opportunity, I would have told her, "I absolutely need you. And I'll need you for all of these other things that come in my life, that I can't even predict yet."

Dana: But if she can't give you that? Or if she's too far gone, or feeling as if she's unable to be joyful with you, or support you, why stick around? But yet it's so hard as a society. We have to have kindness, and yet we get really angry for people who leave. Their children, too. I am assuming you feel anger even when you understand that it's the thing she thought she had to do.

Caitlin: I feel...

Dana: That anger part of it is so complicated.

Caitlin: It's so complicated. And I think it's more disappointment than anger, because I have so much empathy.

Dana: Empathy, but there's disappointment. And maybe shame, but I don't know how you feel around it.

Caitlin: So much. The irony being, she felt so much shame for being ill, that I think it was a motivating factor for her suicide. And then suicide itself being such a shameful act by normal societal standards, by the Catholic church that we—Notre Dame Basilica—had her funeral in, and some family not even being able to explain her death that way, or being embarrassed that my dad wrote the obituary with the first line saying, "She died of complications with depression."

Dana: That's brave too, right there.

Caitlin: It was brave.

Dana: Most people don't even—you keep it out, you keep any commentary—and that's usually also when you know that someone might have taken their own life, 'cause there isn't a lot of specifics. But being honest about depression is brave.

Caitlin: I agree. And I'm not embarrassed or shamed by that. And I think that we need [15:00] to counter that a bit. I don't go walking down the street, telling anybody that asks. Or even, I found myself not telling some people that I just don't encounter on a frequent basis—I'd see them six months later—and I didn't tell them why, because I started to recognize that suicide is one of those—the response that you get from someone else—then you're taking care of them.

Dana: Oh, I'm sure of it.

Caitlin: They're so upset. And then I have to be like, "It's okay."

Dana: "I hope you're alright." That's so true.

Caitlin: (laughs) It's not okay.

Dana: (laughs) It's not, and I'm so sorry. And it's your mother, like you said, in terms of celebrities, these big names— some of your writing talked about how that's fascinating to process, someone you don't know dealing with depression or suicide. And then when it's your own family, and no one knows your story, like they don't know a celebrity's internal workings of what that family was going through.

Caitlin: I'm so glad that we know why some of these big celebrities or know that some of these big celebrities have committed suicide, and that we don't just hear "unknown causes" or something.

Dana: That we actually talk about it.

Caitlin: That we actually specify and talk about it. But the societal reaction to celebrities' suicide's so triggering to me. Everybody posts online, "If you need someone to talk to, come talk to me," or, "Here's a suicide hotline number." Okay, I'm so glad that you feel good that you're taking some sort of action, but it's not that easy. It's not that if she had seen somebody post, "You can talk to me." She had dozens of people to talk to. It's not that we weren't sensitive enough; that's how sick she was.

Dana: You didn't come home from Chicago to her house, like that would have changed everything.

Caitlin: It might have made it worse, back to her shame and her embarrassment of her children knowing that she was sick. She was private, an immensely private person, always.

Dana: What do you wish more people then did in those moments of "call the suicide hotline"? What do you wish was more of what was said in the ethos?

Caitlin: That's a great question, and it's so relative.

Dana: Do you have all the answers?

Caitlin: Nope. (laughs) It's so relative to each person. But the things that have always been nicest for me: my friend Michelle once asked me like, "What was your favorite thing about her?" Just a kind of a random question. The opportunity to talk about her is so nice.

I think the term suicide survivors is ridiculous, but that's what they call my dad and my brother and I. And I went to a survivors of suicide group. I never felt like I survived suicide. She didn't, is the thing. That's what they call it. And I went to this support group for young people 18–35 who had lost a close family member or partner to suicide. They teach you not to compare your grief, rank grief with other people. Sure is hard though, when you're the only one there for a woman, the only person in the whole room who's lost a woman or a mother.

And you start to feel victimized. Like, "This happened to me. This didn't happen to anyone else. No one else gets it." And I think that's a stage, part of the processing, unable to get out of that little drama triangle at that time. But then I find so much value in comparing, in saying, "Dana, there are so many similarities with a mother who's an addict, who lets herself go." Like that's a mental health issue, if I may be so bold to put that on you.

Dana: Absolutely, and yet I feel like that's disrespectful, like I was saying, to say, "My mom slowly killed herself," even though that's what I believe. I go, "I shouldn't compare what my mom went through to what you went through," even though they're quite similar. Or, because she didn't kill herself by hanging herself or any way...

Caitlin: Immediate death.

Dana: ...immediate death. She just did it slowly over time. And she didn't want to leave me.

[20:00] Oh, goddamn it. I usually make my guests cry. I knew it. (laughs) I was like, "This call is going to get me." Yeah, she didn't want to leave me. But she couldn't stay. And she couldn't stay in that form anymore. Her body had shut down.

But I always feel disrespectful when I say, "Oh, I'm so OCD," and it's like, "You're not. You don't have OCD." Or, "My mom killed herself," and then you literally are talking to someone. But again, I don't even know how your mom passed. And it doesn't even matter. I also don't even want to know. But yet, you know that it's suicide. You call it that. That's how you quantify it. But she could have slowly gone for years and years and years and years without—who knows? She could still be here and anxious and small.

Caitlin: And boy, that wouldn't be pleasant to witness.

Dana: Stuck to her couch, never leaving her house.

Caitlin: What a thing that she probably thinks she saved me from. I would have loved to sit next to her on that couch. But she, as the nurse, never talked about herself, always took care of everyone else. And not just in a way that we think nurses are caretakers. This woman literally never talked about herself, and had many sick and wayward people under her care all the time, family and friends. And she attracted that.

Dana: You said addicts. And why do you think that is?

Caitlin: She has this selfless, serving spirit, and loved to listen, and get all of the stories and insight into somebody. And then you'd ask her a question about herself, and she had that wonderful way of not answering it, and bringing it back to you. And you felt like the most amazing, interesting person in the room. And that's what everybody said about her. Her best girlfriends, at the funeral: "I had no idea she was sick. No idea," they said.

And so in many ways I thank my dad for having that conversation with my mom of like, "You've got to tell your children, because I want to tell them. And I think it'd be better coming from you." I thank him for giving me those two weeks of knowing this about her before she died. I certainly didn't expect her death, but I had a little bit more cushion and context. Whereas everybody else in the family, and all of her book club and her nursing friends: no idea. That's why the questions were, "Oh, it must be a medicine mistake. It must be she just walked too close to a train." Nobody just walks too close to a train. So I had that little bit more context and perspective, in order to go into the funeral week with.

Dana: That little grey area though, there's so much power in, "Well, maybe she did just take too many..." My mom in particular. "Maybe she did just..." No. She was sick. She had a blood clot and then a gallbladder surgery. But it's that, "Maybe she just passed away accidentally, and she was tired and had a blood clot," or, "She took too many hydrocodone that day," that grey area. A train is a little trickier, but still there's that grey area of hope, or that grey area of like, "Can I put this in that?"

Caitlin: Because it's an explanation.

Dana: It's an explanation, and it justifies all of the—there's nothing concrete then.

When we had lunch a couple years ago, I feel like we talked briefly about the idea of the magical nature of your mom writing you a letter. Wouldn't that have been nice? A diary entry or some romantic tale of goodbye. And you were like, "No, no."

Caitlin: "No, no." Didn't get that.

Dana: Didn't get that. Got a call.

Caitlin: Got a call from my dad.

Dana: [25:00] Got a call from mom saying, "I love... you seem happy."

Caitlin: Oh, got that call from mom, yep.

Dana: But be romanticized. "You're everything I wanted in a child."

Caitlin: Right.

Dana: "Take care. Love you."

Caitlin: Dad said he went through the house, top to bottom, looking for a note, and was so relieved that he didn't find one. Everyone with a suicide experience in their family probably has a different perspective on this. But to think that she could have been able to write something down and to have planned, I think would have been harder for us at that time.

Dana: Now? What do you think now? But it's also like, "Coulda, shoulda, woulda." Right?

Caitlin: Yeah. Well, maybe that's a little bit where the anger comes in, a little bit. Or the disappointment, I like to think of it as. "You know, Mom, you should be here now. And I'm living in Flushing, Queens, where you grew up. I moved to the place you were born in. We have had such similar life experiences." She moved across the country to Notre

Dame, Indiana, got dumped, stayed. I moved across the country, got dumped, stayed. "Wow, I recognize so much: your loneliness, your bravery, what you went through."

Dana: And she was pregnant with you when she arrived in Indiana?

Caitlin: No, she got to Indiana, and sometime later got pregnant with my brother, my older brother.

Dana: And that's what you mention, she might not be able to go back, back to New York.

Caitlin: Yes, there was an unmarried pregnant woman situation with her Catholic mother. So that was a big struggle that I never really got to talk to her about. The fact that I knew my brother was my half-brother was telling. So my father was at my brother's birth. We think of ourselves as full siblings. Literally, my dad was at his birth. But there was no pretending that he was biologically related. It was honest and transparent. But it was not transparent enough and honest enough that we talked about it, and what that means. It was just, "This is the way it is, and it's accepted." "Okay."

Dana: "Okay."

Caitlin: "But hey, Mom, was grandma ever made at you...?" "Yes." "Okay."

Dana: So the guy she moved cross-country with got her pregnant, and then dumped her?

Caitlin: There was another guy in there.

Dana: Alright, mom! (laughs)

Caitlin: (laughs) Yeah girl!

Dana: So you're an only child biologically...

Caitlin: But my brother—brother Michael, he lives in the Netherlands now—yeah, we're tight. Tight little threesome, the three of us, now.

Dana: That's great. Do you think you went to New York subconsciously? I mean, I know it was for a boy, and I know you wanted a change, maybe, and you were like, "Let's do it." But was there a subconscious "I'm going to go leave here, where she was born, and make a living?" She loved New York, so...

Caitlin: She loved New York.

Dana: Had the accent, loved to be tough, and that 9/11 was hard for her. I want to talk about that. You brought that up a few times in some of your writing to me, about that.

Caitlin: She was such a New Yorker, and in South Bend, Indiana, was a fish out of water. And she loved Indiana, and that she had the yard and the space and the ease of life. But New York: we came back twice a year, grandma and her sister living in Queens. And when New York suffered the 9/11—the country, but New York really suffered from 9/11—she created this little photo collage in the dining room, that lived there until she died in 2012, so for a decade. And according to my dad post-mortem, her depression started after 9/11. She mourned her city so much, she was so homesick, and chemically whatever's happening in your brain kicked off.

And so yeah, Dana, I think I always felt like I was supposed to live in New York. And I tried to. There was a period of time when my parents lived here. [30:00] They moved to Africa for a couple years to do nursing work. And when their time there got cut a little short due to some political unrest—they were there for about two years—they didn't want to go back to Indiana, and they said, "Let's go to New York. Let's be close to my mom's family for a while."

Dana: Did they go to Africa as like missionary-type? Was it a Catholic...?

Caitlin: My mother would say, "No. I'm not a missionary. I'm a nurse, and I'm doing my job."

Dana: Great.

Caitlin: And my dad did clinical drug trials, HIV vaccines. But that was kind of slow, red-tape bureaucratic process. And so what they did spend most of their time doing was clinic for tuberculosis and all other sorts of stuff.

And I got to go. And I got to sit in an exam room with her. And I got to watch this five-foot little Italian woman point her finger up in the face of a six-foot tall African man, say, "Do not come back here next week without your wife and without your mistress, because they both deserve to know that they are HIV-positive." And he said, "You can't tell me what to do." And she said, "I have a responsibility to them even though I've not met them yet." And my dad would say, "Lois, you can't go around doing that." And my mom would say, "I care and worry about these women."

Dana: That's a missionary, of feminist proportions. Feminist, scientific proportions.

Caitlin: (laughs) Just a little badass. She was a rock star.

Dana: You talked about how a lot of people would talk to her about friends, family, about contraception, safe sex. So did my mom, 'cause my mom taught biology. So she was very open about talking about all of it. Abortion, when I had one, she was really direct and clear about, "It's five weeks. You'll be back at work tomorrow. Your dad is freaking out, but I'm fine. It's all good. I need you to know it's all good."

Caitlin: (laughs) Was it great hearing "It's all good" from your mother?

Dana: Yeah. She was just saying, "This happens every day, multiple times a day, all over the world. You have the right to go. You have the right to be safe. And you'll be back on your feet probably within 24 hours." And she was right.

But my friends would talk to her about periods or just like, "Jo, what about the ovaries?" Or even plants. She talked about the ovaries on plants and female plants, but then it was people.

Caitlin: (laughs) Such a biologist.

Dana: So I loved seeing that in the writing you shared about.

Caitlin: The one safe place in South Bend, Indiana, for such conversations in this super-Catholic community.

She told me once, "The reason I could love your brother so much, and be a single mom to him, until I married your dad, was because I had the option to keep him." And I of course exploded. "What do you mean? You thought about having an abortion with my brother? Oh my god, you monster!"

Dana: I've talked about abortion a few times in these, and I'm always like, "Which episode am I finally just going to be, like, 'Let 'er rip?'"

Caitlin: (laughs)

Dana: I don't know. I just have been kind of, "You know, people are weird. I don't want hate." And yet. And yet, honoring my mom, it's the truth. You go, "This is something that happened to me in my life. This is what she said. It was important to me." But then I go, "I don't want to put it out in the world." But your mom is saying, "Bring your mistress and your wife over here." She's ballsy.

Caitlin: She was. Yep, she was. She was somebody to model yourself after, that's for sure.

Dana: Can you talk about the whole tailgating and passing out on her grave plot. You were thinking of I Swear on My Mother's Grave, and you said, "I've got a grave story."

Caitlin: I saw the title of your podcast, *I Swear on My Mother's Grave*, and I just chuckled. My dad buried my mother in Cedar Grove Cemetery at Notre Dame, paid a premium for it to face the direction of Touchdown Jesus. And this cemetery is historical, and so Notre Dame-affiliated. She was a Queens girl. She didn't care about Notre Dame. It's just where she found herself. [35:00] But my dad had this perspective of, "It'll be really nice when you come home, and you can visit her. She'll be close." And I appreciated that.

And then shortly after her death, the times I would come home would be for Notre Dame games, hop down from Chicago. And you get wasted tailgating for Notre Dame games. You try to drink as much as you possibly can, because you can't buy alcohol in the stadium. So you get real warm on the booze out at these tailgates. And you've got all the family friends, different tailgates that you hit up. And everybody knows everybody, and it's generations, and it's great. And then I would leave at halftime, because I don't really care or like football that much. And walking back to my dad's or my uncle's house or my grandparents' house—everybody down the street from Notre Dame—stop by at my mom's grave, sit down, talk to her a little bit. I'm tipsy. And then one time I just woke up three hours, four hours later. (laughs) I had passed out on the grass right in front of her grave. And of course she's like, if I could hear her little voice from up in heaven or whatever, "Caitlin, what are you doing? Sober up. Walk home. Do not do this again."

Dana: (laughs) "Caitlin."

Caitlin: "Oh my god, what are you doing?"

My dad and I have a way of making ourselves feel better for our shortcomings. She was a great person, very private, did everything right. My dad and I screw up, have vices, talk publicly about her knowing that she'd hate it. And we say to each other, we just say, "Well, she doesn't get a say anymore." It doesn't mean we don't love and respect her. We do. She's our number one. But she doesn't get a say anymore if the bottle of whiskey just lives on the counter now.

Dana: (laughs) She didn't enjoy it being left there?

Caitlin: (laughs) Nope. She used to say, when she was healthy, not even in her depression, she would say, "Your father has to remarry, because he'll drink too much if I'm not here."

Dana: She said that when she was feeling good. Did she say that ever again?

Caitlin: I think to him. I can ask him, but I remember him saying some things like, she had suggested women that he could remarry, for example. He said, "What are you talking about? You're my one-and-only."

Dana: So how do you think about your own genes and your genetics? It's always a question that I am curious with, with depression and mental illness.

Caitlin: I bet you think about that yourself a lot.

Dana: I do. And especially drinking, and being careful of how much I am drinking, drinking alone, or just being cautious of it. Or how much time I spend in bed, 'cause I'll have bouts sometimes of just not wanting to get up, 'cause I'm tired, usually. But not because I'm always depressed, but I have to really look at it, and see what's going on there.

Caitlin: Everything means more when you have seen it reflected.

Dana: But I'm different from my mom, and so are you. So I was just curious how that comes up for you?

Caitlin: It's funny timing that you ask that question about genetics. I recently have gotten some health news and been diagnosed with a genetic condition that results in some pretty big things, like premature ovarian failure, possible neurological disorders. I seem to be fine; they've run the tests. But it's something to look out for the future. And the big one, the one that makes me just want to hug her so much, is that 50% of the women with the condition I've recently been diagnosed with, report extreme depression and anxiety. And it's genetic.

Dana: And you think she had this?

Caitlin: Well, I told the counselor when he said, "So you know, 50% of women experience this. Could that be you?" And I was like, "Well, let's not even talk about me right now. Let's talk about my mom." You and I know, we know that mental health and wellness is deep. It manifests itself. Anybody who says, "Just get out of bed," or "Get over it," they don't understand. [40:00] But here's four doctors I saw during this session, telling me this it literally could be on your chromosomes. It's wild. But I'm not going to worry about what could happen to my future, and have this anxiety around it because whatever I can't control in my future. But it makes me so reflective to the past and to her experience, and if it is at all, in any way, related. I just have so much empathy for her.

Dana: Me too. My mom had a horrible back surgery, and it's like, if she hadn't have had that, she'd still have some addictions issues, but I don't think she'd be in as much pain.

Caitlin: Oh my gosh, a back surgery, of course the amount of pain and painkillers.

Dana: And just neuropathy—I wish she'd never had that surgery—and had a battery put in her back to massage the muscles and the nerves, and that didn't work. So I have empathy for her going through that surgery. And it doesn't mean that all of it is all for naught, that that would have changed her trajectory. But it might have. But again, woulda, coulda, shoulda. I can't.

Caitlin: But we do.

Dana: But we do.

Caitlin: I know we can't, but we do.

Dana: And maybe if your mom had moved back to New York City, right after 9/11. She loved it so much. She missed it. She was there with her people. Who's to say, though, if that would have solved it?

Caitlin: Who's to say?

Dana: What was on that collage?

Caitlin: It was pictures of family, her cousins, and stuff in New York. It was the Twin Towers, probably like a postcard of that. There might have been some hokey pictures from things we've done on family trips, like going to one of the late-night shows or *Regis and Kathie Lee* taping. She was a big fan of theater and live shows and stuff. Certainly very influenced by that love of hers.

Dana: Did she love watching you perform?

Caitlin: Yes, she loved watching me perform, and would always say, "Oh, you're not going to do a show about me one day, are you?"

Dana: (laughs)

Caitlin: Like, just terrified that she would be the butt of a piece of comedy. But she was very proud. And one day when I said to her, "I think I'm going to be a nurse, like you and dad," she goes, "Oh god no. Do something more fun. And if you're going to go into healthcare, don't be a nurse. Make more money and be a doctor." Not for me.

Dana: I was like, "Have you really thought about being a nurse?" You just thought, "No. Should I?" Yeah?

Caitlin: I did, at one point, yeah.

Dana: And then you were like, eh.

Caitlin: Nah.

Dana: Did you have a favorite thing that you two did together, just the two of you?

Caitlin: Hm, just the two of us. When I became a woman, she took me to Chicago. We stayed in the Drake Hotel. We went to see *Showboat*, a traveling theater tour. And she told me repeatedly, "Becoming a woman is a special thing. I'm so proud of you. This is a good thing. It's not something to be ashamed of, try to hide, explain away." We celebrated it. It was awesome.

Dana: Were you 13? 12?

Caitlin: I was pretty young. I think I was 5th grade, 5th to 6th grade.

Dana: Did you feel ashamed? Or by her saying that, you did not?

Caitlin: I knew that it was a thing we all whispered about, in changing into gym class and stuff. But nobody had gotten it yet. But the fact that she celebrated it, and she told everybody—we went over to my aunt and uncle's house, and I remember her just saying, "Oh, did you guys hear? Caitlin got her period." I was like, "Mom!"

Dana: "Are you there, God? It's me, Margaret."

Caitlin: But I just knew, oh yeah, this is a cool thing that I get to have, that my brother doesn't get to have. My brother never got to go stay in a hotel in Chicago and see a Broadway traveling show.

Dana: There's a lot of feminist power, which has been so cool to hear.

Caitlin: And the things that we can learn about our mothers after their deaths still. I recently learned that my mom was at the very first Earth Day, 1970, in the Boston Commons. I was like, "Good for her! That's so cool!"

Dana: She was just there to celebrate it, just witness?

Caitlin: With some of her best friends.

Dana: What else have you learned about your mom since her passing? Or how has your views of her shifted a bit?

Caitlin: [45:00] Great question. Well, the shifting has certainly come with my personal experiences. Wow, she must have been so lonely living in South Bend, Indiana, as a New Yorker, having moved there for somebody, getting dumped, getting pregnant, her mom not wanting her to come back. And she stayed. The strength and bravery that that takes. She really poured herself into her nursing work, and continued to take classes, higher education, doing a lot of English classes at the local university, really into reading literature. And then after her death—it's been eight years now—I see an old family friend or my aunt, my mom's sister, and they just are flabbergasted. "Wow, Caitlin. You look like her. You sound like her. You are doing such great things. She'd be so proud of you." And it's great to hear. She was a beautiful woman, accomplished, fantastic. To be compared is quite an honor.

Does anybody tell you that?

Dana: Oh, yeah.

Caitlin: I think I've only seen one picture of her, but I see it. Shirley Jo.

Dana: People say that whole, "lights up a room and a good host." My mom talked to everybody like they were her best friend, equal, funny.

Caitlin: That's you.

Dana: Just very ballsy, just gets in there, and would say stuff that only she could. I'm like, "How are you getting away with that?" And sometimes people are like, "How are you getting away with the shit you say?" I'm like, "I'm fun!"

Caitlin: (laughs)

Dana: (laughs) But I think my mom certainly had a gift. But she's controlling and very anal, and I can be that way too, and wanting things done a certain way. But not high-maintenance per se, but just it's hard for me not to want to overtake a situation and be like, "I know how to do it! I know how to do it!" Or a group photo, oh my god. I'm like, "I can do it. Give me the cameras. I got this."

Caitlin: (laughs)

Dana: My mom was always, "You stand there, and you stand there. And okay, Jerry, I need you to smile more." It's like, "We're done, Mom. We've done ten photos for prom."

Caitlin: And you do that.

Dana: Oh yeah, I do that all the time. But I think a lot of people remember my mom a certain way, like your mom. That feeling of, "We had no idea. Your mom was so incredible." And you're like, "She was." She's all of that. She's that, and she was extremely sick or angry or anxious or manipulative—my mom could get very manipulative—or just violent, emotionally, verbally. But it wasn't her talking. It was pain and drugs and depression. But I think a lot of people remember her a certain way, so sometimes it's hard, even with the podcast. People are like, "We can't wait." And you're like, "Well, it's not all going to be what you might remember." And that's okay, but some people want to remember her that way. I'm sure there's people in your life too. "Why would we want to think of her as sick or.."

Caitlin: She was different things to different people.

Dana: And I'm sure people don't all—do some people not even talk about the suicide around you then? Family?

Caitlin: Yeah, correct.

Dana: Even though you're like, "We're open, we're open, we're open. Here we are"?

Caitlin: Yeah.

Dana: "We put depression in the obituary." But then some people still don't want to speak about it?

Caitlin: Yeah, for sure. It's uncomfortable.

Dana: For them?

Caitlin: For them.

Dana: Even though they probably have so many questions. You know they probably have things that they want to just share or get off their chest. But then that's also weight on you, like you said, to answer it or to help them.

Caitlin: But general rule of thumb: any chance to remember and think about her...

Dana: Is good.

Caitlin: ...is aces, yep.

Dana: Even the difficult ones?

Caitlin: Yeah, 'cause that's how we find comfort and digest it and reflect on it and plant it to become something of the pain and the grief.

Dana: How is it coming up for you now, during COVID, thoughts of your mom?

Caitlin: COVID is—New York is not New York. I want the city to be what I am here for it to be. But I understand what we have to do as a community in order to protect ourselves and protect each other. And I had COVID in early March, and was just so desperate for [50:00] comforting parents to tell me that it's okay, and it can be a 37-year-old woman and get a fever and still become a baby. (laughs) I was like, "Somebody bring me a Gatorade."

Dana: (laughs) Were you freaking out, or were you rational about it? March was pretty in the thick of it.

Caitlin: I truly did not think this could be COVID. "I know COVID's around. I know the city's shut down right now. But come on, I've just got the flu." And then, woof, it was certainly COVID, proven by some tests later.

Dana: How long did you have it?

Caitlin: It's two or three days of fever, and then I felt so much better and was going around, went to my boyfriend's when I felt better. And then back in bed for five days.

Dana: That's what I hear. It's so crazy. That's so crazy.

Caitlin: My mom would have been volunteering. She would have come to New York. She would have been proud to be a first responder.

Dana: On those boats, she would have gotten on the mercy ship.

Caitlin: She would have loved it, yep. She would have been like, "I got my dramamine behind my ear to take care of the seasickness, and I'm going to go on this boat.

Dana: (laughs) "Dramamine."

Caitlin: Oh yeah, she couldn't stop. She spent a lot of time with her patients who just needed to talk, to tell their stories. She was a critical care nurse—a lot of recovering heart attack patients—and knew she was therapist, counselor, nurse, mother all-in-one.

Dana: Well, I like to end all these calls—I was going to ask you your mom's name, even though you've said it—but I like to ask my guests their mom's name, and then tell me how you're feeling about her today, in this moment, what's been coming up for you.

Caitlin: My mom's name was Lois Ann Vanderhoof. And I'm so thankful to smile and tell stories about her. And I'm reflective on how we lost her eight years ago this month.

Dana: Halloween?

Caitlin: Halloween. We buried her on Halloween, which just is so funny to me. She loved Halloween. She used to spook and boo her nieces and nephews all the time. And it feels, in a circle-of-life way, complete, cyclical, to have gone underground on October 31.

Dana: Well, thank you, friend.

Caitlin: Thank you, friend.

Dana: It was a joy to see your face, even in this context.

Caitlin: Same. Thank you for doing this.

Dana: [start outro] Yeah, I'm glad I didn't wait a moment longer to email you, Caitlin. It was totally worth it. Thanks for sharing your story with us, and your mom. You're the best.

If you want to see pictures of Caitlin with her mother, you can check out our website, which is mothersgravepod.com. And on that website, you can also see how you can support a nursing scholarship that Caitlin's father set up in her mother's name. It's called the Lois A. Vanderhoof Nursing Scholarship. Caitlin's mother needed scholarships as a single mother when she was starting off in South Bend, Indiana. The income from gifts will support students enrolled full-time in the nursing program at Indiana University South Bend. So go to our website and check it out, click through, and see how you can support the Lois A. Vanderhoof Nursing Scholarship.

And if you've been listening to this entire episode, you understand that there are no easy answers or solutions towards depression or suicide. There's no one-stop shop, one easy answer on how you can help. But if you know someone struggling, or you might need to talk to someone yourself, I thought I would give you the number to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, so that you have it. It's 1-800-273-8255. You can also get that information on our website, for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

I want to thank Caitlin again 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, and to all of you for listening. I recently learned that there are over 700,000 podcasts in the world, [55:00] which is—that's a lot. So, yeah, maybe too many. But thank you for coming back and listening to this one. I really appreciate it.

I was recently going through a lot of my grandma's belongings, because I was helping her downsize from her apartment of 20 years, into a nursing home. And my grandma kept every card that she ever received. So I found cards that I had written to her when I was five years old. I found cards that my mother wrote to her, when she was in college. It was very magical. But my grandma also keeps all of her tax documents from like 1965. She keeps electric bills from the '80s, magazines of Richard Nixon. There was a lot to sift through.

But in the midst of all that paper, I found a notecard, a 2×4 notecard, white, double-sided. And on it was a note in pencil from my mother to my grandma and I from 2006–2007, when my parents were getting a divorce. It was probably around the height of my mom's depression. She was sleeping a lot. She'd had a back surgery a couple years before, and was probably high on many, many opioids, was probably drinking, and she was certainly having a hard time. My grandma and I flew out to Arizona, where my mom was living, to help her through this divorce, and maybe try to convince her to move back to Illinois. I assume that my mom went back to bed but left this note on the kitchen table, the day that my grandma and I flew out of Arizona back to Chicago. On the note, it says, from my mother to my grandmother and I, "Mom and Dana, thank you for coming. I'm sorry I was a disappointment, to say the least. There are no excuses from me, but I'm in a rut. I love you two more than anything. My heart is so broken from so many events. I don't know where to start. Psychologist? We'll see. I love you both. I wish I could be on a plane with you. Jo." A 2×4 notecard: it's so small, and it's so lethal.

I wish I could tell her that my heart is broken from so many events too, and that she was never a disappointment—I was just disappointed in what happened to her. And over the years, I found many cards like this. I'd just never seen this one. I thought about sharing it again with my 93-year-old grandma, but Alex Trebek just died, and there's a pandemic. She doesn't need to see this, 'cause she knows my mom loved us.

Talk to you next time. [end 58:08]