

Dana: Ahh! We did it. You did it. You made it to 2021! You're here, you're present, and, well, you're alive. And that is all that matters, so: Welcome.

I love the meme that's going around that says that nobody gets to claim 2021 as "your year." Because we're all just gonna walk in real slow, be good, be quiet, and we're not gonna touch anything. And in the spirit of walking in real slow and quiet and gently, that's sort of how I want to approach this episode.

The story you're about to hear is about a man's estrangement with his living mother. Which is a crazy brave story to share with someone they didn't know. So I hope that you find his story full of generosity and love and hope, but it's still really difficult to hear, and I'm just so grateful that he chose to share it with me and with all of you. So welcome back to the podcast, welcome to 2021. Keep wearing your masks, keep standing up for the rights of marginalized communities. Keep living, and loving, in the moment, and just keep making bread in your home, y'know? Because I'm not gonna judge. Welcome back.

[theme music]

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.

When I started this podcast this summer, I knew that I wanted to talk to people who were estranged from their mothers, people who were grieving the loss of their mom while she was still living, because that's a part of my story: estrangement. So I had a friend reach out to me, and we'll call this friend Lexi, because that's their name—shout-out to Lexi—who said that they might know somebody who'd be willing to talk to me. Lexi had done a devised theater piece with this person in Chicago through About Face Theatre a couple years ago. And this person had written a beautiful little piece that was a heartbreaking imagination of all of the small cards and love notes that he wished he could send his mom in the mail. They weren't talking.

So I emailed this guest, and I said, "Hey, I got your name from Lexi, and I was wondering if you'd be willing to talk to me." And he said, "Yes." But he also said that his story complicates parental loss in a way that is very familiar to queer people, but so few others, in a visceral way. We got on a Zoom call this summer, and we hit the ground running. I asked him to give me a general overview, tell me a little bit about himself. He said that he was geographically from Texas, but that culturally, he's really from New Orleans—his mom is from New Orleans, and it's a big part of his life—that he went to school at the University of Iowa; studied creative writing, English; dabbled in

social justice work; came to Chicago; did some theater, did some writing, did some teaching artist work; and then eventually realized that wasn't serving him. And he went back to school to get his Master's in Education. He's now a teacher here in Chicago. This is, and I want to quote him, "a highly functioning trans person, with a life and a bank account and a schedule."

This is Xander Krohn. [end intro]

Xander: I'm an only child.

Dana: Me too!

Xander: It's very strange. People usually meet me, and they're like, "You're an only child? I thought you must have had three much older siblings."

Dana: That's funny, 'cause a lot of people who are listening, who know me, they'll be like, "Nah, we know she's an only child." (laughs)

Xander: (laughs)

Dana: There's moment of me that are very—but yes, I'm very gregarious, and I like talking to people too, so I'm not just trying to get all the attention. And yet, let's be honest, come on, right?

Xander: My fiancée would say the same thing.

Dana: It's like, "Please, you're an only child."

Xander: We definitely have moments where she's like, "Okay, this is an only child thing. Let it go, dude." (laugh) I was like, "I can't! I don't want to."

Dana: Do you know there's a stereotype around only children, like: "That's my toy, and mine, and mine"? And yeah, I'm a little too organized. But I certainly feel I think I'm generous, so I go, "Okay." I don't like the bad rap, when only children are seen as selfish. I don't like that.

Xander: I agree, I don't like that either. It's mostly untrue. I think there are archetypes in our society where there's just a set of characteristics that must go with that, trans people included. So being an only child, I think I'm "well-adjusted"—air quotes well-adjusted—because I went to summer camp, a solid Texas summer camp, from 8 to 21 years old.

Dana: That long?

Xander: I was there every summer. It started out two weeks, and then it turned into three weeks, and then it turned into six weeks. And I loved it.

Dana: What kind of camp was it?

Xander: So it was not a religious-based camp. It was in the Texas Hill Country, right outside of Kerrville, Texas, just a good old outside, horse-riding, archery-shooting, rifle-target-practice Texas summer camp.

Dana: (laughs)

Xander: It was awesome. Some of my closest, most important, dearest people, I've known for 20 years in that environment. And this is also, when I came out as trans, they were some of the first people to pick up the phone and call me, and are like, "Just introduce yourself. What's going on here?" And it was no questions asked. That was one of the areas in my life where I was the most nervous about the ripple effect of this journey, and they're amazing.

So I want to make sure I say this: as we continue talking, I'm going to use my birth name. I give you permission to use my birth name in this podcast. I think that's another monolith, archetypal rule [06:13] we've glommed on about trans people: that you absolutely do not ever deadname them. And in my mind, deadnaming is a verb. It's not the object of the identity. That's my birth name. I love Kate. From about birth to about 17, she's my favorite person. From 17 to about 27, I'm still dealing with that version of Kate. She made some mistakes. That's where I think I really did the most damage with my relationship with my mom. I doubt we'll ever truly recover from it. It's also where I managed my grief in that relationship as well. But I like to be in control of giving permission to use my name. And I think that's unique to me. That's definitely not the case for all trans people. But for the sake of this podcast, we're going to use it. You can use it. It's super important.

It's also very funny, because Kate Krohn went to Kickapoo Camp in Kerrville, Texas, and grew up in Katy, Texas.

Dana: (laughs)

Xander: So that's also super fun. I really like that.

Dana: Thank you for letting me know. Got it, heard it.

Xander: Well, my parents do not acknowledge Xander.

Dana: Ever?

Xander: They did once, and it was to basically say, "Cool. If you're Kate, if you're Xander, whoever you are, we hope you're happy. We don't get it. Maybe call us." And so they use my old email exclusively. Every phone call—she'll call once every six months, maybe, maybe, maybe.

Dana: Are they married, your parents?

Xander: They are still married. They're retired, living it up in Texas. They have a beautiful home. They love traveling. They have a full life, but I am not part of it. And it has been communicated pretty clearly that they're ready to get on with their life. And I just find that to be very disheartening language.

Dana: What does that mean?

Xander: I'm not sure, but it doesn't involve me. Every time, they make a point to say, in asking about me and my fiancée, "Oh, you girls are so busy. You girls are really doing a lot. The two of you gals are just really..." And if you can see me, podcast listeners, I'm like a burly, hairy guy with a full beard. I have to shave my beard if they ever come up or if I ever go down there. I have to negotiate that with myself. And I try to send pictures through text message. But my partner and I take a picture that we actually want to take, and then we take the picture we'll send my parents, where there's like a menu in front of my face, or I'm hiding behind a glass, or it's just a picture of food. And it's just really interesting. I think that would be a really cool art project. It's like, the pictures we actually take and then the pictures we send to our parents.

But I came out when I was 17. I moved to Iowa for school. I started to come out more and more throughout college. My mom actually outed me to my family as a lesbian, and it was completely out of my control. And I was so scared, anxious, nervous, whatever—not in a good place—that I had no wherewithal to sit and have a conversation, because also it had been clearly communicated to me that this would not be okay. Whenever this did have to come up, I was like, "Well, I am just going to put up some walls and push them away, so that they don't feel the negativity that I know I inherently bring them by being who I am.

I was writing a blog with my roommate at the time. And my mom found it, and read it, and showed it to the whole family, and took that away from me is how I see it. And she was also a major bridge between my family in New Orleans and myself. And when she tapped out, I was like, "Oh, I've also lost my entire relationship with my family." This happened when I was about 20. And it wasn't until about two years ago I actually started to talk to these people again, on my own terms.

Dana: Did she talk about why she chose to out you, or why did she go to your extended family with this? 'Cause she wanted to figure out and understand what was happening? [11:13] Was she trying to do something for herself? Like, "If I share this, then I can understand what's going on with my child"? Why would she do that?

Xander: That is a really good question. I don't know. I'm sure she was looking for some kind of support. I'm sure my family tried to offer it. Because I've had conversations with my aunts, where my aunt is like, "I wish you two could bridge your gap. I wish you could." But I think they understand why I can't. Or won't? I'm willing, so it's not will not. I cannot do the emotional work and reconciliation for another person, for them to be okay with me, even though I'm going to have to.

Dana: But why would she do that? Is she a religious person, was your mom?

Xander: She is... I was raised Catholic, confirmed Catholic. She's a Catholic woman. I don't know. I would not categorize her as overtly religious, but it's definitely a core tenet of her moral compass. And I think generationally religion meant something different. And it's also, New Orleans Catholics are a mess. (laughs) It's like not a real thing. So it's very fascinating. The New Orleans thing I wish was more culturally prevalent in our relationship. It is a commonality. But she moved to Texas when she was really young, and met my dad.

And so I gather that she has—oh my gosh, if she hears this—this is another thing where it's like, "Oh god"—I gather she has a bit of a reputation in my family as having issues. I try to talk to my family, my aunts, and I go to them, and I'm like, "I just feel like I must be missing something." I must be missing a piece of information that will make all of this make sense to me. Why she's not here. Why she's not trying. Why she's not showing up. "Why did you stop calling? I am the child. You haven't called me in ten years. How am I supposed to feel good about our relationship, to be the bigger person, to reach out and make the phone call to you, when the decision I have to make is how hard am I going to throw myself against this brick wall today." How hard am I going to throw myself against this? And in the question of, "I must be missing something. Can you tell me anything?" the response was, "Well, your mom, she's got some problems. Well, you know your mom's got some problems." And I'm like, "What? I know she does. What does that mean?"

Dana: "I got that. What are they?"

Xander: And so I don't have that information, and I don't have any answer as to why, which is why this feels like a death that I have to grieve and navigate on my own, because the person or thing on the other end is not there and hasn't been there since I was probably about 17 years old.

Dana: When you first came out, or when you were outed.

Xander: Yes, about around that time.

Dana: It slowly started, and then coming out as Xander or trans when you were 20, is that what you're saying?

Xander: Oh, I came out as Xander when I was late twenties, 27. I'm 30 now, so I've been transitioning for about three years. I went about that conversation with much more maturity. And I was met with the same, "Absolutely not. We just got used to the gay thing. How dare you do this." And I'm like, "Did you get used to the gay thing though?"

Dana: Doesn't sound like they ever.

Xander: "Doesn't sound like you actually did. And I'm not asking you to march in a Pride parade." That is not the expectation. But they live right outside of Austin, Texas, which is a very strange, weird liberal spot, progressive in the middle of Texas. And if they wanted to make an effort, the resources are there. But to my knowledge, none of that has happened.

Dana: Did you tell them you were male-identifying Xander in person, over the phone? If you weren't really talking to your parents from the way that you used to be for many years, how did that conversation happen? Was it in person, was it over email? You were saying your mom barely picks up the phone, or you haven't talked to her in ten years.

Xander: Correct. These are great questions.

Dana: How did you communicate that?

Xander: Another detail: the pretty girl that I followed to Chicago, I married her. [16:13] I got married very quickly, and in a kind of stick-it-to-the-man sort of way, in a way that alienated both our families, which I regret that decision. I don't regret the relationship, even though it was not healthy or good for me. I do regret marrying this person.

So we had broken up in about 2017, and that spring my dad came to visit. And I had just started to wear a binder, and I was slowly using Xander and he/him pronouns in select communities. And it was going really well and felt really good and was really easy, so it very quickly became the norm. But when he visited, my partner and I had to have the discussion of—she's like, 'So what do I call you? And how do we handle this?' And it was very clear that I hadn't even had a chance to have discussions about being a butch lesbian with my dad, so I was like, "Well, I just want to kind of tackle that, and see how it goes."

And we had conversations about that, and I let him know. I was like, "I'm dating a new person. I'm seeing how it goes. It feels really good. But I'm also starting to think of long line." I feel like queer people don't often think beyond 26 years old and how to get the steps to get you into an established life, 'cause we were sent messages, whether overtly or covertly, that ya' not going to last that long. And so I find that the common thread amongst my community is, "Oh shit, I'm 32. What the fuck am I doing with my— how do I do this?" So I was trying to express to him a long line. I was like, "I would like to be a parent. Like, I want to be. I would like that. I want a family of my own." And his response was, "I really don't think you should do that. And if you did, we're probably not going to be involved." And I was like, "Sweet. So that tells me a lot of what I need to know about this next wave of conversations."

And so people are like, "Well, why don't you write him a letter, and just explain. Like, why don't you just do it, bare it. They'll get a positive response." And I'm like, "You think I haven't done that three times?" I've written three long letters: one about my regrets in college, one about how I wish I had handled things differently and where I'm at now, and then one about, "Okay, I guess this is where we're at. This is what I would like to see happen. What would you like to see happen?" And I did not really get much of a response. They're like, "We'd like you to call, I guess." And I was like, "Okay, cool, I would like you to call me as well. I can't be the only one trying to do this."

Dana: It's just so generous of you to continually do, like you've said, coming to the table, coming with options and how to make this work, to continually come with generosity, and to be met with such resistance. And then you still keep trying. It's incredible to be kicked down over and over again. And I want to talk about that later, like when you really decided, "I'm done trying." How many times you're going to keep coming back to the table, and hoping for a different result.

Xander: I appreciate that. I never really thought about it like that.

Dana: I don't know if you have stopped.

Xander: It's definitely shifted. Well, we can get to that. We'll get to that.

Dana: But when your dad said, "No, I don't want to. I don't want to engage in this," what do you say in that moment? What happened in real-time? "Okay, take care"? Do you even remember?

Xander: Everything just kind of sank and felt like my insides turned to glass, and all I could say was, "Well, okay. Is there anything I could do to change your opinion?" I think I asked that. And I think he just said something along the lines of like, "You know your mom and I are," essentially, I think too old to change their mind, is something along

those lines. But I remember shutting down at that point in the conversation, and super don't remember the rest of it, 'cause it told me all I needed to know, 'cause I was like, "Maybe it'll go really well, and I can tell him, 'I'm in a really good place. I'm discovering my masculinity in a really new way. [21:13] And I am starting to transition,' is what I hoped the conversation would be." But then when I was met with just a lot of like, "We'd rather not. We're probably not. That's not going to happen. We don't really want to know about it. Whatever. This is your friend," I was like, "Great, okay, cool, I'm really knowing all that I need to know."

So there are a few more pretty honest conversations on the phone with my mom. My mom did not come visit. He kind of scoped it out. And I come out in an email. I was like, "I'm doing really good. I'm moving in with my new partner. It's excellent. I'm starting grad school. I'm doing really well. I'm doing really well. This is very good. It's also going well because I am discovering Xander, and this is important that you know." And I don't think I got a response for weeks, weeks. And the response that eventually came was like, "How dare you," more or less, and no real answer to like, "What would you like this to look like? Like, I need you to articulate what this relationship is going to be." And I have not really gotten that.

And so my extended family is friends with me on social media, and see it and know it, but my parents are very much in this isolated pocket of no. They won't engage with any of it. They're not on social media, thank god. But it's out in the world, and they just won't acknowledge it.

Dana: So you use the word, "when I came out this time," or you said, "came out." So you've come out twice in your life: you came out as queer, and you use the same term for coming out as trans to your family.

Xander: Yes.

Dana: When you sent that email, what were you hoping? Your track record so far (laughs) hadn't been great.

Xander: (laughs) That's a good point. That's a great point.

Dana: Again, it comes back to your generosity, and you're an optimistic extrovert. Me too. I think, "Well, I'll just say this thing, and watch."

Xander: "Maybe this'll be the thing that I say that changes. This is the wording. This is going to be it."

Dana: "This is it." And again, when my mom was sick and drinking and sick, and I'm going, "Come on, let's talk about addiction." I literally said the words, "Let's talk about it. I love a beverage. Grandma loves a beverage. Let's talk about it. There's no shame. Come on, come on, come on." "No, I'm not an addict. What are you talking about? Get out of here. Leave me alone. Close the door." Christmastime, these moments where I'd be like, "Oh, here's the moment. I'm going to come with full transparency. Like, 'I love cigarettes. You used to smoke. Let's talk about drinking. Let's get to it,'" and she wouldn't do it. So that is not the same. I have no clue what it's like to be trans and coming out and changing my entire identity, to my parents, who only knew you...

Xander: In the before.

Dana: But I'm just saying, I still came with generosity and hope that my mom would say something different this time. So that's a long way to say: what were you hoping for? Like, "We love you"? You're not thinking unicorns and rainbows. I don't know, you tell me. But maybe you were? (laughs) You're such a joyful person.

Xander: That's of course my fantasy moment of, "Okay, we're uncomfortable. But we see how happy you are. And we're going to try to lean in this time." 'Cause we literally had a dry run. We literally had a rehearsal, and it didn't go well.

Dana: Your tech run was rough. It wasn't even a first preview. This is, "Yeah, we are in." (laughs)

Xander: (laughs) Nobody knew their lines. Nobody knew their cues.

Dana: "We're teching the top of the show." It takes forever.

Xander: So we had a rehearsal. And my hope was that—'cause I felt I was coming to the conversation with a different tone and a different attitude and energy of...

Dana: "I'm in a better place," you said.

Xander: "I'm here for questions. I know this is outside of your comfort zone. I am not trying to hurt you. None of this is in combat with you. None of this is to spite you. I am only trying to move forward with truth, grace, and positivity. I know that I have not been the easiest person to raise." And I was hoping that the response would be, "Give us a minute. Let us think about it, and we'll come back to you with..."

I wanted it to be a negotiation, 'cause I had laid out like, "This is what I'm choosing. This is how I would like our relationship to be. I am here for questions. Here are some resources in your area [26:13] for parents of queer kids living in Texas, because I'm sure

you feel alone and like you can't talk to anybody about this. But I assure you, you are not." And I was hoping it would open some sort of conversation, because without the difficult conversation of, "What does this mean for us? What do we address you as? What does this even mean?" Without that conversation, every exchange we have is—I have to censor myself. It's very clear that I can only share the tip of the iceberg. And then they basically say, "You're really distant from us, and we don't really know what's going on in your life. And it's like, "Yeah, because I can only tell you, 'I went to the grocery store on Wednesday, and am watching *Parks and Rec* for the 20th time.' That's all I can tell you, because you've told me that anything else is off-limits." So obviously we have a very superficial relationship, obviously, which isn't a relationship at all, at all, at all. So I was hoping for a dialogue and a negotiation, and I was met with a "How dare you. We will never talk about that."

Dana: We can speculate it's about grieving the loss of maybe their biological, female-identifying child at birth. Or there's some shame. What is that about? Besides religion, what do we think parents, when—why they're saying, "Don't talk to me. Don't talk about it."—why is that happening so much? And also, instead of them going to those resources in Austin or going to those places—like you said, "Here's a place you can go. Here's people you can talk to." They should be doing that—but why don't they just come to you? So just come right to you. They don't need to go to some center in Austin. Come to their child.

Xander: So when someone comes out as other, you are basically asking also your family to go through a coming-out process of their own that they should be in charge of. They get to disclose their own interpersonal details to whomever and however they want to or know how. Ideally the unit navigates that together with support and curiosity and grace. That is not the case often, at least for our generation. Now I know it's different, because my friends are parents. (laughs) So it's different, hands down.

Dana: Generationally, you're right. We have to always remember the generation we're talking about in so many of these conversations, about addiction.

Xander: And the shame of admitting I am broken, or I am not what I seem. Because I think in a child coming out as any version of other, it disrupts the plan our parents had for us, because they had one. They did. Ideally people have babies and they're like, "I will love this human in whatever iteration I get to love them as." But that's not the case. That's too evolved. People are not that evolved. And I think that it is grieving what they thought they were going to have. And there are no models to base a reimagining off of.

Dana: They don't know anyone?

Xander: They don't know. All of the people they know died of AIDS. They died. They are dead. I am sure it's a fear of like, "You're going to get sick. You're going to get killed. You're never going to be happy. You're never going to be in a healthy relationship. People are going to think you're disgusting. People are going to think I'm disgusting. People are going to think I did this." They have to grieve their own loss. It shouldn't be that way. It shouldn't be that way.

Dana: It's just crazy to think running away from you, though, would help if they're worried about you dying, or worried about you getting killed, or worried about you getting AIDS, or worried about you getting hurt, or all the things they're worried about, instead of leaning into you.

Xander: There's that dissonance. There's something dissonant there. I think you are on the right track with your perception. I think that we are one of the last generations that will have to deal with this so overtly. I think this narrative is becoming the minority. And the question is becoming, "Transness and queerness is new. There are so many people." And it's like, "No, they just now have the opportunity. We've been here all along." [31:13] They just now have the opportunity to come out and be out.

And I think that queer people are uniquely positioned in the world because we're inherently born to people who are not like us. Queer people don't have babies. That's not how the smashing works. (laughs)

Dana: (laughs)

Xander: We are inherently born of a hetero coupling. And heterogeneous, homogeneous, heterosexual, homosexual: they're all science words at the end of the day. But I think this is something my fiancée and I talk a lot about, is there are some select identities that are always going to be born of people who are not like us, and grow up in a community where they are not like us. This is stretching outside of my level of expertise and understanding, but I think you can include biracial, interracial children in that as well. If you've got parents of two different races, you are neither both nor neither. You are your own unique identity that they'll never truly be able to help you navigate. And the same thing is true with queer people, but there's no bridge to relating a family as a queer person, unless the rest of the family steps outside of their comfort zone, 'cause we're already out of our comfort zone, all the time, all day, every day.

Dana: Every day as you move through the world.

Xander: And that's why I think our chosen family and logical family is so important to the queer community, because we have to carve out a space to do our grieving of our biological family.

Coming out is a gain and a loss. It's really complicated. It's really complicated. 'Cause I do think—I don't know. There's a whole bunch of ways to talk about the before of transness and the now. Like, "Kate is dead." It's like, no, Kate is alive and well. At the core of me, I am still taking of that child.

Dana: How? How are you taking care of that child? What does that mean?

Xander: Currently it involves a lot of affirmations to reframe thinking, and acknowledging—like, I really appreciate how you have said I'm generous towards my parents. I really appreciate that. I never thought about it like that, so that is something that—'cause I feel like I've just made so many mistakes. Like, I must be the reason this is the way that it is. And I never thought that I was being generous. I just thought that I was doing what I had to do. So I'm really working on reframing what I view as a epic, unfixable mistake as, "No, you were like a child without parents to guide you through this, 'cause they didn't know how to guide themselves through it." So it is acknowledging my resiliency, and acknowledging my pain, and registering that I am strong, smart, sensitive, capable because of it all—not in spite of it, but because of it.

And I think that, as a teacher, I just want to be an option. I'm not trying to cram ideologies at anyone, but I just want to be quote/unquote "normal," that then when are like, "Wait, what?" I'm like, "Yeah, like super normal." Crazy, high-functioning trans person with a life and a bank account and a schedule.

Dana: (laughs)

Xander: It doesn't have to be—it can be anything we want it to be. But I think I am a palatable gay. I am easy to approach and digest because the binary works for me. I look how men are supposed to look. Until I open my mouth, you would not clock me for days. But then I start talking, and I'm really flamboyant, and I'm really expressive, and people are like, "But are you gay, though?" And I'm like, "No, I'm not a gay man. Let's think about it again." And then it's just it's really funny to watch the wheels turn, 'cause my partner is a cisgender female and just this 5'11" beautiful Amazon woman. And people see us walk down the street, and they're like, "You can't be a couple." [36:13]

Dana: (laughs)

Xander: "That can't be that." And so I try to be, I don't know, an approachable version of trans, so that I am in a position to call people out, rearrange some expectations, things like that.

Dana: How is Kate like Xander?

Xander: Oh, that's a really great question. Kate and Xander are both really sensitive, really abstract thinkers, really—when Xander is calm and there's no anxious bullshit happening, we're both really creative. I can tap into this childlike thing and feel really close to my core, which is still Kate getting muddy in the bayou, and scraping her knees rollerblading, playing roller hockey in the dead-end street with all the boys in the neighborhood. We're both really capable at making friends and knowing where we slot into a community in a group.

And we both of us are still working on getting to know our sense of self. The bond to our sense of self is still very fragile, because I was even more gregarious than I am now as a kid, as a defense mechanism, because if I was just loud and people liked me, they wouldn't see what was really happening. I wouldn't have to really address it. I never really got to know what I needed in my alone time or on my own. I was exclusively in groups. For an only child, I was never by myself. I was always at a friend's house. I was always outside. I was at summer camp for three months. I was using that—I recognize now—to not have to do some of the internal work of my own emotional awareness. And so coming into my masculinity has a lot to do with getting to know my sense of self, getting to know my true core, and getting to understand how I emote and how I process and how I react to things, truly react to things—what I truly think about things.

Dana: You're not saying that being masculine is getting into your core, right?

Xander: Right, I'm not saying that that's masculine. But the process of getting into my core, for me, externally manifests with masculinity. My comfort is in masculine things and with traditionally masculine—this is where transness gets really complicated, and can be problematic when we talk about it, because I do ascribe to lumberjack-plaid, IPA-drinking, boot-wearing, outdoor guy. I ascribe to that. That is appealing to me. And I understand and register that not all men have to be that. Women can be that way too. Non-binary people own no one any gender presentation. You do not have to be androgynous to be non-binary. No one owes anybody anything. But in my own self-work in making steps to being like, "Okay, I actually like this, and I'm going to do that," because I was born female, leaning into truths and things that I like had a negative consequence at times, in losing people and losing ease of navigation in the world, until my transition was going really well.

And now I pass, which is a blessing and a curse in and of itself. I had to make these choices to move in this direction, which required honesty of like, "Okay, I'm really sensitive, highly feeling. I cry every week. And I am all of that, but god I look good with a beard. And dang I want that custom suit. And I am about it. I hear my own coming out of my mouth." I have never had that sensation. I would hear recordings of myself and be like, "I have no idea who's speaking." No clue. "That's me?" No idea. That's not

what I hear when I speak. And now, when I hear recordings, I'm like, "Sweet, awesome. That's me." I can pick my voice out of a crowd. I just didn't hear it, which is so strange.

Dana: I know that happens and voices change. I've never had someone say it like that. That is a metaphor (laughs) and yet it's a literal thing that is happening, that you couldn't hear it.

Xander: And I think that's some the magic of being a trans person, is metaphor becomes reality, and it's cool as hell. It's awesome. My most recent fun thing about transitioning [41:13] is I have an Adam's apple now. That's like, "I have like—oh, cool! Okay, sweet." (laughs)

Dana: (laughs) "This is going to look good in a suit, this Adam's apple."

So you grew up as Kate. So what was your relationship with your mom then as a kid? I guess that's what I'd want to talk about for sure. Or what was something you and your mom did together? Did your mom talk to you about her mom? I like asking my guests a lot about their generational conversations.

Xander: I knew my grandmother. I was really close with my mom's mom, my mama. And my relationship with my mom as a kid—she was a stay-at-home mom, and I could sense that she had a lot of dissatisfaction with that. And I understand why, especially being a homemaker with one kid, but I was kind of high-maintenance.

Dana: (laughs)

Xander: And I could tell my mom would try to relate to me by taking me to a touring musical that came through Houston. We love *The Wizard of Oz*, so we love *Wicked*. We watch *Wizard of Oz* every Thanksgiving. Every gift she gives me is something *Wizard of Oz*. In high school, she started to take me to the monthly midnight screenings of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Dana: Cool.

Xander: Super cool! So I have these... (laughs)

Dana: That's so... what is the deal? She took you to... wait, hold on, (laughs) hold the phone here. That wasn't too much for her?

Xander: No, she would go to New Orleans to *Rocky Horror Picture Show* with the goodie bag. You throw the bread. You've got the squirt gun. You're yelling obscenities at the screen. We would go to River Oaks Theatre in Houston. It is this art deco theater from the '20s, and it's gorgeous. So we would also go and go see weird art films produced by

Focus Features, *Vanity Fair* with Reese Witherspoon, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. All this really cool shit. And that was one thing where I literally—I think I brought up in some of our conversations, and she just didn't have an answer for me—was like, "So why did we go see *Rocky Horror Picture Show*?" And I loved it. Like these B-rate actors were like celebrities to me. Like the woman who played Magenta, I was like, "Oh my god." I have like seven pictures with her outside of the theater, that my mom took.

Dana: But what did she say when you asked her that? She just goes, "Oh, I thought it was fun," or what?

Xander: Yeah, she was just like, "I thought you would like it." She was like, "I liked it. I thought it was goofy. I didn't really think much of it."

Dana: Were you into theater? Were you in already?

Xander: I wasn't participating. I loved watching and going. And I really loved Janis Joplin in the '60s and things like that, so my mom would buy me tie-dye t-shirts with the Grateful Dead bears on it. She was trying. She was trying, and I can own that I did not accept with much enthusiasm. I was a teenager though. It's literally a teenager's developmental job to push back. That is what your brain is doing. But we also loved going to New Orleans and walking around the French Quarter. And we could go on ghost tours and cemetery tours. And my mom read the obituaries for fun, 'cause that's what you do.

Dana: Was your dad with you on these trips?

Xander: It was just me and my mom.

Dana: Just you and you mom.

Xander: It was just me and my mom a lot. And that is something that I still feel really sad about, because we have the foundation for a really good relationship, but instead there is nothing, or what is there is very forced and surface-level and intermittent. I never really know when it's coming. Anything that I say could ruin it at any moment, so it's best not to say too much.

Dana: How often do you talk now then?

Xander: Once every six to nine months, maybe. And I have tried in the past two years to be like, "Want to catch you at the beginning of the year. I'm sure you're planning all kinds of getaways. Can we fit a Chicago getaway in, and come visit us?" And the response was, "Oh, we've already planned all these things, so we'll just see you next year. We'll

just plan for next year." And I'm like, "Okay, so you planned all of these things, and didn't even take into consideration what if you made time to see me?"

Dana: Do they ask about your fiancée?

Xander: They do.

Dana: Do they want to know about her?

Xander: She's great. She has been a really good bridge for our relationship, [46:13] because they respect her. They see how stable she is. And I am better and more stable with her in my life. That's good. They're like, "Learn from her. Learn from Meg. Do what you..." And I was like, "Okay, cool."

Dana: (laughs)

Xander: "Well, I'm super not trying to make her my teacher, but I appreciate what you're saying." (laughs)

Dana: What do you miss most about your mom?

Xander: Oh...(sigh)...oh, I miss her idioms. Like, she just has such New Orleans-rooted turn of phrase and way of speaking, that growing up in Texas and being a little removed from that culture, sometimes she would say things and I would literally be like, "I have no idea what you just said to me." And we would laugh about it. And she would be like, "Oh, I just got real New Orleans on you, huh?" And I'm like, "Yeah, you did. I have no idea what you just said."

Dana: I need to hear what that is. Do you know one off the top of your head?

Xander: It'd be like, "Okay, I'm going make groceries." And I'm like, "What? What?" She's going grocery shopping. "I'm going to go make groceries." And so I say that now too. I'm like, "Going make groceries."

Dana: (laughs)

Xander: My partner's like, "I will see you when I see you." I have no idea.

Dana: "Have fun at Trader Joe's." Yeah, great. Got it.

Xander: Or she had this—I still live by this story—she has some deep-rooted French/Cajun/Catholic superstitions. And so one of the ways she would get me to shower before bed, she would always say, "Wipe your feet before you go to bed, else the devil'll lick your toes. If you go to bed with dirty feet, that devil'll lick your toes." And so I to this

day am like, "If my feet are dirty, I have to wash them before I go to bed." My partner now does that too. She's like, "Okay." I'll look at her feet, and I'm like, "Those feet dirty. Can you fix that?"

Dana: "We don't want the devil showing up tonight."

Xander: "I don't want that anywhere near us. That'll get stuck to me. I don't want that." Little things like that, where I'm like, "God, if I just had more opportunity to talk, I would get more of those, and be closer to my home place." Family gatherings are loud. There's like 36 of me, gregarious people. And so it's just like, I miss feeling that closeness to her through her speech patterns, turn of phrase, little idiosyncrasies in how she expresses what she wants to express.

Dana: Have you ever told her that?

Xander: Not specifically.

Dana: Again, you're doing a lot of the work, and you don't need to do any more work. But have you ever said that? "Yeah, I miss your idioms. I miss your turn of phrase. I miss talking to you."

Xander: Not specifically. Not specifically. I have said like, "I miss you." But not that specific. Maybe I should do that.

Dana: I don't know.

Xander: Again, you're just so generous. But that's again me. I'm always an optimist.

Dana: Me too.

Xander: I keep thinking, "But... but yet..." You don't owe her anything. But I wonder. I wonder if she (laughs) could start sending you emails with more idioms in them.

Dana: (laughs) That's actually how we found the title of this podcast. We went and googled mom idioms. I'm not kidding. My boyfriend was like, "Let's go to the internet." Phrases like "everybody and their mother" or "I swear on my mother's grave." And it was like—and then an idiom was like...

Xander: That's it.

Dana: So, I wanted to talk about your writing, if you wanted to share. I know that you're a writer, and I know Lexi—that's what she mentioned—was hearing that piece

about you imagining sending little love notes and cards to your mother, and what they would say if you could send them in the mail.

Xander: The scene she's talking about was one of the most soft, vulnerable moments of the show for me. And it worked really well because it was interspersed with two other characters delivering their wishes for our parents as well. But I wrote that—it's four very simple lines: "Hey mom, wanted to let you know I think about you. We write grocery lists the same way. Did you know that? I fold shirts the way you taught me too. Did you know Dad and I have been talking for two years? It's been six years. I miss you. Do you miss me?" That's all it is. And it's interspersed with these other characters, which gives those some space and weight.

But I often imagine, [51:13] if long letters baring my soul is not going to bring my mom back into my life, maybe just letting her know that I scribble lists the way same does, I walk around the grocery store in the same way she does—all of these little things that I cannot divorce from, 'cause they're so a part of me—maybe if I just let her know, and sort of be the son she never had, like woo my mom back into my life.

Oh, one of the other lines in the piece is, "I'll do the dishes. You sit down. I've got this, Mom. I'll bring that from the car into the house. I got it." And I sometimes wonder if I—don't know—was this lost boy or something, and if I just was the best man I can be for my mom, maybe she'll fall in love with me, and we'll be okay.

Dana: It's totally like a death. That's crazy. In a way, that really is like a death. I'll do so many things that make me feel like my mom, things that I always didn't want to do. I'm like, "Oh, I'm doing it. I'm doing that thing. I'm that thing." But I also love that I'm doing that thing. "Look at me, Mom. I'm doing that thing."

Xander: And now it's like you would give anything in the world to do that thing for your mom one more time. "I'll clean up dinner. Let me get you another glass of wine. I've got it. Let me light your cigarette, whatever. Let me do it. Let me do it."

Dana: "Let me do it." Or I used to try on her clothes or jewelry, and now that I inherited, it's all here. Everyone's like, "You look so good in that jacket." "It's you, Mom."

Do you feel sometimes, when you tell your story, or if people are listening to this, that you want to help other people? When you tell this story—or even how you're telling it today—do you want to help other people who might be going through this with their parents, and say, "Oh, if I could give advice, this is what I would give"? Or is that not even part of your narrative, because everybody's story is different? And yet someone listening to this who might be estranged from their parents might say, "Xander, what

do I do? What do you think? You keep trying. You keep coming with generosity." I wonder what you feel in this moment, what you could impart besides all the beautiful things you've already said?

Xander: So many queer stories have a hard stop. The lesbian dies. Somebody gets sick. There are these tropes within our canon of storytelling. And everybody dies, or everybody loses something, and you never really get what you want. And I think that that's still true. And I lost something. I'm never going to get what I want from her, ever. But my life has gone on beyond that.

And I think it's important to model what happens after that, because so many of our elders and ancestors have hid or died, and no one has taken care of them, that we have learned how to build our own after. I've grieved a loss, but it's complicated 'cause she's alive. So it could change, maybe. And if I just keep doing what I'm doing, maybe other parents will also respond differently, because I am pretty transparent with how sad I am about it. And I think that they see how I'm hurting, and it makes them understand, "Well, I don't want to do that to my child. I might disagree, but I don't want to do that."

Dana: I end these calls the same way. And I want to ask you your mom's name and how you're feeling about her today in this moment after this call. What's coming up for you?

Xander: My mom's name is Barbara. And I just feel sad and confused, [56:13] because I don't really know why things are the way that they are. And I also know that I couldn't have done anything different. And I am not sure whose responsibility this is. But I feel I have the series of events, but I have no theme or answer or ending. I just know that I'm never going to get what I want. I'm never going to get from this person what I want, and I often wonder if she feels the same. And I imagine what it could be like—and it could be great—but I don't know what has to happen to do that. And I don't think I'm the one to do it.

Dana: Now go wash your toes. Alright.

Xander: (laughs) Go make sure my feet are clean.

Dana: (laughs) Before the devil gets you.

[start outro] If you wanted to see some behind-the-scenes of this episode, such as photos of Xander growing up and photos of his family, you can go to our website, which is mothersgravepod.com. And on that website, you can read about two organizations that are really important to Xander. The first one is called the Youth Empowerment Performance Project, and the mission of YEPP is to create a safe

environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth who are experiencing homelessness. They explore their history. They investigate new ways to address their struggles and celebrate their strengths. And they do this all through a process of developing a theatrical performance piece. So check them out on our website, YEPP. And the other organization is called Second Story. They are based in Chicago. They have been around for years. I love them as people. I have gone to many live shows, back in the day when we could do that, and drink wine. And they believe that a well-crafted, well-told story can be a catalyst for change. And they say that they want to live in a world driven by empathy—don't we all. And they believe that stories are what bind us to each other. Go to our website, check it out: mothersgravepod.com.

I want to thank Xander for talking with me. You didn't know me and you trusted me. And I hope someday we can meet in person, since we live in the same neighborhood, instead of over Zoom. 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 all of you for listening. You're awesome, thank you.

I don't know exactly how to compare that conversation with my life. I'm not going to say, "I really hope his mom listens to this podcast episode, and that someday they might be able to have a conversation over coffee," even though I am an optimist, and so is Xander. But what I do know and what I keep coming back to, around my estrangement with my own mom, and her addiction and depression, and the end of her life, is that I had a complicated mom. I had a sad, angry, confused, mournful, mean at times, complicated relationship with my mom. And I was not a perfect child. And even if I was, it wouldn't have made her less sick. Do I wish every day that things had been different? Yes. Do I feel angry at her for pushing me away? Yes. Do I have regrets of my own? Yes. But I have to keep living. I have to keep moving forward, and making sure that I'm okay, that I am living up to the best version of myself, with or without her.

And what I heard in that conversation is that Xander is okay. I keep thinking about his own words, when he says he is strong, smart, capable because of it all, and not in spite of it. And at the end of the day, I'm okay. [1:01:13] For me, I just keep coming back to the fact that there might not be a lot of hope with his relationship with his mom. And there certainly wasn't a lot of hope for my relationship with my mom at the end of her life. But he is now living his best life as his best self. He's engaged. He has a good

job. He's feeling good in who he is. And now his mom has to catch up to him. That's not his job.

At the bottom of Xander's emails in his signature line, there's a quote by Nayyirah Waheed: "If someone does not want me, it is not the end of the world. But if I do not want myself, the world is nothing but endings."

Talk to you next time. [end 1:02:05]