

# Mother's Grave S2 Ep7 Dana

## Transcript

[00:00:00] Hey, friend. Thanks for being here. Happy December. It's me, Dana, your friendly, sassy, podcast host. Just sitting here in front of the fire in my cozy robe, thinking about holidays past, and I thought we could have a little chat about it, just you and me. So why don't you go get into your coziest robe, grab a cup of cocoa or coffee or tea and put on your warmest fuzziest socks.

[00:00:38] And if you don't have any, I'm really sorry I didn't know that because I would've sent you a pair. Because my mother bought me, I don't know, maybe 25 pairs of large, warm fuzzy socks during her lifetime. I think by the time I was 18, I had like 16 pairs of warm, fuzzy socks. You know, the big, large ones where you wear them all over the house and they get really dirty on the bottom and gross, but you can't stop wearing them.

[00:01:02] And then sometimes you fall asleep in bed wearing them and they get stuck in the sheets and they fall off. Anyway, get into a pair of those and meet me back here and let's talk about holidays, Christmases past. Let's talk about grief. Let's talk about my love of American Girl Dolls. Let's do it. So meet me back here. Put marshmallows on the top of that cocoa, and thanks for being here. Welcome to, I Swear on My Mother's grave, which I forgot to say at the top because I was really distracted by the fire. See you soon.

[00:01:48] So I've probably already mentioned this before, but I am an only child and I grew up during the beginning of the Renaissance and home catalog journey of the American Girl Doll franchise. I was team Samantha doll all the way. She was my very first love. Samantha was the beautiful brunette from the turn of the century that I got for Christmas when I was about eight years old.

[00:02:15] Only one year after the start of this franchise, one of the originals. Her wooden sly ride and winter coat and adorable school girl uniform from 1904 was all I ever wanted, and I never looked back. I would then continue to ask for Samantha's bed, her birthday party set, her miniature little tea cakes for the birthday party, for Christmases and birthdays to come.

[00:02:39] And eventually I even got a new doll named Kirsten, the Swedish girl who moved to Minnesota with her family in the 1800s and the gift giving cycle continued. Side note: so today I looked up both of those original dolls, Samantha and Kirsten, which are now discontinued and supposedly you can sell Kirsten on eBay with some of her accessories for like \$3,000.

[00:03:00] So are you in? If you handle the shipping and like all the administrative stuff, we can split it 50/50. Let me know. Hit me up. I loved how the dolls came in these dark chocolate brown boxes with a cream colored ribbon around them, like they were fancy items of clothing. There was no plastic on the front of these early boxes, so when you opened them, you weren't even sure what doll or item you were receiving.

[00:03:25] It was pure surprise opening the box, just pure joy. I would set up the doll surrounded by her furniture and miniature fancy finger cakes around our Christmas tree. I would eventually take it all upstairs after Christmas to be displayed in my bedroom and play with them alone because, well, you know, only child. Remember?

[00:03:45] My mom loved these dolls. Honestly, she might have loved them more than I did. The dolls seemed so sophisticated to her back then. So new and fancy, and each doll represented a different era and "culture" with culture in quotes. My mom made sure I also got the books that went along with each doll that told their story and their history.

[00:04:09] And these books sat right next to my complete set of the Babysitters Club books. Boom. If you know, you know! It's throwback time, peeps. I love those books. I remember one year for Christmas, I asked my parents for a box of books. I'm not making this up. I just said, "Can I get a box of books? Like any books." I never told them what kind I wanted because I probably had no idea.

[00:04:33] I just knew I wanted fun, interesting, new fresh smelling books, and I got them in this like big box too. I think like 20 of them. And in full disclosure, I don't think, I don't even think I read them all. My gosh, how wasteful. I asked for books and I didn't even read them all. Come on, Dana! Oh, I grew up with a fake Christmas tree my whole life.

[00:04:56] A beautiful tree covered in white pearls and cream and gold bows and white lights and beautiful ornaments of all styles and colors, but it was fake and it lived in our basement, covered in a sheet all year round. My mother seemed deeply worried about fires and dry needles and the mess it made, and so I didn't have a real Christmas tree of my own until my husband and I got one, two years ago.

[00:05:19] We even walked it home ourselves from this nursery around the corner from our old place in Chicago. It was really cute. Two little city kids holding onto our tree by a rope and walking around the corner and up two

stories to our condo. Oh, and yes, the needles. Yep. They were all, all over the place. And that fear about a dry tree and fires, that stuck.

[00:05:40] I was anxious and worried about the tree's hydration, like all the time. My mother's voice in my ears telling me that the lights on the tree would burn the whole place down one day. Speaking of trees, we used to have this ornament that was made of old dried dough. Yeah, it's weird, but like that's what it was.

[00:06:00] It was a baby in a manger that hung from two branches. And one year our cat, our cat ate that baby right outta the manger. It's just a memory I have Like little baby Jesus eaten by my yellow Tabby cat named Tiger. My mom loved going to church on Christmas Eve. She wasn't really religious, even though sometimes we went to services around Easter and other occasions at this Lutheran church in town.

[00:06:29] (Shout out St. Paul.) And as I have mentioned on some other episodes, I dabbled in the hand choir. Mm-hmm. And the youth services of this church. We didn't go a lot, but my mom seemed to love Christmas time at church. The beauty of the church decor, the candles, the lighting, the songs, dressing up, and just the ceremony of it all.

[00:06:53] My nana, my mom's mom is 95, still kicking it and has lived near me for over 30 years of my life. Isn't that amazing? Oh my God, when I just said that out loud, 30 years, I have lived close to her, and by close I mean my nana has lived about 15 minutes away from me. And then in the later years, she lived about an hour, and now she lives about 6 hours away.

[00:07:21] But after my grandfather died when I was about 10, my nana would pack a bag and come sleep over at our house on Christmas. She would sleep in the guest room next to my room and be there in the morning in her nightgown with a cup of coffee waiting for the festivities to begin on Christmas Day, and I always sort of knew this was cool and special, having my Nana sleep over on Christmas Eve. Even telling friends back then, I knew that this was a gift, that not everyone got this and that I should cherish it.

[00:07:54] I don't know about all of your family traditions, but in my house, in my nana's house, you dressed up on Christmas. I don't mean in the morning, like right when you wake up, we aren't monsters, but for dinner and brunches and all special occasions, especially Christmas Eve dinner and Christmas Day dinner, you looked your best, like putting on black stockings on if I'm wearing a skirt nice and curling my hair.

[00:08:18] And in my later years, making sure I put on some of the clothing I might have received for Christmas that year as a gift. I mean, that won me some points! To come down for Christmas dinner on Christmas Day, wearing the Express sweater my mom had just bought me, or the Talbot shawl my nana had picked out and just saying to the table, yes, “I love it.”

[00:08:42] Knowing full well that I would never wear a Talbot shawl in my life. My mom and nana sometimes would argue over gifts. They would accuse the other one of not liking what she bought or saying, “well, if you don't love it, I'll take it.” Ah, yes. The holidays and the competitive mother-daughter relationships, memories.

[00:09:03] Remember when I said I can't stop hearing my mother's voice telling me about that dry Frasier fur burning down my house? Yeah. I can also never stop hearing her voice telling me to make sure you keep all the nice bows, the ribbons, the gift bags, the wrapping paper or decorative boxes, after everyone has opened their gifts, you put them in neat piles.

[00:09:25] You always clean as you go. You make sure the bows are in one pile, the bags are in another. Always keep it tidy. Always reuse and make sure that you comment to the person receiving the gift on how beautiful of a job you did wrapping it. Yep, that's my mom, and now that's me! In my late twenties, after my parents had divorced after 37 years of marriage, I would take the train from Chicago to the suburbs where I grew up to visit my mom, who was now living alone in a townhouse about 10 miles from my childhood home.

[00:10:01] She was still driving then, so she could pick me up from the train station. I would then sometimes tell her, “Okay, I didn't have time to shop yet. It's been really busy with work, so can I use the car tomorrow?” Yeah. Shopping at Chico's, Barnes and Nobles, Nordstrom and Clinic on December 23rd was like my thing.

[00:10:20] My mom and my nana kind of always needed or wanted the same things like year after year, so I knew which stores to go to in the suburbs to just bang it out, grab it, and go. I mean, it's, it's not a joke. Our local Chicos in Wheaton knew my nana, like she was a member of the staff. Mom and nana were really easy to shop for.

[00:10:41] Truly. Until one year when my mom started asking for a body that wasn't broken, her body. She really did ask me this. She emailed me and asked me to get her for Christmas, *a body that worked*. And I of course responded

with a sassy comment about how I'll see if I can find that at Target, which is not even that funny.

[00:11:03] And nor was the fact that she was getting sicker and sicker. I think it was around, I don't know, 2009 I arrived from the city and she called me to tell me that she couldn't pick me up from the train station that she was in too much pain from putting up the fake Christmas tree (yes, that same one from my childhood) and getting up all the Christmas decor.

[00:11:24] She said she'd pushed too hard and that she just wanted Christmas to be beautiful in the townhouse, to be as special as it was when I was a kid. And she didn't want me to feel sad that it wasn't like my Christmases when I was young, but that she overdid it and she was now physically unable to get out of bed.

[00:11:39] Her neuropathy and her bad back and tingling in her legs was rough. And so she told me her neighbor, Don, who she also thought had a crush on her at one point, but that's for another episode, would pick me up at the train for her. And when I got home, she cried to me from her bed and told me that she just wanted to make it perfect like it was when I was a kid.

[00:12:02] And I felt like saying, "You and dad are divorced. It will never be like it was when I was a kid." But I felt too old to be feeling that resentment, that sadness, like that was only for children, not 28 year old's. In the last years of my mother's life, it was too hard for me to sleep at her place, so I slept at my nana's independent living apartment on her green cushy couch covered in flowers from the 1970s that I now own.

[00:12:32] Another sleepover with nana. My mom didn't love this arrangement, but she accepted it because it was the healthier option for both of us. We were fighting a lot and she was in a lot of pain and drinking and...yeah. It was just hard. I remember calling my therapist one year during one of these difficult fights on Christmas at my mom's and my therapist, who is amazing, said to me, "This doesn't sound fun, so why are you choosing to keep staying there?"

[00:13:03] So I eventually started sleeping at nana's during the holiday, and then we would go over on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to bring food and appetizers and gifts. And sometimes my mom could join us in her living room and sometimes we had to open gifts in her bedroom. And since she couldn't stand at this point and was pretty much confined to her bed, and my nana was in her late eighties, I'm sure I collected all the gift wrapping from the floor myself

and tidied up all the bows and all the bags and put them away back in my mom's closet for next year.

[00:13:34] I now own all of that reused, recycled holiday wrapping paper. All the paper, all those shiny bows, all the gift bags that have my name written on them and her handwriting, all those ornaments, all her Christmas decor, all her nutcrackers, all the gift cards that say *To: Dana, From: Mom*, all her strings of pearls to wrap around my tree.

[00:13:56] But no, I don't own that fake Christmas tree that had to go. I also now own all my mom's jewelry and the entire velvety tan jewelry tray that it lives in. It sounds cliché, but every time I lean into that tray, I smell her. The jewelry is beautiful and fancy, full of clip-on, diamond and gold earrings, and shiny bracelets and antique pieces.

[00:14:23] I can see her opening her dresser drawer around the holidays in my old childhood home and the townhouse in her later years that she died. Her blonde hair pulled back in a short-curved ponytail, picking out which set of black and gold earrings she'll wear this holiday. I channel her when I pull out that tray and I choose a pair of earrings for myself, and I really miss her.

[00:14:50] I think I might have given you the impression that I'm healed, that I'm feeling more joy, more love, more acceptance around the loss of my mother, which is true. Of course. And sometimes I do feel a lot of acceptance and joy, but I miss her. I am not exempt from those pangs of sense memory and the pangs of what I had in this lifetime, what she gave me, how she loved me, how she showed up for me, how she taught me.

[00:15:20] I also miss being a kid. I think about this a lot lately. I miss that little kid, the kid who had no idea what was coming. And who loved her purple scooter and her box of nerdy books and her American Girl dolls and her sleepovers with nana. I miss little Dana as much as I miss having a mother. I couldn't look at my mom's Christmas stuff until last year when I finally pulled it out of storage and decided to put some of it up, and on one of my mom's Christmas boxes, this is not a joke...

[00:15:52] It says in full all capital letters with a black sharpie. It says FRAGILE. And then in quotes, it says "To me...Jo." FRAGILE. To me...Jo. My mom's name was Jo, and as many of you know, she loved sassy notes and instructions on objects of all shapes and sizes. FRAGILE. To me...signed Jo on a box. Because inside this box was a lifetime of Christmas memories and love and history and care.

[00:16:27] A time of celebration of family and wanting to keep that joy and love alive for her daughter. An inheritance of memories past. Seeing my first Christmas stocking from 1979 and my childhood ornaments are one thing, but like seeing gift cards that say "To: Dana, From: Mom" in her own handwriting, are they just breathtaking?

[00:16:56] Do you have anything like that? They're hard to hold in my hand. And the gift cards, like they all slip out from my fingers as I weep. Every time I see them in this box "To: Dana, From: Mom." Sometimes even with the tape still on one corner. Holidays are hard and I wish I could give you all advice that could change your life and tell you the cure for grief.

[00:17:21] Cause if I could, you know what? I'd have a lot of money. But I can tell you that even though these inherited holiday objects and boxes are a weight on my heart, I am so grateful to have them, to know that they are mine. They are now fragile to *me*, and I love them. Even though I dread them. Like right now, a bunch of these bins and boxes are downstairs in the laundry room waiting for me.

[00:17:48] They're calling to me. They're saying "To: Dana, From: Mom" and I am so nervous to answer, but I can smell them just like my mom's jewelry tray, begging me to open them and welcome them home. Happy Holidays to you and yours, however you celebrate. Deep breaths. And remember, you are loved by someone always. So now go put on your best Chico's jacket,

[00:18:21] And make Jo Black proud or just, I don't know, get back in bed and watch Everybody Loves Raymond because my mom liked doing that. Love to you all.

[00:18:51] The second season of I Swear on My Mother's Grave podcast would never be possible without our editor, Amanda Roscoe Mayo. Our music composer, Adam Ollendorf, our graphic designer and illustrator Meredith Montgomery, and our copywriter, Rachel Claff. Thanks as well to Tony Howell and Austin Heller for all their work on the website.

[00:19:09] And to Heather Bodie for her emotional, spiritual, social, and physical...well, for for all the help. Thank you. And to all of you, thank you for listening, subscribing, reaching out, and just being a part of this community. I'm so grateful you're here. And if you haven't signed up for our newsletter, you can do so at our website, which is [danablack.org](http://danablack.org).

[00:19:28] You can hear all about this incredible season and some upcoming live events we're curating just for you. I hope you'll come back. Come back, come back. Don't leave me like my dead mom. You know what I mean? Come back. Talk to you soon.