

Mothers Grave Mary_FINAL

[00:00:00] **Dana:** Welcome to I Swear on My Mother's Grave, a show that's part memoir, part conversation, and all about the loss of our moms. Well, actually, the show's official tagline is, bold, funny, vulnerable moments about the loss of our complex mothers, and not just in death. That's it. The tagline has evolved a bit over the last three years, three seasons.

[00:00:40] And I'm sure if I kept doing the show for the rest of my life, it would evolve again. Like, come for the grief, stay for the sass, is what I really want for my next branded version. Like grief, this show's tagline hasn't been 100 percent linear, and as I evolve, so does the show. So summing up the entire show and all the guests, the conversations, the tones, the vibes in one sentence is hard.

[00:01:03] It's about as hard as it is to sum up someone's entire life existence in 100 words or less. Yep. That's where this show has finally landed. It's time to talk obituaries, people. We're going to talk about how to write a good one and what they can teach us about our own lives. Today's guest is a friend I met on TikTok.

[00:01:25] Yeah, that's a sentence I haven't said much. But when you find someone who likes talking about legacy, complex grief, love, death, and family online, as much as I do. It feels like a friend. Today's guest, Mary, hosts the Tips from Dead People page on TikTok, where she earnestly and respectfully curates and personally reads obituaries from submissions she receives from all over the world.

[00:01:51] And she has built quite a following. Mary and I decided to take our new friendship offline this summer and try an old fashioned phone call to see about collaborating together in some way. We scheduled the call for June 22nd. And on June 19th, three days before our call, my 96 year old Nana, my mom's mom, and my best friend died with my husband, myself, and her caregiver by her side.

[00:02:15] Due to logistics and, well, my grief, Mary and I decided to reschedule our call for July. And when we finally got on the phone, I felt so much wisdom, curiosity, and kindness on the other end. After the call, I asked Mary to send me some of her favorite obituaries as good examples for me, because I still had yet to write one for my Nana.

[00:02:37] I think I thought that putting it off another week... Just wasn't going to change the fact that she was gone forever, but I finally did write my Nana's obituary, which you will get to hear at the end of this conversation. And then I scheduled this official interview with Mary to thank her for her tips and to get some wisdom on the mic for all of you.

[00:02:57] Outside of TikTok's tips from dead people, Mary's professional career has included working as a social worker and director of nonprofits and being a video producer director. She was also born in South Dakota, just like my beloved Nana. So it felt like fate that we connected so close to my Nana's death.

[00:03:15] Mary said, I've loved obituaries for a long time. My mom has been a journalist, a memoir writer, a teacher, and even a professional obituary writer. So I paid attention. I've collected stacks of obituaries over the years. Ones that made me laugh. Ones that felt achingly bittersweet. Ones that had a bit of mystery to them.

[00:03:34] Ones that guided me a little bit in how I approach my own life. I always suspected I'd want to do something with them. I just... Didn't know exactly what that would be. Diving into obituaries has shown me that a well told story never fails to deliver wisdom, humor, and even a bit of advice on how to live the good life.

[00:03:54] This is Mary McGreevy.

[00:04:09] **Mary:** As a kid, I was always interested in. gossip, I will say. And so I, I think that that interest in story is the through line to what I'm doing now with obituaries. And it's not so much celebrity gossip, but if you're telling me a story about your family and this was true even as a kid, I'm going to be the one to remember the family dynamics and oh my gosh, that part must have been hard and that part must have been hard.

[00:04:41] I'm that friend. I cannot remember things that I learned academically in school or maybe political events. or geography. You're not the person, I'm not the person you want on your Trivial Pursuit team. But if you tell me like, oh my God, my school pictures in fourth grade were ruined because this... like, that's what I'm going to remember.

[00:05:01] So my brain has always worked like that. And then my mom, who's done a lot of great things in her career, had a stint for a while as the obituary writer for our local paper, Sioux Falls the Argus Leader, is the name of the

paper. And so she brought home, stories from that gig and it got me started reading the obituaries because she was involved and I can read this is a very specific memory, but I can remember reading an obituary as a kid.

[00:05:31] So this would have been maybe middle school, high school, the phrase bachelor farmer was used. And I don't know if you're familiar with that phrase or if it's just like an upper Midwest thing, but it refers to single guys who like inherited their family's farm and never left the farm, but it's kind of a like people who make Norwegian Ole and Lena type jokes will often talk about bachelor farmers and I didn't really know what that meant, but the phrase was used in obituary.

[00:06:00] So I remember asking my mom what that meant and she explained it to me and it just. It occupied my brain for a while thinking about being the, the single person that inherits a family farm, likely an immigrant family from way back, what it means to stay and what it means for that person to be the end of the line.

[00:06:22] Everybody else has moved off, brain drains, nieces, nephews, all of those kinds of things, but you're the one. That is maintaining the immigrant dream of your ancestors and what happens when that bachelor farmer dies. So that's just an example of the kind of thing that really caught my attention as a kid.

[00:06:42] And of course, I went on to, you know, have college and work and a family of my own and all that kind of thing. So the obituary thing was always just sort of in the background. Every once in a while, you'd meet someone else that really likes to read obituaries. I still subscribe to the paper version of the newspaper.

[00:07:00] And that's a special group of people, the ones that like obituaries. And you kind of get to talk about that right away. So yeah, that's the, that's the childhood connection. I'll stop there.

[00:07:09] **Dana:** You're like, I go on and on and on. But I love it. It's like, tell me more. But there was not a, there's not a morbidity to it then, even as a child for you.

[00:07:19] It wasn't something salacious or morbid or true crimey or right or sad. It was more honoring, interested, curious.

[00:07:28] **Mary:** Yeah, that's a great point. I don't think that I've ever thought of it that way, but that's true. It really wasn't a morbidity thing. It was thinking about the life choices that that person made.

[00:07:41] Were they happy, sad? What what's and also because of the financial structure of obituaries over time what wasn't said so you can read an obituary and see related sort of boring stuff and then if you have a certain kind of brain you're always wondering what's not said, there. You know, if there's multiple marriages, if there's multiple moves, if there are things where there are questions, it wasn't tradition back then to say the harder things, the more complicated, but that's where most people's brains go.

[00:08:11] And that's for sure how mine interprets those things.

[00:08:14] **Dana:** And obviously when they're longer, they also cost more now. They, that wasn't how it was before even, or it was always about financial, how much you have to spend word count. Yes?

[00:08:26] **Mary:** Yes, there's a lot of history to obituaries. It used to be that they didn't cost anything because it was like a public service thing.

[00:08:33] But then once the idea of honoring your loved one in the newspaper caught on then, of course, newspapers caught on to that and it really got shifted over into the classified ad department, which is where it sits today. And so the average cost of a normal obituary is somewhere between \$600 and \$900 for one day.

[00:08:58] Usually that doesn't include a photo, but it can, depending on the size of the metropolitan area or the paper. My own mother in law's obituary, she died in 2016. She pre wrote her own obituary, which is. I love that. Colorful Southern woman, great storyteller, had great stories about her own life. She was, you know, a firecracker, as they say, but she pre wrote it.

[00:09:22] So when she died, we took it to the Dallas Morning News for a day and it was \$1, 200. So that was my sort of wake up call as to the the cost structure of obituaries and how that limits people's stories individually, but also how it limits us as a society seeing how diverse our culture is, because there's definitely an equity issue when it comes to that.

[00:09:48] I mean, are you reading the paper? Are you a page that cares about that? Are you willing to pay that much in addition to all the costs the funeral home is putting on you?

[00:09:58] **Dana:** Yeah.

[00:09:58] **Mary:** To tell that story.

[00:09:59] **Dana:** It's like a final nail in the coffin, literally, of our capitalist society and our right strataspheres of privilege.

[00:10:06] You're like, mm, mm hmm.

[00:10:08] **Mary:** Yep.

[00:10:08] **Dana:** Another, another sign of, yeah. Do you remember the first time you read an obituary for someone you know and how that might have changed how you read it? These weren't strangers anymore. They weren't faceless.

[00:10:24] **Mary:** So my grandpa died in 1986, and he was a city leader. He started a medical clinic in Sioux Falls that grew to be pretty big, and he was just very well respected.

[00:10:40] Sioux Falls, the population has exploded over the years, but back then it was, you know, a smaller, mid sized city. And he... you know, he was involved in a lot. So, there was the obituary, which I definitely remember reading and talked a lot about his accomplishments. But there was also then how newspapers can sometimes call out people of note who died and there's like a separate article.

[00:11:04] There was a separate article, I think, on the editorial page that said, the headline was City Loses Doctor Who Cared. And I remember feeling so proud of that just because of who he was, we adored him and because that piece got to go into more detail than the obituary that someone in our family clearly had paid for, which is...

[00:11:29] you know, as they go, it's usually jobs and this person has survived by and so forth. But when you can do more, you get that emotional feeling like City Lose, City Loses Doctor Who Cared. I mean, that I vividly remember reading. So the funny thing is that I I don't really believe obituaries should be a recitation of your honors and achievements.

[00:11:54] I believe strongly that the best obituaries are the ones that, that focus on little things, personality things, quirks, funny things, even the hard things. That's, that's a wholehearted belief that I have. But as a kid, I wouldn't have

known that distinction. I, I, at the time, I was just like, look, his story gets to be told in a way that's better.

[00:12:13] It's, this is who we know.

[00:12:17] **Dana:** I feel like I always want to take writing my mom's and I obviously started talking to you after my grandma passed and then you taught me some tips and tricks and, and we can get into that a little bit later. And I haven't shared with you her obituary, but I spent \$700 and I had multiple people reach out to be like, that was the most beautiful obituary I've ever read.

[00:12:39] So I, well, yeah, I was going to send it to you, but I just hadn't yet, but I, you helped me a lot and reading those examples. I, it was hard, not for me because I'm a writer in my newsletter and in the podcast, I put a lot of emotion and things I get sassy, I get, but I was like, you know what, I'm going to throw a little of that in this obituary.

[00:12:58] A little, a little, because it's hard to get emotional or, but to throw in the, the I voice even at the end, like, I'm going to miss you, grandma. Like I threw in my own voice right at the end. So you kind of know it's written for her, but from me, right? And, and that felt risky in a weird way.

[00:13:16] And, and then the moment of like, how do I talk about her burying both of her children? Well, just say it. You're going to say she's, you know, she was survived in death or she was, she lost her preceded death. They're going to know, so say, you know, she went through that deep loss with resolve and hope and love, even though it was difficult, I don't have to say that my mom died from addiction and that my, her sister drowned, but I had to like, honor, you told me, like, remember the details, talk about her carpet, talk about her skincare, like, do, give us the details, give us the juice, but the feeling of getting into the emotions felt messy in an obituary because it's like, Oh, here it's going to get, it's going to get costly.

[00:14:02] Oh, but also go for it because I wasn't having a funeral. I wasn't honoring her that way. The only way I could do it was in this public way in the Daily Herald, you know, so, but I will share with you. I just hadn't yet.

[00:14:15] **Mary:** Yeah, please. I would love to read that.

[00:14:17] **Dana:** But how do you, how do you think about the emotion part?

[00:14:19] How do you help people? Some people don't want that in there though. They want to keep it dry. They can't handle. Putting all that in, maybe it's too hard, right? It might be too hard for them. It's too hard.

[00:14:30] **Mary:** Some people are just private.

[00:14:31] **Dana:** Right, exactly, exactly.

[00:14:33] **Mary:** I do know what that trepidation feels like because there is a sense that if I write this publicly, especially if it's being in a news, in a newspaper, genea future genealogists or future people are going to read this.

[00:14:46] And so I don't want to do something that appears erratic or strange to the future, I guess. And, but I also think that that hesitation has to do with what we've always been taught makes a good obituaries, a good obituary rather. And I just. I just reject that. I, I understand that you want to have survived by all those things that are really actually super important for history and genealogy.

[00:15:15] I, I support that completely. But I think even when it comes to private people and thinking of future readers, that expanding the idea of what can be an obituary is, good for all of us. I have this theory that, I don't know if this is true, if you're a Ph. D. student looking in sociology, looking for a topic, I, I'll help you, but knowing your story will be well and fully told makes for a better death.

[00:15:46] And it hastens the grief process for people in a good way, because those stories are out there because you're not dealing with just a check the box type of experience when it comes to telling their story. I do believe that it makes for a richer experience around the time of death, both before and after for the person who's dying and for their loved ones, knowing that that picture is complete.

[00:16:10] And it sounds like you feel that way. Like you got you got what you needed to say about your grandma in a way that respectful to her, but richer than maybe you've seen in other obituaries

[00:16:20] **Dana:** Yeah, and that and you sharing a lot of specific examples with me allowed me the permission to go a little further, even though I could have gone, right, I could have written the memoir, right, of her life, and it's like, girl, that's not this, and A, that'll be \$6,000, but under, but, but that privilege part is real, was real, like, well, I can afford this \$700 because I'm not doing a service and, you know, some of this money's coming out of my grandma, but

the, what I really wanted to put in that obituary is that my grandma would be mad that I spent \$700 on this obituary.

[00:16:51] Do you know what I mean? I want, I wanted that to be the last line that she'd be like, how dare you? This is so frivolous. And yet I think she would be so honored. That it was so specific and so beautiful and we talked about how great her skin was, you know, she'd be thrilled and it got the facts of her life, but you said that it, yeah, people eliminate stuff and you can tell when someone says the word suicide, let's say in a specific obituary when they're honest about that, I'm always like the bravery of that and the choice of that when a family chooses to do that.

[00:17:23] I don't know. It's pretty profound for me. That's a separate thing than my grandma, I just mean when we go deep, on honesty like that. I, what do you think when you see that, when you see that you go, whoa, like, wow, you know, that's, there's something brave about that.

[00:17:38] **Mary:** Well, and it frustrates me a little bit when you, when I see euphemisms, like when someone died from, they'll say mental illness or couldn't get on top of their demons and suffered....

[00:17:50] You know, for addiction and that kind of thing. It's, we know what is being said there. Everybody knows what's being said and implied there. And I get not wanting to dishonor people, but I think it helps the world and the rest of us remember each other's humanity. Remember the complications of life.

[00:18:09] Remember our vulnerabilities when those things are said out loud. I've saved quite a few that deal with addiction and suicide because I feel like it's something I want to talk about more on my TikTok account because. I would love to gently nudge people into being truthful that way, if it feels right to them, if they're scared a little bit, let me say, you can do this.

[00:18:31] I mean, if they really, really don't want to, of course, everyone has, right.

[00:18:33] **Dana:** Of course. Yeah.

[00:18:35] **Mary:** But I think it's a help.

[00:18:36] **Dana:** Yeah.

[00:18:36] **Mary:** I think it's a help.

[00:18:38] **Dana:** So talk about like, then what, what are some of the basic tips and, and what you've learned? What are the basic tips and then what you've, what you've learned when, when you've, when you've got to write one or if, if you decide to write one for yourself while you're alive, which your mother in law did, which I love.

[00:18:57] Yeah.

[00:18:58] **Mary:** So things that I think make for a good obituary, and by the way, there are free sites. It sounds like your, the Daily Herald was important to your grandmother, but there are places to do free obituaries. From the funeral homes that offer, it's not a pretty, those aren't pretty platforms, but they do offer unlimited text space.

[00:19:16] There are a couple other startup companies that offer free obituaries. So if, if the newspaper's not an issue for you, there are places to expand. But for me, what makes a great obituary? So I do think it's important to be historically accurate. So I like the preceded in death or survived by, because I think people will come and look at these.

[00:19:34] We just never know.

[00:19:35] **Dana:** Right.

[00:19:37] **Mary:** But that can be at the end. It doesn't have to be at the beginning. It can be, it doesn't have to be if when you google how to write an obituary, I would say reject all of that because it's really just people in the death industry reproducing the same template over and over and over again.

[00:19:53] And so then you read these obituaries and you're like, yeah, that's just from a template. So I advocate for thinking about the details that made that person unique, and the smaller, the better that can come in the form of humor. It can come in the form of very truthful, complex things that are hard.

[00:20:18] It can be super quirky. It doesn't have to be. You don't have to be a professional comedy writer. To share things that we all will that will make us smile the very strange habits of the person or...

[00:20:31] **Dana:** ...because through specificity, you get universality, right? We know that like the more specific you get. It's like we know that we their love of peaches and the smell of you know, right?

[00:20:43] **Mary:** Things that, yeah, things specialty cooking items or whatever. There's a I think humor is a huge gift, and so I wouldn't be scared to go there in obituaries. There's a bit of a line, like, I've read some obituaries that are just savage. You can tell that there's a lot of simmering anger there on the part of the family.

[00:21:04] So I wouldn't, I wouldn't advocate unloading on the dead person. That's a line that I personally wouldn't cross, because I've read enough of those obituaries, and I just feel like, ugh, they're going to regret that someday. But! Acknowledging a person's shortcomings, in a sort of loving way, is a okay if that person wasn't the best parent or if the, you know, there are ways to say that, that feel universal and really flesh out that person's story.

[00:21:34] **Dana:** Yeah, when you told me that on the phone that you read these savage obituaries, remember, I was like, what are you talking about? Who in the world would ever and you were like, Oh, honey. There's a lot of them, right? I mean, I was like, I've never seen that. Couldn't believe it.

[00:21:49] **Mary:** You can Google savage obituaries and you'll find tons.

[00:21:53] **Dana:** Oh my god.

[00:21:54] **Mary:** The theme is generally like, this person was a horrible parent.

[00:21:58] **Dana:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:22:01] **Mary:** That's sort of why they come up, mostly. But, you know, that's a, that's a that's a sort of a side issue. I guess my main thing is get the basics down, but also fill it up with the kind of details that show why your unique person mattered on this earth.

[00:22:17] And that can be as small or as large as you want it to be, but that's what I want to read.

[00:22:21] **Dana:** Yeah, and I, I wonder if, I'm sure there's people out there, especially if they're writing their own or talking about end of life plans, they might have asked for, please make sure you mention this or say this at my service or in the obituary, but my grandma and I didn't have that conversation.

[00:22:36] I don't think it mattered to her what was said, of course, I think the \$700, like I said, she would have been livid, but, but no, she didn't ask for anything specific, but I wonder what she would have, you know, and I wonder

if that's advice you would give to like, if you can, you sometimes we don't have the privilege of talking about death sometimes comes sudden, but I wonder if, yeah...

[00:22:58] **Mary:** I think there's a generational thing to like, anyone age, I'm just going to generalize here, say 60 on down at this point is much more comfortable with showing their full selves out there in the world, but when my mom retired from her kind of corporate communications world, she became a personal historian, which is just a memoir writer, basically.

[00:23:22] And so she did this for many years. People in Sioux Falls would hire her to write their memoirs. And she did an awesome job. She has a stack of books that she's written about people in the community. And I helped her with that a few times. And my thought was, okay, people are paying for these memoirs.

[00:23:39] We're really going to get into it, you know. And I'm prepared. As a former social worker. I'm prepared for hard emotions that can come up but really that generation of people wanted to talk about things that they were proud of you can sure get through anything and like if you dig a bit on the hard times they really didn't want to delve into that we got through it we had enough you know that that was their, that was their thing.

[00:24:08] So it ended up with a lot of these memoirs not really getting difficult. They're great. They're great stories. Very interesting. But I do think there's a generational thing about not wanting to expose the hard things or the things that that someone might perceive to be frivolous,

[00:24:25] **Dana:** Right.

[00:24:26] No, that's a generational thing. Yeah. What have you learned about death and dying and memorializing by reading so many of these or about your own death?

[00:24:38] **Mary:** Yeah.

[00:24:39] **Dana:** Or and life?

[00:24:42] **Mary:** Well, there's there's so in terms of life, there are themes that come through from these obituaries. I've been because of my tick tock account, which we can talk about.

[00:24:51] I've been asked to tell people what tips you can get from obituaries like life tips. And so I've done, I don't know, maybe a hundred of these videos. And so I went back through all of them and started extracting the, the things that I got as life advice from all these obituaries and, and some themes emerged.

[00:25:12] The number one, which we've kind of alluded to the little things are the big things in life. If you. Think that your obituary needs to be your job history, your resume, that kind of thing. Nobody cares about that at the end of life. I mean, it's fine to mention it, but that's not what makes you, you. And even older people at the end of life who do write their own obituaries, that's not what they put in there.

[00:25:38] At some level, it just doesn't matter anymore. You know, what, what makes you unique about this time on Earth? And it's, it's almost always the little things. Not to say that you should be proud of your professional accomplishments or passions. That's all fine, too, but...

[00:25:52] **Dana:** And it's not about our stuff, because we can't bring our stuff with us.

[00:25:56] Our stuff, our accolades, our, yeah, our money.

[00:25:59] **Mary:** Cars won't be in your obituary, for sure. Another thing that keeps coming up through these obituaries is that there's always a next chapter. I keep reading about people who experience some kind of catastrophe or tragedy, whether it's divorce or addiction or some, you know, bankruptcy or even I've read people who were in jail, you know, when the obituary is written, it's almost always the case that there's another chapter after that doesn't necessarily mean that it's always going to be happy.

[00:26:30] But if you believe that that one thing is going to define you, It won't. That's, that's what I'm taking from this, that, that even till the very end, there's room for a next chapter. There's room for other ways of being in the world, for new people coming into your life, for, you know, happiness that you didn't know you could have.

[00:26:50] Another theme that I think we just alluded to is that humor and storytelling can move us down the grief path faster than we had thought we could go. And that sometimes it can actually make the death. Experience easier for the person who's dying. I also think honesty is cathartic. That's another theme that has come through. When people and I pulled a couple examples for you, but I think when people talk honestly about some things that are hard, even

if it's just touching on it, even if that's all you're comfortable with, I think it's cathartic for the people left behind.

[00:27:25] **Dana:** That's why we're, I started this whole thing. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:27:29] **Mary:** Yeah, exactly

[00:27:30] **Dana:** For myself, but for others, it's like just, say the thing say the thing that might be hard. Yeah. Will you share some of those examples and yeah you're referring to your tick tock tips from dead people, which is very beautiful and you get submissions from people and you read other people's obituaries and right and and accept submissions and share what you're you read them and but then you also share tips and kind of takeaways from people's

[00:28:00] **Mary:** Yeah

[00:28:01] **Dana:** From people's writings.

[00:28:01] **Mary:** That's exactly it. And it's genuinely not shtick.

[00:28:06] **Dana:** Right. No, no, totally.

[00:28:08] **Mary:** I actually do apply these lessons to my own life, or I try to. I was going through a stressful period at work a couple years ago, and I thought, I need some kind of creative outlet. I'm not a creative person. I'm not a creative professional. I don't really have an artistic talent. I mean, I'm, you know, whatever.

[00:28:28] Everybody's got something, but it, it hasn't been revealed to me if I have artistic talent, so I just decided that to reclaim a little bit of things that I enjoy in this period of stress. At work, it felt like a sort of extreme stress, I was going to do something that I felt creatively interesting and so I had these stacks of obituaries and I thought, what if I went back into my little archives read the ones that were most interesting to me and said what it is that I find interesting about them.

[00:29:02] And I have three daughters in their 20s. I talked to them about what, where should this be? Should it be on Facebook or Instagram or whatever? And right away, they were all like, this is TikTok material because TikTok, you can be a mess on TikTok. You don't have to be as polished. Things are very instantaneous.

[00:29:19] You don't have to work that hard on editing videos and so forth. So learned a little bit about TikTok and started posting. And then all of a sudden, one video kind of quote unquote went viral. It was kind of a funny one. And Then people started sending me obituaries that they loved and so now I have this list of, I don't know, 50 on deck because, because people are sending me these obituaries and some of them are not awesome, but some of them are really unique and I never would have found them otherwise.

[00:29:51] **Dana:** Yeah, but you get to choose what you share. I'm assuming there's some that you're like, that's inappropriate or that's not what I want to share or that's not everybody's life is worth honoring, but what you choose to share on there, you know, it's, it's selective, but I love that you still take it in.

[00:30:06] You're still, even if the world doesn't hear you read it, you've received it, you've received this person's story. So that's a lot to hold to. I was curious about how it feels when you're reading other people's lives, you know?

[00:30:19] **Mary:** Yeah. And one thing that I've noticed, a couple of things that I've noticed about this process, number one, I am a person who by nature is sarcastic and cynical and like very skeptical about other people being corny and whatever.

[00:30:34] For some reason, it's almost impossible to be skeptical or corny about, or skeptical or cynical, I should say, about this content. Like, if someone is taking the time to send you their grandmother or their sister's obituary, I'm reading it and I'm like, this is... so lovely that you sent this to me. It's sometimes it's not original or unique enough for me to feature on the account, but I, I love it.

[00:31:03] And I take the time to respond to every single person and I call out details of the obituary because. They, they exposed themselves like this and I want them to know that I, that I honor that. The other funny thing is that I'm, you know, I'm a, I'm a liberal, I'm a political liberal and I was kind of expecting when I started this account that that issue would eventually come up.

[00:31:30] **Dana:** Yeah. Yeah.

[00:31:31] **Mary:** Because people are people and you know, it always happens and commenters are can be divisive and so forth. I'm completely surprised by the fact that obituaries still seem to be an area that people who are divided and other things can can agree on. So even if an obituary is political, like I've had

obituaries come from all sides of the political spectrum, I don't always feature them because I do, I do kind of want to be somewhat centrist on this account.

[00:32:00] People still like a good life story, like even if I'm reading, you know, obituaries from someone that clearly I wouldn't have agreed with, if it's a well told story and it's interesting and I'm getting the details, I say that's a win for an obituary. Will you read some of those things you pulled? These are all about moms.

[00:32:15] I, I have written by a son that is just a masterclass in humor writing. It's hilarious. And it went, it kind of went viral on its own. And, but it's, it's really, really funny. I have one that talks in their own way about an unconventional and difficult mother. It sort of gets to the truth about that. This one, I'm going to read fast because it's long and People will keep up just because it's so funny.

[00:32:42] It's just like a little short story. Okay. This is Renee. The body fertile redheaded matriarch of a sprawling Jewish Mexican redneck American family has kicked it. There will be much mourning in the many glamorous locales. She went bankrupt in Pennsylvania, Renee's birthplace and where she first fell in love with ham and atheism North Carolina, where Renee's dreams, credit rating and marriage are all buried.

[00:33:07] And of course, Florida, where Renee's parents. Uncles, aunts, and eternal hopes of all Miami Dolphins fans everywhere are all buried pretty deep. Renee was preceded in death by Don Shula, who was the former coach of the Dolphins. Because she was my mother, the death of zoftig, good time gal Renee Corrin at the impossible old age of 84 is newsworthy to me, and I treat it with the same respect and reverence she had for, well, nothing.

[00:33:32] A more disrespectful, trash reading, talking, and watching woman was not to be found. Hers was an itinerant, much lived life, a Yankee, Florida, liberal Jewish tough gal who bowled him in Japan, rolled him in North Carolina, and was a singularly unique parent. Often frustrated by the stifling conservative culture of the South, Renee turned her voracious mind to the home front, becoming a model, stay at home parent, a supermom.

[00:33:57] Really just the perfect PTA lady, volunteer, amateur baker, and ha ha ha ha ha, just kidding y'all, Renee, this was a broad who never met a stranger, worked double shifts with Doreen, ate a ton of carbs with Bernie, and could occasionally be stirred to stew some stuffed cabbage for the kids. She played cards like a shark.

[00:34:15] Bowled and played cribbage like a pro and laughed with the boys until the wee hours, long after the last pin dropped. Yes, Renee lied a lot. But on the plus side, Renee didn't cook, she didn't clean, and she was lousy with money too. Here's what Renee was great at. Dyeing her red roots, weekly manicures, dirty jokes, pier fishing, rolling joints, and buying dirty magazines.

[00:34:36] She said she read them for the articles, but filthy free speech was really Renee's thing. Hers was a bawdy, rowdy life, lived large, broke, and loud. We thought renee could not be killed. God knows people tried a lot Renee has been playing with death for decades, but always beating it and running off in her silver chevy nova Covid couldn't kill renee neither could pneumonia twice infections blood clots bad feet bread breast cancer twice Two mastectomies two recessions multiple bankruptcies marriage to a philandering sergeant major divorce in the 70s, 6 kids one cesarean, a few abortions, or an affair with Larry King in the 1960s.

[00:35:13] Renee was preceded in death by her ex boyfriend. Renee King. Renee is survived by her kids and her favorite son, the gay one who writes catty obituaries in his spare time, Andy of, obviously, New York City. But the last line is, Please think of the brightly frocked, frivolous, funny, and smart Jewish redhead who is about to grift you, tell you a filthy joke, and for Larry King's sake, laugh.

[00:35:39] Bye, mommy. We loved you to bits.

[00:35:41] **Dana:** Mmm.

[00:35:43] **Mary:** So, of course. Nobody can write...

[00:35:46] **Dana:** no. Yeah. You're also like, Oh my God. Yeah. Is that a professional? Is he a professional writer?

[00:35:53] **Mary:** I don't know. I don't know him. He must be. He must. But for me, it's just an example of that litany of little things. It doesn't have to be funny, but this made my life better knowing that she existed.

[00:36:07] **Dana:** Oh my god. I wish I knew her. I'm so yeah. And I'm so sorry. She went broke so many times. What year was that? What year was that?

[00:36:14] **Mary:** 2022.

[00:36:15] **Dana:** Right. Because of COVID. And, and all, and then to, to throw abortion, I mean, to throw that phrase in the middle of that, I was like, Ooh, and then mastectomies and you're like, Oh, we're going, he's we're sharing all of it, which again, yes, not everybody can do that and everybody wants to do that.

[00:36:33] But man, it humanizes. It's like, it's, it's again, it feels so free. It feels so brave when someone, it's like when someone else is brave, it makes you want to be like, yes, like you said, the humanity of it. Right,

[00:36:46] **Mary:** right.

[00:36:46] **Dana:** Oh.

[00:36:47] **Mary:** So this next one is shorter, but it is. It might be of particular interest to your audience because right away you can tell that this is a complicated relationship and that their mom was not a perfect mom.

[00:37:01] So I actually don't know who wrote this, but I'm assuming it's one of her kids. So this is Heidi. She was perhaps one of the feistiest broads that ever battled against death. We're pretty sure death came for her many years ago and she looked him dead in the eyes. Spat on the ground and told him to come back when she was ready.

[00:37:18] Heidi lived a life that no one would want. But she lived it as only a queen could, proud to the last, she deigned to have it her way or the highway. The rest of us could shrug, give her a ride, or get out of her way. She relished being in nature and was happiest with dirt under her nails and trees above her head.

[00:37:38] She was an unconventional mother. Some of it came easily and naturally, and other traditions she lit on fire. Even she might say that she wasn't sure which was which. But, she loved her children fiercely, and her grandchildren brought her such joy and pride. She will be missed by the many lives she touched.

[00:37:57] So to me, that's, it's saying a lot in a few words. This is a, they're saying that this is a life no one would want.

[00:38:04] **Dana:** Yeah, what a way to start. Yeah.

[00:38:06] **Mary:** So this is one of the videos where I, I got like someone saying, you're interpreting that she's a difficult person. She might not have been a difficult person.

[00:38:16] That's you saying it. And it's like, you know, that's fair. But to me, this seems obvious that they're trying to describe a woman who caused some trouble for people, including her.

[00:38:28] **Dana:** Yeah, it could feel fake if they didn't right? It's that feeling of I don't want to say everything. I have to, I can't sugarcoat it.

[00:38:39] It's kind of like I felt a long time when my mom was living in those later years, it was hard to figure out what kind of mother's day card to get her. So I would get a blank card and then I would write what I wanted to write. I didn't write you're mean I would just write I know we haven't talked in a while.

[00:38:52] It's I know we're not, you know, best friends right now But you know, I still love you and instead of a platitude card that said you're the best If I bought my mom a card that said in those last years, you're my best friend It'd be like I was in denial and she would even be like, girl, what's this card?

[00:39:10] Anyway, so that's what feels like, yeah, it feels almost they had to figure out a way, but they still, they still said that she was strong. Right. That she did it her way.

[00:39:20] **Mary:** Right.

[00:39:20] **Dana:** Didn't let death take her. Loved soil under her nails. Loved the tree. Yeah. They found ways to honor her.

[00:39:27] **Mary:** To honor her or to, to show the world that there was a bit of love there, even in amongst the hard stuff.

[00:39:34] So I actually reread your mom's obituary this morning because I wanted to remember some of the details. And I'm just curious.

[00:39:41] **Dana:** Oh God, it's so long ago. And that was a very, that was a pretty traditional, I went pretty traditional then, you know, cause.

[00:39:47] **Mary:** Well, there's some wit in there, which I think is, it's you and it's unique.

[00:39:52] And I really. Enjoyed the fashion and the, the teaching and so forth.

[00:39:57] **Dana:** Like, I wonder how I'd write that now.

[00:39:58] **Mary:** Was your state of mind at the time like, I have to only say positive things or, or was your state of mind at the time like, we've, we've reconciled to the point where I actually do only want to honor her this way?

[00:40:11] **Dana:** I think because she was a teacher in that like, in that area and yeah, in that, in that state of mind, I was like, I miss you mom, you know, and it wasn't until 2002 and the pandemic where I was like, I'm going to get on a mic and I'm going to get this out and I'm going to get this out of my voice. So yeah, how I would write herbituary today, I totally, totally wonder what that would say.

[00:40:31] That's really interesting that you asked me that. And I had a friend help me write that. And the truth is, at the time in 2016, I was a playwright. And I gave him like bullet points and said, here are the facts. And then I took it from there, but interesting that that is what I thought then I was like, here are the facts.

[00:40:50] Cause I didn't, couldn't handle any of the emotions. I was like, these are just the facts of her life. Right. But I don't know, but, but, but if it's in a newspaper, if I had to redo it today, I don't think I would be like, she struggled with neuropathy and opioid addiction, you know, I don't think I would have done that what I would what I would have put in writing for a local paper.

[00:41:11] **Mary:** Yeah, because really, some people, the obituary truly is just a box to check when someone dies and all the other things picking out a coffin or a cremation place or whatever. Some people just don't care that much about the obituary. They're not go back and read it. I guess...

[00:41:31] **Dana:** Right.

[00:41:32] **Mary:** ...I'm different obviously But it's to each their own completely I mean if in some ways it's probably healthy to just like do a task and get it done and

[00:41:40] **Dana:** right I think I thought at this time with my grandma and then talking to you and and And this whole journey with the show.

[00:41:46] I was like, let's give my grandma something something nice, you know, I mean, my mom's was fine. But at that time, yeah, that didn't matter to me. It was kind of like, yeah, yeah, yeah, just get we got to get it out. Let's keep positive. And some students reached out to me and but I was just already kind of, yeah, ready to move on.

[00:42:03] And then four years later, I went down this path. I know that this might be hard because it's like putting you on the spot. And I know your mom is still alive, which is amazing. But as you know, I usually ask my guests to tell me their mom's name and what, how they're feeling about her as she's left this world and what's coming up for them.

[00:42:22] And so today I was like thinking about you and I thought, during this conversation, I still want to hear your mom's name, but I don't know how have you thought about how you would memorialize her? Have you thought about what you would say about her? And if you haven't that's okay. I just was like Mary I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about her?

[00:42:43] **Mary:** I often get the question like what I would say in my own obituary, but I haven't really been asked that question before.

[00:42:49] So her name is Kathleen Ann McGreevy, and she was born in Cheyenne, Wyoming, went to college in Nebraska, where she met my dad, and then they moved to Sioux Falls, and they've been there ever since.

[00:43:02] **Dana:** Wow.

[00:43:02] **Mary:** Since 1969. And she's a great writer. We have a great relationship. I, I adore her. She's, I would say she's more introverted, but being a great writer, it's not going to surprise me at all if she comes up with her own obituary.

[00:43:22] **Dana:** Especially if she memorialized other people's lives for her career, too.

[00:43:26] **Mary:** Right. You know, we haven't talked about that, actually, so that's a good question. But she's also of a certain generation where me asking that might not be the most comfortable conversation. So, it's a bit of a TBD thing.

[00:43:44] **Dana:** You mean acknowledging her own death.

[00:43:46] Is that what you mean? Yeah.

[00:43:48] **Mary:** Here's how I want my story to be told. But I've read stuff that she's written because she worked for the newspaper and she's been in communications and she's written some, some kind of personal memoir type things that I've read and I, I hope honestly that she writes her own because I would be so proud to see it and share that.

[00:44:11] So there's a funny little story when she was writing for the Sioux Falls Argus Leader and doing obituaries They had a moment where the editor said hey, let's do headlines for obituaries just like the New York Times does and there was kind of like really I mean, that's gonna be a little hard It's not like you have a lot of Nobel Prize winners to write about but okay, we'll try. So she was tasked with trying to write obituaries er headlines for all these obituaries like, you know farmed many acres joined many clubs, hard. So we had a family gathering and she had us go around the table to say what the headline for our own obituary would be, which is a fun dinner party conversation.

[00:44:53] Certain type of crowd for sure. But for her own headline, she said that it should be, never got hair right. So I can tell that whatever her obituary will be there will be some Wit and whimsy to it for sure

[00:45:11] **Dana:** never got hair right. Like her own?

[00:45:16] **Mary:** Right her own right? Absolutely.

[00:45:19] **Dana:** I was gonna read I was like, why not I could read some of my grandma's to you now for fun.

[00:45:25] Let's do it. It's not, you know, it's not groundbreaking, but so my grandma, Donna Marie Bannock, there's no headline. I don't know this headline you're speaking of. Was I supposed to, I didn't, I didn't get that

[00:45:36] **Mary:** option. No, no, the newspaper dropped.

[00:45:38] **Dana:** Oh God. I was like, this is not a thing anymore...

[00:45:40] **Mary:** because it's silly.

[00:45:41] **Dana:** You shouldn't know like a, like a newsflash. I thought, Oh gosh, is, is there really one? Donna Marie Bannick died peacefully on June 19th, 2023 at the age of 96. In bed at her nursing home, Wynscape, in Wheaton,

Illinois, just a few minutes after her beloved Jeopardy! had ended. She was surrounded by her wonderful caretaker of seven years, Paula Coyle Wheaton, her granddaughter, Dana Black, and Dana's husband, Jonathan Bode.

[00:46:08] Donna has been a proud member of the Wyndermere retirement community since 2001. Born on January 20th, 1927, in White Lake, South Dakota, Donna would live all over the country due to her husband's job with Westinghouse, but she landed in Wheaton's Adair Farms in the 1980s. She was a wonderful, witty, and loving mother, wife, friend, and grandmother.

[00:46:28] Donna craved a great book, especially memoirs, and loved a coffee and movie date in Glen Ellyn with her dear friend, Joan Ruddy. She cherished conversation and connection, especially handwritten notes from family and friends. When using a pen got difficult, Donna moved over to the iPad and kept emailing, even at 93, Donna exuded grace and style and never missed a hair appointment all while donning her favorite Chico's top, black pants and a statement necklace.

[00:46:54] Her skin was legendary and Clinique, a favorite brand. Her home was immaculate and the vacuum lines and the white carpet dared you to step on it. She was preceded in death by her husband of almost 40 years, a decorated World War II veteran named Francis Budd Bannick, and her two daughters, Shirlee Jo Black (Bannick) and Barbara Bannock.

[00:47:14] She endured this painful loss of both her children with a stern resolve that radiated hope and love and forgiveness, even in the face of deep grief. She was also preceded in death by four brothers and one sister, Elmer, Raymond (Ray), Harold, Orville and Shirley. She survived by her only grandchild, Dana, born in Wheaton and now living in Traverse City, Michigan.

[00:47:36] Her greatest joy in life was being a grandmother to Dana, an only child, and the bond between Dana and Donna, known as Nana, is fierce. Her joy was like no other when Dana married her husband on the patio of her nursing home in June 2022, almost exactly one year before her death. Donna will be laid to rest next to her husband, Bud, and daughter, Barbara, at Fort Snelling National Cemetery.

[00:47:59] Whoa! I'm starting to cry at like the last line. At Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In lieu of gifts, go check out a library book and maybe grab yourself a Chico's Blazer while you're at it. We love and miss you, Nana.

[00:48:13] **Mary:** Oh, that's so good.

[00:48:14] **Dana:** Whoa, girl. I have never read it out loud. And now I'm like, you taught me.

[00:48:18] You taught me, girl. You taught me.

[00:48:20] **Mary:** Oh, it's so good. It has it. It has everything like humor and everything. So the line about Jeopardy at the beginning perfectly sets the stage. Also, okay. My birthday is January 19th and So I feel like I know your grandma, like the need for control and the, oh, like

[00:48:41] **Dana:** vanity, like vanities there.

[00:48:42] It's like, how do you call her vain? How do you say like, she wanted to go to like the fuck really it's COVID she's like, I have to get my hair done. We're like, you're never getting your hair, like you're never going to get it for the next year. You've got to get over it, you know, but also, yeah...

[00:48:56] **Mary:** but dignity, the way that you.

[00:49:00] Oh, my gosh. The thing, like, if you didn't know anything about your grandmother and you read, she's preceded in death by doo doo doo doo doo, her two daughters. It's like, like it takes breath away. And then that, and her brothers, which by the way, all classic South Dakota names, that's so funny. I just, it was really important that you addressed how she lived.

[00:49:27] After those tragedies. Yes, because we would wonder otherwise and that's like that's a spine That most people could never dream of like what she did after that.

[00:49:40] **Dana:** Yeah, that's a good point Yeah.

[00:49:42] **Mary:** This is a story.

[00:49:44] **Dana:** Thank you and maybe maybe and maybe because of the work I've done like these last three years like I I I think I added that because I was and I'm now in my forties.

[00:49:53] And I think I was like, Oh my God, she buried both her children and we never really talked about it. You know, I didn't talk about Barbara when I

was a child. And I was like, wow. And I look at her sometimes and I'm like, how did she, how did she do that? How did she wake up every day?

[00:50:15] **Mary:** Right.

[00:50:16] **Dana:** And still...

[00:50:16] **Mary:** I don't know.

[00:50:17] **Dana:** Because she loved good skin and Chico's, no, because she had to, she had to just keep going.

[00:50:22] And for me, right? Anyway. I don't know.

[00:50:25] **Mary:** It's just for you. And so how do you, like, your kids have both died. How do you say, all right, well, my to do list for today is go to Chico's and pick up another necklace. Like, like reclaim the joy of little things. I don't, I don't know how you do that. I don't.

[00:50:42] **Dana:** Right. Right. And I, yeah, so totally, I was like, I have to say, because you're, because you're going to write, she's preceded in death. You're going to say it in this thing, right? The thing that is not said. And then you're like, well, let's address it. Let's, let's remind everyone this woman buried her husband buried her boyfriend, which I didn't talk about buried.

[00:51:01] Yeah, like all her siblings are gone. And both her children. Anyway, thanks. Thanks for letting me read that.

[00:51:07] **Mary:** Oh, I'm so glad you did.

[00:51:22] **Dana:** Yeah, I couldn't say all the things I wanted to say to and about my mother. When she died in 2016. And I certainly wasn't going to be able to articulate them in a public newspaper. I mean, I could barely tell my friends or even my therapist how I felt at the time. For years before my mom's death, my therapist used to say to me, We have about five minutes left in your session.

[00:51:46] Let me know if you want to talk about your mom. Because I just didn't know where to start. I didn't want to. I preferred to bitch to my therapist about a guy that I was hooking up with or talk about my acting career. It was way easier than addressing my mother's physical deterioration, her addiction, and deep depression.

[00:52:04] It was just easier to pretend that my mom hadn't called me at 8 a. m. crying and almost incoherent in her speech while I was on the train to work. It was easier to just hope and pray that she would get better and instead of having to look right at it, to look right at her and say, Oh my God, you are a different person.

[00:52:22] You've changed. You are dying and I am so embarrassed and pissed and I'm mourning you in real time deep in my bones and I am so fucking sad. I could not say that then. I never wrote what I truly loved about my mother and how her death affected me until I started this podcast in the early months of the pandemic, four years after her death, four years after her obituary.

[00:52:46] I was jammed up in my closet at night alone on a mic. And this is what I said, this is how the podcast started, this is how my journey to free myself began. And three seasons later, I thought I would read it back to myself and to all of you, my thesis and my trailer. Welcome to I Swear on My Mother's Grave.

[00:53:06] My name is Dana Black, and in 2016, I lost my mom at the age of 67. My mom looked like Vanna White, and was a lover of gardening, biology, teaching, a good Chico's jacket, writing her name on everything she owned, a great dinner party, family, and me. But she also loved vodka, opioids, and refusing therapy, and neglecting her body when it started to fail her.

[00:53:32] And by fail, I mean that my mom lost the ability to walk. She lost the ability to stand, to go to the bathroom on her own. My mom dealt with crippling neuropathy, a bad back, depression, a divorce of 37 years, alcoholism, and a huge addiction to opioids. I had been mourning my mom for years, way before her death.

[00:53:52] The mom I knew was already gone. And it was painful to watch and confusing and embarrassing, and I did not want to talk about it with anyone. Ugh. But now I do. I want to talk to friends who have also lost their mothers. And by loss, I don't just mean in death. Because loss is complicated. And so is grief.

[00:54:12] And our assumptions around grief. I remember when I got the call that my mom was on the way to the hospital. In an ambulance, the EMT on the phone couldn't legally tell me anything, but he told me that I'd better hurry. And I remember saying out loud, please let her be dead. Please let her go. She was so sick, there was no coming back.

[00:54:35] I felt an immediate relief, an immediate feeling of peace. I had moved instantly onto acceptance. And my grief, it wouldn't start for a few more months. I want to learn how to talk more openly about my own mother's life and death. I don't want to bottle things up and not reach out to people to talk about difficult things or ask for help, which is something my mom did in her later years as she got sicker.

[00:54:57] It's something my grandmother, her mother does as well. By talking more openly about losing my own mother and asking people questions about theirs and laughing together and maybe sharing memories, I believe that I can begin to honor my mother and start to process some of the pain of losing her. I also hope that I can start to remember more of the good days.

[00:55:18] I hope that I find it healing and that by talking with others, they might find it healing as well. Grief is not universal, but it is personal. And what I'm learning is it's not always as devastating as one might think. Oh, and because the world needs more podcasts, I thought, well, yeah, let's talk about our moms.

[00:55:40] Whoo. That was what I wrote. That was what I recorded three seasons ago. And boy, oh boy, what a ride it has been. As Mary reminded us, the little things are the big things. And a little bit of humor, storytelling, honesty, and vulnerability will hopefully set you and the dying free. It has for me. Talk to you soon.

[00:56:20] The third season, which is crazy to say, of I Swear on My Mother's Grave podcast would never be possible without our editor, Amanda Mayo from Cassiopeia Studio. I also want to thank our music composer Adam Ollendorff, our graphic designer and illustrator Meredith Montgomery, our copywriter Rachel Claff, and Tony Howell and Jonathan Freeland for all of their work on our beautiful website.

[00:56:42] And as always, thank you to Heather Bode for her emotional, spiritual, social, physical, for, well, for all of the help over all of the years. Thank you. And all of you. Thank you for listening, for subscribing, for reaching out, for telling all of your friends. I know that this club, this complicated, messy club, isn't fun to be in.

[00:57:04] But I'm so glad that you're here. I couldn't do this without you, so thank you for being a part of this community. And if you haven't signed up for our newsletter, please do so at our website, which is danablack.org, not just

because I want to sell you stuff, but because I want to keep talking to you, and you talking to me.

[00:57:20] So, go check that out. There's personal stories, I'll tell you about the season, and you'll learn about some live retreats we're curating. One retreat at a time.

[00:57:27] So, yeah. Thanks for being here. I hope you'll come back. Will you come back? Don't leave me like my dead mom. You know what I mean? Come back. Please. I'll talk to you soon.