

Episode 113: Bonus episode – They Knew

Hey, this is Scott.

I know, you might be surprised to see What Was That Like show up in your podcast feed today. New podcast episodes come out on Fridays every two weeks, and today is not one of those “new episode” Fridays.

What I have for you today is a bonus episode, because I want to introduce you to another podcast that I think you’ll love, because I know how much you enjoy hearing people tell their very personal stories. I love those stories myself, which is why I’m subscribed to this show.

The podcast is called The Secret Room, and it features anonymous guests revealing true stories – stories they’ve never told before. Sometimes it can be a tragic one, like witnessing the murder of someone you know. Or it might be about having a secret love affair with someone on death row. The variety of stories and topics are endless, because everyone has a secret.

The host of the show is my friend Ben, and I think he and I are similar in a lot of ways. He’s very empathetic as the guests come on the show and talk about these things that are very personal to them. Ben and I talked about this idea, and we thought it would be nice to share each other’s podcast with our audience. I’ve only done this once before with another podcast, because I have to be 100% sure that the content I bring you is something I know you’ll enjoy. The Secret Room definitely meets that requirement.

So today you’ll hear Caroline’s story. When she was a kid, she accidentally discovered a shocking secret that her dad was keeping. What happened after she confronted him would change her world forever.

If you like this episode, I encourage you to find The Secret Room on your favorite podcast app and subscribe. I’ll see you next week.

Susie

Hey, what's your secret?

Female

When I was 15 I worked at a little cafe nearby that made sandwiches. Oh, one of the sandwiches was a grilled chicken. We kept all the chicken breasts marinating in, like, the crappiest cheapest Italian dressing you can think of. They were all marinating in this dressing in a refrigerated drawer. Then, you would just pull the drawer, take the tongs, grab one of the chicken breasts, and throw it on the grill. So, I knew that my boss was a cheapskate, but I didn't know that he was a sociopath until the day that somebody accidentally spilled the entire drawer of chicken breasts onto the greasy floor and he made us pick them all up, wash them off, pour new Italian dressing, and throw the chicken breast right back in there. It was disgusting. And I probably should have called someone.

(Introduction music)

Caroline

A woman had been murdered, chopped up, and hidden in the walls of that basement.

Ben

Today's story is about resilience.

Caroline

So she turned to me. I remember her eyes narrowed like a predator and she went, "What did you just say to me?"

Ben

It starts when a heroine makes a discovery...

Caroline

I got nosy and was poking around in my mom's closet

Ben

and what she found defied logic.

Caroline

I didn't understand how there could be a mathematical explanation for this.

Ben

It took her to unexpected places.

Caroline

This night is chiseled in my memory.

Ben

Today, The Secret Room presents, "They knew".

Caroline

Hi Ben. My name is Caroline. When I was a kid, I discovered a shocking secret my dad was keeping. What happened next would change my world forever.

Ben

Hi, Caroline. Welcome to The Secret Room.

Caroline

Thanks, Ben.

Ben

Great to have you here. Thanks for sending in your secret.

Caroline

Oh, it's my pleasure. I'm really excited to be here.

Ben

The first thing I wanted to ask you is, do you believe that everything in life happens for a reason?

Caroline

Well, I don't generally believe in platitudes. I think they provide comfort and they have their place, but I think when you dig deep, they often kind of fall flat for me. I don't like this one in particular because I would prefer to believe that we have more control over our future than that would imply. While it would be comforting to believe there's a grand plan and a reason for everything, I think the universe is messier than that. Sometimes, shit just happens and you have to be able to - I like this one - roll with the punches because life is going to hit you now and then. I think being adaptable is better than just chalking everything up to the plan that the universe has for you.

Ben

Well, we're going to unfold your secret, and I guess it's something that happened not for any particular reason - it just did.

Caroline

It was a totally normal day. Yes.

Ben

All right. Well, let's roll back. What was your mom like when you were a kid?

Caroline

Up until a certain point, my mom was the best mom like the mom that you would read about in Good Housekeeping, the one that keeps everything neat, cleans, cooks every night, has dinner on the table, arranges playdates, and is just fully invested in her kids. Around, maybe, the time when I was 10 or so, it almost seem like she just sort of lost interest in being a mom. I had a younger sister and a younger brother. A lot of the responsibilities that she had taken care of, for us, as our mom - she just sort of started assigning them to me and shifting them to me. So, I was the one suddenly making lunches. At that point, I wouldn't say that I was scheduling playdates and that sort of thing - those things would come in the future. I just took on more and more cooking and after-school supervision to the point where she could kind of just check out.

Ben

That sounds like a lot of responsibility for a 9-year-old.

Caroline

Oh, yeah. She had gone back to work. My parents were both out of the house until at least 6 every night - my dad was much later even than that. When mom would get home, it was 1 o'clock. So, it wasn't like she got home and engaged while we were doing homework. She got home, poured herself a glass, shut the door to her bedroom and kind of ignored us. So, we got to be very self sufficient, very good at entertaining ourselves.

Ben

As a 9-year-old, did you have a feeling that this was not normal? Were you longing for the attention, care and love that you had lost from your mom?

Caroline

Yeah. This story is going to get kind of sad for a minute here. I have always been sort of hyper-responsible and was wanting more and more responsibility. So, it was definitely a case of "Be careful what you wish for". Gosh, for a person who doesn't love platitudes, I've used three now. I can remember laying in bed at night and just thinking to myself, "Okay, tomorrow, I'm going to need nothing. I'm not going to ask my mom any questions. I'm going to just guess what everybody needs and make it happen because I just wanted to maintain peace and tranquility. If I were to question anything or object in any way to something that they had asked me to do, it could be a slap across the face or "Go to your room! I'm not going to talk to you right now!" I mean, it just changed so abruptly that I thought I had done something to deserve that.

Ben

Was your dad involved in your life?

Caroline

On vacation, he was. The rest of the time, he was typically working or sleeping. It seemed to me that dad was always at work.

Ben

When you were 9 and taking care of your siblings - a brother and a sister - your dad's working so hard. Was there a lot of money coming in? What was your social status?

Caroline

Another thing that was really confusing is my dad was gone all the time. Then, my mom went back to work. I knew that working was about making money, but there never seemed to be enough and it didn't make sense. I mean, I remember going to Salvation Army to go back-to-school shopping or going through the dollar bin at the supermarket to find things to eat. When I would make dinner for the kids, a lot of times, it was all 3 of us sharing a single box of macaroni and cheese. I didn't understand money. I just knew that there just never seemed to be enough of it. I never went hungry or wanted shoes that fit or anything like that. There was always enough to meet our basic needs. Anytime we asked for something, the answer was, "We can't afford it." Now, that said, we did occasionally go on vacation and we would do activities on the weekend. I mean, we weren't stuck out living on a dirt road with no friends or anything. It just seems that the common answer was, "We can't afford it."

Ben

What kind of vacations did you take?

Caroline

A lot of years, all of us would drive to Florida - I grew up on the northeast coast - so, it's a 20-plus hour drive and it was paradise. It was so wonderful. We had our parent's full attention. Sometimes, we would go for, kind of, a long time - I think the longest time was 2 weeks because I can remember missing school and my teachers making such a big deal about it, and I remember not understanding why missing school was bad because I always got great grades. We would often miss weeks of school every year. In fact, one year, I had a letter sent home that said if I missed a single additional day of school, I would have to repeat the grade regardless of my grades because of truancy, which was sort of mind-boggling. When you're little and you have so many responsibilities, sometimes you wake up and you just don't want to go to school. If I said "Mom, I don't want to go to school today.", she never really fought me on that. She would just say, "Fine".

Ben

Do you have any idea why they transformed so starkly on vacation?

Caroline

I do. I think part of the obvious reason is they just weren't under as much stress because we were out of our daily lives. Another reason is related to my secret.

Ben

Which we're getting to soon. Tell me what happened one day after school when you were alone, as usual.

Caroline

It was a very average normal day. Just think of any typical Wednesday after school. I'm not sure why I wasn't doing something with friends that day. I can't actually remember what time of year it was, but I know that I was in the house by myself. I got nosy and was poking around in my mom's closet because I had reached my full adult height by the time I was 12. I would always take her clothes and like them on - especially anything fancy or sparkly that she had - just as a way to entertain myself until they got home. God forbid she ever caught me. I felt like she would have smacked me but she never caught me.

One day, I was snooping around in there and I found a VHS cassette tape. Being very innocent and not having any clue what a videotape hidden in an adult's closet might contain - thank goodness, it contained what it did, because it could have been worse - I popped it into the VCR and I saw my mom and dad in New York City with two teenagers - they were visiting landmarks and goofing off. I noticed the time stamp on the tape was two weeks prior. My parents had been - I didn't know exactly where - out for a couple of overnights 2 weeks prior, so I was putting together the pieces. "This is my mom and dad. There are these 2 teenagers. This is when they were out of town. Suddenly, the boy - it was a boy and a girl - stated his name to the camera, and it was the same last name as me, as my family." Then, it just clicked for me. "Oh my gosh, I'm related to these kids." The tape was pretty long. I think it was probably 1 - 1.5 hour. They were visiting my aunts and uncles and the girl must have been about 16 because she was getting driving lessons with my dad around my grandfather's neighborhood, and I went, "Oh my gosh. This is my brother and sister. How can this be?" I don't know how that could be but that has to be what I was looking at.

Ben

So you must be asking yourself, "How is it possible that my parents have two other children and where are they living?"

Caroline

Right. Where did these fantasy children that popped up 2 weeks ago? Where are they the rest of the time? Exactly, yeah. I was very confused. I think it's worth mentioning that this was sort of the heyday of talk shows like Jenny Jones, and I would watch those after school. So I was kind of like, "Oh, my gosh. It's my own Maury Povich episode. This is exciting!"

Ben

So you can go on Jerry Springer--

Caroline

Wouldn't that be amazing?

Ben

--but here you are in the secret room. I guess it worked out.

Caroline

I guess. So it's my claim to fame.

Ben

Gosh, how many times did you watch the tape at that moment?

Caroline

Just one. I was really afraid. I was a straight and narrow rule follower. I never wanted to break any rules and get caught because I knew that was going to mean a smack. So, I put the tape back exactly where I found it, tucked it away and sort of made my plans for what I was going to do next.

Ben

Oh my gosh, I can't even imagine. I mean, if that were to happen to me, my heart would be racing. I would be questioning everything I knew about myself, my mom, and my dad, and try to find holes in my life that could explain what I've seen.

Caroline

That's all true, but I think I probably was calmer than the average 12-year-old just because my world had already shifted so dramatically before that I felt like I couldn't trust the earth under my own feet anyway.

Ben

Wow. Okay. So you're creating a plan. You're going to talk to mom about it because dad's probably not around?

Caroline

Yeah. I didn't know when is the next time I would see Dad. I just didn't really have that kind of relationship with my dad where I would confide anything in him, so I only would have asked my mom even if he had been available. So, she got home from work. I knew to not confront mom before she changed out of her uniform and poured that first glass - that was chiseled in stone tablet in my mind - but this was too juicy and I couldn't wait. Seriously. She was about to go into her bedroom. She got her nursing uniform on. She was basically trying to wave me out of her face. Then, I said, "Why didn't you ever tell me I had an older brother and sister?"

Ben

Wow, she must have just looked at you like, "How on earth did this child have this information?"

Caroline

So she turned to me. I remember her eyes narrowed like a predator and she went, "What did you just say to me?" I kind of reared back like, "You kept this secret and you're angry at me because you got found out? Like, how are you the one being self-righteous right now?" She said, "I don't know what you're talking about. You need to talk to your dad. I don't have any more information than that for you." Then, she slammed her door in my face.

Ben

Oh, my God. Well, you've got some chutzpah - I'll tell you that.

Caroline

Well, my heart was beating fast.

Ben

I'm sure it is. So mom was locked behind the door like usual but, now, you've got this thing hanging in the air and it's, like, huge.

Caroline

So I hit the road. I got on my bike and I pedaled like mad. I was going to California on that bike because I thought, "For sure I'm in trouble". That was not the reaction I expected. I expected, if anything, "How do you know this?" or something along the lines of "Let me sit down and explain some things to you". I didn't expect a door to be slammed in my face. I hadn't done anything wrong. Well, I guess snooping isn't very honest, but I was 12. I was the kid and she was the grown-up.

Ben

Clearly, she knew exactly what you were talking about.

Caroline

100%. That was the part that had me the most freaked out - trying to, like, race through my mind's Rolodex. What could be a logical reason that me figuring out that I have an older brother and sister would get me in trouble? The only thing that made any sense was she figured out that I was snooping, but I still didn't think that her reaction was in proportion to what had happened.

Ben

Yeah. I mean, her reaction was just, like, way over the top.

Caroline

Usually, I knew why I was in trouble - I had done something to provoke it. Even if it was something minor that I shouldn't have necessarily been punished for, I knew what it was about. But I just had more questions at that point.

Ben

So you were on your bike and pedaling. Where are you going to?

Caroline

I didn't really have a destination but I had to hide because I didn't know what she was going to do. The one thing I couldn't handle in my world at that point in time was unpredictability. I needed to know who was going to do what so that I could prepare for it at all times. I had thought that I had the upper hand because I found out her secret. Then, she turned that table on me so quickly and I just couldn't make sense of it. There was just no logical explanation for her reaction.

Ben

So you were just heading for the golf course or wherever?

Caroline

Probably, yeah. I'm just gonna pitch my 10 on the green, sell my golf balls, and that's going to be my life now,

Ben

You must have felt a little bit like your world was crumbling. I mean, I know you felt a seismic shift already. All of a sudden, a kid who likes certainty and wants to be prepared for what's next suddenly has no idea what's next and doesn't really have a way to figure that out because you've already tried the only avenue you have except for talking to your dad, which is not really the hugest option. Is that what you're planning to do next?

Caroline

I initially had just this profound sense of disassociation, like "This isn't real life. Nothing is real. I'm experiencing a dream right now." I couldn't comprehend what to do next. When I got home later that night, it was past dark and I fully expected to get reamed for being home late because I came home when the street lamps came on. My dad was there. He said, "Hey, can I talk to you?" What was I going to do? Do I be like, "Nah, I'm good"?

Ben

But you had this burning question. I mean, if I understand the kid that you were to some degree, it's on the tip of your tongue ready to ask your dad. So that's an opportunity. Am I wrong?

Caroline

I think I was so apprehensive after the reaction I got from my mom, which I predicted to be safe. I just didn't know what to expect, so I allowed myself to, kind of, be led by him without trying to prepare myself because there was nothing I could prepare for. I had no concept of how this was going to go. Maybe, I had gotten it wrong. Maybe, these weren't siblings and I made an assumption - that was possible. He sat me down. We used to always sit on the covered porch when we were having chats - well, I should say when we had chats, which wasn't often. He said, "Would it be okay with you to go on a daddy-daughter date this weekend?" which got my heart beating fast because my dad never asked my permission for anything. I was like, "I guess if I have to. You know what we're doing out here and you want me to wait till the weekend? Like, that's days." But I mean, what was I gonna do? I guess I don't have leverage on my dad. I had nothing to negotiate with.

Ben

Okay. Well, at least you know, at this point, that you're gonna get the truth or you're gonna get some information because that sounds pretty heavy.

Caroline

I didn't know at that time if we were going to have a chat about snooping or what I had found.

Ben

Okay. So you've got days until the daddy-daughter date. What is going on in your mind? Are you thinking back and going over memories?

Caroline

The thing that I remember most was trying to fit together a timeline. When I was born, my mom was newly 18 years old and my dad was 23. They were really young when I was born. So, my thought was, "When the heck did you have time to go have two other kids? Did you adopt some children and not have them live with us? How did this happen?"

Ben

Yeah. And were they about your age? How old are they?

Caroline

No, they were teenagers and I was 12, so I knew they were older than me. I was the oldest of my known siblings, so I couldn't conceive how it was possible for an 18-year-old to have children - the older of the two looked to be 3-5 years older than me. Did something really horrible happen to her as a child? I didn't understand how there could be a mathematical explanation for this.

Ben

Yeah, it doesn't make any sense. Figuring out their age, were they born before or after your parents got together?

Caroline

Before.

Ben

Okay. So maybe your mom had kids with somebody else and your father adopted them?

Caroline

Maybe.

Ben

Okay, that's one theory. That's the best one I can come up with.

Caroline

Yeah. There were not a whole lot of sensical options here, so I was very curious about what this daddy-daughter date was going to reveal.

Ben

Yeah, me too. All right, so you had been going over the timeline, you came up with a lot of different options, but nothing really makes sense.

Caroline

The only thing that kinda made sense was the adoption idea, but one thing really nagged at me and that was my dad has piercing blue eyes - really deep blue eyes. It was always a sore spot for my parents that none of us was born with blue eyes like his. Both the kids in the videotape had piercing blue eyes.

Ben

Oh my gosh. So the mystery deepens. During this waiting period, how are mom and dad acting around the house? Is it just business as usual? Are they tiptoeing around the subject and being weird?

Caroline

They had said to me that they didn't want me to talk to anybody - especially not my siblings - until after I had a chance to have my date with dad.

Ben

Okay. Did you honor that?

Caroline

Yeah. They said that we could tell people once that happened, I guess. They were very clear with me, "Don't tell your friends. Don't talk to your siblings about this. This is something we need to talk to you about privately before you share it."

Ben

Wow, this is really interesting. So they know that the cat is out of the bag.

Caroline

I'm not sure what I would have said anyway because I didn't know anything yet. All I would have to say at that point was, "I found this mysterious videotape. I don't understand what I saw. Can you brainstorm ideas with me, I guess?" There wasn't really anything to tell yet.

Ben

Okay. That is so true. Well, for whatever reason, you're in this holding pattern. So days go by. Was everybody acting normal around the house?

Caroline

I don't remember anything being different than normal other than dad being at home from work that night, which was weird.

Ben

Yeah, she probably called him and said, "We got a situation."

Caroline

She paged him 911.

Ben

Get your butt home from work. This is your mess. You clean it up.

Caroline

100%. Yes.

Ben

Okay. So daddy-daughter dinner date evening rolls around. Where did you guys go?

Caroline

Oh my gosh. That night was chiseled in my memory. I can remember what I ordered, what I wore, and what we said. Minute by minute was just so clear to me.

Ben

Well, what did you wear?

Caroline

I dressed up very, very elegantly for the occasion because this was a very special event. So I wore a special dress, tights, a necklace, and the finest wares that I could come up with. We went to the Ground Round, which I don't think is around anymore. It's a chain like TGI Fridays, I

guess. This was a big deal too. It's not like I went out to dinner much at all, and certainly never alone with my dad. I remember trying to be so gross, crossing my legs, trying to use my fork and knife as I had seen in movies, and trying to talk very slow and measured like I thought a grown-up would. I'm not freaked out. I'm totally cool with this - whatever you have to say, it's fine - and was trying to be, like, this cool cat so that he wouldn't be afraid to tell me as much information as possible.

Ben

Such anxiety.

Caroline

Oh, my God. Yes. I'm sure that's partly why the memory is so heightened - because of that anxiety. Gosh, I wanted to know. I couldn't wait one more second.

Ben

Did you just wait for him to bring it up?

Caroline

Yes, and it was excruciating because I was, like, trying to make small talk. "Dad, how's work? Yeah, school's great. The math test was fine. Just get to the good stuff. Let's have dessert first. Come on."

Ben

Right. At what point in the meal did he decide to broach the topic?

Caroline

I know we, at least, had our entrees and had started to eat because I can remember it sitting in front of me and then turning into a stone in my belly. He pulled out a photo album and he started flipping through pictures of these same kids that were in the video and pictures of them with my relatives. He started to tell me a story. He said, "Before dad was married to your mom, I was married to another lady and we had 2 kids together. This is them. These are their names. They're 14 and 16. Basically, like, what questions do you have?"

Ben

Wow. Okay. My first question is how old were your parents when they married?

Caroline

So my mom was 17 when they got married, and he was 22.

Ben

Okay. So this happened when he was about 19?

Caroline

Yes.

Ben

Wow. Okay, so what on earth was young Caroline's first question to dad?

Caroline

Are you still married to that lady?

Ben

Good question. Okay.

Caroline

Where are they? Why didn't you tell us? Maybe, most importantly, why didn't you feel like you could tell us? What was it that made you think you had to keep it a secret? I would imagine that was probably a really hard secret to keep.

Ben

I've got a question too. Why was your mom tagging along in the video and not the kids' mom?

Caroline

Oh, gosh. There's so much more, Ben. We're not even halfway done.

Ben

All right. Let's answer your questions first. What did he say?

Caroline

This part is not super clear to me. At that time, I was in too much shock to clarify. When he met my mom, he was still married to this other lady. She had some kind of emotional breakdown - this is his words, not mine, I would phrase it differently - when he met my mom. She was like a safe harbor in this storm for him and they fell in love. So, they got married. I don't know if he was ever divorced from his first wife - till this day, I still don't know that.

Ben

I think he has to be.

Caroline

I don't know because this is, like, the early 80s and there weren't computers then. You couldn't do a Google search and say, "Does this person have a marriage with some other person?"

Ben

Okay. So we just don't know the answer.

Caroline

No. He said that they live across the country and one of the reasons why dad has to work so much is because dad has to pay for 2 families.

Ben

Wow. Okay. So are the kids living with their mom? She had an emotional breakdown of some sort. Is she a fit parent?

Caroline

They did live with her. That is an interesting question that I think will probably end up getting into more detail a little bit later in the story because that will come up. It was, like, the early 90s, so it wasn't uncommon for moms to always get custody at that point in time, and I don't think he really wanted it. My dad didn't seem too interested in parenting us. Why would it be any different with these other kids?

Ben

I'm thinking now maybe he wasn't too interested in parenting you guys because he's busy parenting the others. He's busy working. He's busy traveling across the country. I mean, we got some things falling into place here. He's just exhausted. This explains the lack of money too.

Caroline

Totally. It leads into the next logical question, which is, "Do they know about us?" That's the part that really blew my mind.

Ben

Oh, my gosh. Let me guess.

Caroline

Yeah, go ahead.

Ben

Okay. I would say that the answer is "No, they don't." But if you say it blew your mind, then they do know about you.

Caroline

They knew the whole time.

Ben

Holy cow. That makes no sense.

Caroline

So as a kid, imagine growing up with a potentially unstable single parent and knowing another parent who lives across the country with a whole new family that he started without you - he would only see you a few times every few years, maybe. What would you be thinking if you were that kid knowing this whole other family exists? They couldn't have known we weren't getting a whole lot of him either, but we're certainly getting more than they were.

Ben

Okay. This is really weird. If they were divorced, then everything can be on the table, right? It's like, "Okay, we have these two kids. We're divorced. I'm in love with this other woman. I married her. I have kids. Everybody knows what's going on". Why the reason for all the secrecy?

Caroline

So I'm gonna circle back to something that we talked about earlier, which was the vacations to Florida and my parents being much more involved and relaxed. This makes me feel really, really bad for those other kids because this was not fair and not okay. I found out - not until I was an adult, this wasn't part of our daddy-daughter conversation and it wouldn't have been appropriate at the time - that we moved 27 times by the time I turned 14.

Ben

That's just not possible. I mean, I believe you.

Caroline

It is possible and it was so weird because we would sell everything, move to a new place, and buy all new stuff. I was like, "Well, we never have enough money. We can't afford anything. Why

are we buying all new stuff every time we move?" Moving is expensive too. I wouldn't have known that at that time, but holy cow.

Ben

I mean, that's where the money was going too. What on earth could be the reason for moving 27 times? Was he on a run?

Caroline

We would leave in the middle of the night. My parents would wake us up after a garage sale. I knew this was coming after a while. When we were having a garage sale, mom and dad are gonna wake you up in the middle of the night in the next few nights. So they would wake us up, pile us into the car, and leave that house. So you never really got too attached to a place that you live because you didn't know how long you were going to be there. It could be a year. It could be a couple of months. Dad was on the run for child support and his ex was trying to pursue him. Every time she found him, we would move.

Ben

Doesn't she see him when he drags his butt across the country to make videotapes with his kids?

Caroline

Yeah, but seeing him and shaking him down for his paycheck are two different things. What are you going to do if he's in front of you? You can't smack him and coins fall out. Maybe she was grateful just to have him there. Maybe she thought he would stay that time.

Ben

How did he get word that family court had caught up with him?

Caroline

I imagine that he got mail. Here's another weird thing that I remember growing up that didn't make sense until all of this kind of clicked together. We would be given passwords. When somebody would call the house, you were supposed to say "What's the password?" If they didn't know the password, you'd hang up and tell mom and dad that somebody called and they didn't know the password." Again, I thought it was just a normal part of our household. I thought everybody had passwords when they answered their phone. If somebody didn't know the password, they might be part of this pursuit of child support that was being made one time in preschool. I was little at that point in preschool - 3 or 4 years old. I remember my mom didn't come to pick me up and my friend's mom said, "Oh, honey. I'll just take you home". I asked her, "What was the password?" and she said, "What are you talking about? What password?" So I was thinking that this lady is abducting me, so I was screaming, crying, throwing a huge fit, and thinking that I'm being taken. We got home and it was just my friend's mom. That's how serious the password was.

Ben

I guess the lack of money, though, is not explained by the second family because he's busy shirking that responsibility.

Caroline

I think what was probably happening was he was making illegal non-taxable income. So another thing I found out - again, years and years later as an adult - was my dad had a horrible cocaine

problem, so I imagine a lot of the money was going towards that. That was possibly a contributing factor to the sudden shift in their marriage because they used to do it together and then she didn't want to do it anymore, but then he got more and more into it and he'd be awake for, like, 4-5 days at a time. I remember her telling me that she came downstairs one time - when she was hugely pregnant with my youngest brother - it was, like, 4 in the morning and he was just doing - I'm not sure what it's called, I don't know the lingo, but we'll call it a hit - hit after hit after hit. There were just tissues all over the floor. He had been doing it for, like, 3 days and she had been keeping me and my sister upstairs to shield us from it. She was like, basically, "Knock this off or get out!" I told you the story has a lot of tangents. I think that had a lot to do to tie that money piece up with a bow. So I think he was doing illegal things. I think he had non-taxable income that he was trying to hide. Then, he was being pursued by his first wife.

Ben

Okay. Were there any other revelations at dinner?

Caroline

I remember him saying that the reason he didn't tell us was he never wanted us to think that he loved us less. I said, "Dad, I don't think that. I think you love them less."

Ben

Why did you think that?

Caroline

He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, you live with us and you're here with us. You're not there with them." He said, "Well, I visit them." I said, "Yeah, that's not the same as having a dad. I know you work a lot and you're not home as much as you'd like to be, but you left them behind." I mean, even at 12, I could understand how profoundly that - knowing we exist and him choosing to be with us - would impact the psyche of a child. What a knife through the heart. Both of them had so many problems. I'm not saying that you could necessarily draw a straight line to this based on those problems, but I'm certain that it contributed to some of the lack of stability in their lives. Then, the other thing was, "Why didn't you feel like you could tell us?" He said, "I was always kind of waiting for the right moment and it just never came. There never was a reason to tell you before now."

Ben

Oh, there was always a reason.

Caroline

Everything happens for a reason, right?

Ben

That's right. All right. You got this whole new world opened up to you at the Ground Round. What was your reaction? What were you feeling inside? What did you say to him?

Caroline

He wasn't my favorite person going into that dinner. I feel like I lost even more love for him coming out of it. I remember just saying one crying spell, "What kind of person could do this? What else have you done that you didn't tell us that is going to impact our lives? There has to be more secrets. This can't be the only one."

Ben

Very insightful.

Caroline

Yeah. Well, if you're hiding something that big, what thousands of little things are you hiding?

Ben

So this truth is laid out for you. You hit home and now it's time to face your mom. She's gonna know that you know everything when you come back home, and it's time to face your siblings. What's the conversation at home?

Caroline

They sat us down and told the three of us together what he had already told me. I think they probably edited it a bit because they were littler than I was. We were also excited. We were like, "We want to meet them. When can we visit?" This was, like, the coolest thing we thought had ever happened. We were just like, "Wow, we have a big brother and sister." I was thinking, "Gosh, maybe I don't have to cook dinner every night. Maybe somebody can help me out with this." When you're a small kid and you haven't really done much traveling, I don't think the concept of distance makes as much sense, so we didn't understand that you had to get on a plane to go to where they lived. It wasn't a place you could just drive to and they weren't visiting regularly, but we really wanted to connect with them. We were really excited about them, so my dad said that he'd set up a call. It was actually really sad because the older kid - that girl - didn't want to meet us. She said, "No, I don't want anything to do with them. You are the cause of everything that's bad in my life". At that time, she had a lot of pain in her heart and I can understand that. To this day, I have never met her. I'm almost 40 years old now and I've never met her. She actually did go to a family reunion - I think it was two years ago - but I was overseas for work at the time, so I wasn't able to go. My younger siblings have met her, but I have not.

Ben

have you spoken to her?

Caroline

I guess probably once or twice on the phone. We're not connected on social media. She's very religious. She got a lot of kids and she lives on some kind of compound out in Colorado. Her husband went to prison for something fraud related - I don't really know all the details. She leads a very private life. We did talk to the boy and he said that he wanted to come to visit, and that's where I felt, like, the second half really starts.

Ben

Okay. So when did you finally get to meet your half-brother?

Caroline

He ended up coming for a visit the next summer - it was a few months later - and was staying for a while. It was summer break, so he didn't have to be at school. I think his mom was probably really happy to have him gone because he was a major troublemaker. I remember that, on the very first night that we were home without our parents - I can't remember if they were out or if they just hadn't gotten home yet - he sprayed his skateboard with body spray, set it on fire, and took off down the street. I just remember being so appalled, like, "Who would do that? What is wrong with you? That is so twisted!"

Ben

Troubled kid?

Caroline

Yeah. How would you even think to do that? It was just so weird to me. We were all so well behaved and he was such a hooligan. One year, he showed up and he had a hugely pregnant girlfriend with him. They were so into drugs that my parents wouldn't allow them to stay with us. They ended up staying in a rent-by-the-day motel in another town because they were just so ill-behaved. Wherever he went, trouble followed.

Ben

When your father originally told you about his other family, you, your brother, and your sister had an initial reaction that was like, "Wow, this is great! We want to meet our new brother and sister!" You have feelings that you would get some help around the house and this was going to be a cool thing, but that all got washed away now because you've got an older half-brother that is just a mess and creating even more chaos in your family.

Caroline

Yeah, the experience of meeting him wasn't great.

Ben

At that point, you were probably wishing that none of this had ever happened.

Caroline

There are a lot of things that had gone differently. Let me think about this. My gosh, you want to hear such a scary story? You don't have to include this in the podcast, but it's very juicy.

Ben

We can include it.

Caroline

Oh my gosh, I guess so. So we - my mom, my brother, my sister and me - moved into the creepiest duplex. I mean it was what my mom could afford. She made like \$12.50/hour and was raising 3 kids with a person who was historically known for avoiding child support. So, it was like the Haunted Mansion at Disney World. It was horrible. There was really no reason to go into the basement other than the laundry, so only my mom would ever go down there. You would always get this super creepy feeling down there. Basements are, like, creepy in general, but this basement was like cobwebs spider creep city. We found out - thank God it was after we left, and we were there for, maybe, 3 months - that a woman had been murdered, chopped up and hidden in the walls of that basement. That's why it was so cheap to rent.

Ben

Oh my god. They didn't disclose that when you rented it?

Caroline

She didn't know because the owner of the duplex was our next-door neighbor, who is this creepy old man who had this crush on her, took sympathy on her situation, and actually let her stay there really, really cheaply - like, more cheaply than Murder House would normally be.

Ben

How did you find this out?

Caroline

She told us after we moved out because we were like, "Ma, we left a really nice neighborhood and a really cozy house." I mean, comparatively speaking, I went and lived in that shithole, how did that happen? How did we fall so fast? How come we had to leave when there were four of us and dad got to stay in the nice house?" That's when she told us, "Mom doesn't make a lot of money. Dad wouldn't pay child support. That was the only place we could afford to live. This is why it was so cheap."

Ben

You, your brother and your sister are living with your mom. She's getting divorced from dad. What's next?

Caroline

It just gets sadder. There's no silver lining here. We moved to the state where the older brother and sister lived cross country because that's where mom had grown up. So she moved in with her sister. Then, she spent 6 months laying in her bedroom with the door shut and lights turned off, having a complete nervous breakdown. She didn't work. She didn't eat. She didn't leave that room. We didn't see her. We weren't welcome to come in. The only thing that lifted her out of that fog was the boyfriend whom she had told me about, who paid her to buy a car and move back to where we had left back on the East Coast. We moved in with him and he was a stranger. One thing about this that was especially, like, piercing was when we got on that airplane to move, it's the one and only time in my whole life - even with all this trauma - that I ever saw my dad cry.

Ben

Because you were leaving?

Caroline

Yeah. I remember that really impacted my feelings because I was like, "He is sad about this. He does love us. He does not want us to leave." I didn't know everything that was behind those tears. I didn't understand the dynamics of their relationship well enough to understand the loss that he was feeling there, but I didn't think my dad would really be that hurt because he didn't spend all that much time around us. Anyhow, he was brokenhearted that day.

Ben

Now he's gonna live alone. So it's a new chapter. Your mom moved across the country and she got custody.

Caroline

The way this happened was really strange too. We had had a sleepover - my siblings and I. We were all able to invite somebody, which was a really big deal. I remember my brother being really excited about this sleepover, staying up, watching movies, and being such a great time. We woke up the next morning. Usually, when we had sleepovers, that was when mom would put on her polish, make breakfast, and make it seem like everything was so wonderful. So, having a sleepover was great because it meant that she was gonna make strawberry pancakes and I didn't have to do the dishes. It was just a great time. But we woke up and dad was gone. She was already drunk at, like, 9 in the morning. She wouldn't get off the phone. She was just

crying and chain smoking in the kitchen. We were like, "Where is Dad?" It's a Saturday morning. He's usually asleep. I mean, he's home, but he's not gone. Now, he was gone and his side of the closet was empty. "It's Saturday. Where is dad?" She wouldn't tell us anything and that was, I guess, the beginning of the end.

He had moved out after they had had a rip-roaring physical altercation. The police had been called. She had been running down the street barefoot screaming for help. I mean, it was very dramatic. We were like, "How did we not hear any of this?" We had a party and didn't notice any of this. We were all just quarantined upstairs enjoying ourselves. I mean, in a way, thank goodness, we didn't see it. We just had no concept of what I was told that happened or whatsoever. My mom had to get this car that her boyfriend had helped her bought back across the country. She decided to have me and my youngest brother flying standby, and take my middle sibling - my sister - with her and drive cross country.

Oh, gosh, I really wish I had happier stories. This is awful. So I don't know, flying standby still works the same way. We were told that it was possible. We could be put on 2 separate flights, but he's little. I mean, he's like 6-7 years old, and I was in charge of him at this big international airport. They were telling me that we could be separated. They wouldn't feed us on the plane - it was a 6-hour plane ride. They wouldn't give us any food. We were, like, these 2 kids by ourselves. I was like, "Are you kidding? You're not going to give us some friggin Cheerios? Where is the compassion in this world? I hate this world. Everything sucks." So, we got to the airport and we landed in Newark, which is like a city unto itself. It's enormous - you've done a ton of traveling, so you would know - and my dad was not at the gate to pick us up.

Ben

Oh my gosh.

Caroline

Yeah. I was, like, newly 13. I've got my little brother with me. We haven't eaten anything. I have no money. It's not like there were cell phones. I was like, "What the fuck do I do? I'm on my own now. This is life. Okay, let me figure this puzzle out now". Nothing's ever easy. There was this red telephone on the wall and it said, "Pick up for assistance" and I was like, "Okay, well, let me go pick up that red telephone". I guess, if an alarm goes off, maybe somebody will feed us. All it did was give me the ability to have my dad paged. They wouldn't call him. It wouldn't have done any good anyway. I mean, we lived like 4 or 5 hours away from this airport. So we just sat there waiting for hours, starving, and wondering if our dad who we hadn't seen in 6 months was going to show up to pick us up.

Ben

That's terrible. I can imagine what you were feeling - abandoned, lonely, and probably petrified that he wasn't coming.

Caroline

Petrified is the perfect word. I was like, "Okay, I'm planning my life. Now I'm gonna have to get a job. I'm gonna have an apartment. I don't even know how to react to this situation. I'm just gonna have to take care of it as usual." That was what I was thinking. I was at the point where my little brother was, like, screaming because he was so hungry. I'm like, "Dude, maybe I should just ask somebody for \$5 so that I can buy this kid a slice of pizza". So he finally showed up. He took us to Chili's. Again, these memories are so vivid - like, what a stupid detail to remember. He was just shooting shit like it's a normal day, like, "How's it going? How is school?" Then, I

was like, "How has school been?! Where have you been?! What are you talking about? Where were you? How dare you show up 6 hours late to pick up your kids at the airport! You fucking piece of shit!" At that point, my compassion, patience, and understanding for his pain had run out. Then, he took us home to the house that we had grown to know as home. We would live there, I think, for 2 years, which was the longest place that we had lived anywhere, and it was destroyed. I don't think he had done a dish or scrubbed a counter in the entire 6 months we were gone.

Ben

I hope it wasn't your job to clean.

Caroline

The next day, I woke up and he said, "Alright, I'm off to work. I expect this place to be spic and span when I get home. If it's not, you'll do it again."

Ben

Did you expect that was going to be your job?

Caroline

No. All I thought was, "Oh my god, I just have to survive until mom gets here". The person who I was expecting to save me was the person who had just spent 6 months in bed dying of absolute horrible, life altering depression. That was my saving grace. He was so particular about how he wanted things cleaned. When you would do the dishes, he would touch them when they were drying. If they weren't still hot, he'd throw them back in the sink and say, "Do it again."

Ben

How long did it take your mom to get there?

Caroline

She drove like a bat out of hell because all that mattered to her at that point was her boyfriend and getting back to him. So, I think she did the drive in 2.5 or 3 days, but she didn't pick us up because she didn't have anywhere to take us. So, she dropped my sister off in this hellhole where I and my little brother had been staying and took off with her boyfriend. So, that was maybe a week or 10 days. Then, she came, picked us up, and said, "We're going to be moving in with my boyfriend." This was the first exciting thing that happened because she drove us to his house, which was a couple of towns over. It was, like, the biggest, most amazing mansion I had ever seen. I had never been inside a house this big in my real life ever. It was like something out of the movies. I was like, "We get to live here? I get to have my own room to my very own self? Like, what?!"

Ben

Things are looking up.

Caroline

Yeah. I was thinking, like, "Maybe this ain't going to be so bad." I'll just cut to the chase here. It turned out to be a really great thing. He was actually a really great stabilizing force in all of our lives, and I call him dad now. I have a relationship with my real dad as well, but it's different. She's now married to him - it's her husband now - and he turned out to be a really good dude.

Ben

That's awesome.

Caroline

Yeah. He had two kids of his own, so we got 2 new siblings, and they were really cool. They were about our same age. Their parents were going through the same things that ours did, so it was almost like we had this built-in support system right off the bat, just moving into his awesome and amazing giant, big house.

Ben

So he had a secret family also?

Caroline

No. He had a regular family.

Ben

So not quite the same things, but there was a divorce.

Caroline

Yes.

Ben

So there is a happy ending to this story.

Caroline

I think so. Yeah. I think it's a story of resiliency, not losing hope, self-sufficiency, and being able to advocate for yourself and ask questions that you have a right to have the answers to.

Ben

So your mom was having such a hard time. Her mental health is seriously challenged by all the things she was going through. Did this stability let the sunshine in? Is she okay now?

Caroline

It was tremendous. It was such a 180. Mom came back. She was never the mom she was when we were little. It was like that Mom was gone. She wasn't the ghost that she had become because of years of being beaten down in an abusive relationship. So, it was like the sun started to shine on us. We were in the same school for years, which was awesome. We were in the same house for years, which was awesome. We had two parents in the house. Her boyfriend would tell us, "I really love you. I'm proud of you." and those sorts of reinforcing statements that kids really need to hear. We felt secure, special, loved, and appreciated in a way that we really needed at just the right time.

Ben

Whatever happened to your half-siblings?

Caroline

Their mom has tried continuously to connect with us and I have no idea why. We don't have any reason to have a relationship with her. I've learned that she was diagnosed with a form of schizophrenia, which I'm a bit disappointed because my dad didn't have more empathy because his mom was also diagnosed with schizophrenia. So, I would have thought that would have equipped him with some tools to deal with that, but the only tool he seemed to have mastered

was running away and hiding. My older brother reinvented himself a lot of times. He did a lot of bad things that I think he was incarcerated at a couple of points. Now, he's married. He got kids. He wants a relationship with me, but I don't want one with him. I feel like that just kind of opens up a chapter in my past that I look out with a lot of sadness, so I just don't need that. As I had said earlier, the sister lives - I don't know if compound is, like, the "non-PC" term to use, but that's what it's always been referred to - very secluded, so I don't have any relationship with either of them or their mom, and neither do my full blood brother and sister.

Ben

Was your dad ever able to rid himself of his drug addiction?

Caroline

Yeah, he did. He got really fat after he stopped using. That's one of the ways we can mark when it happened because he gained a lot of weight. We didn't know that at the time. We were just like, "Hey, it's fat dad now." I remember that's not a nice thing to say, but we were, kind of, joking about it. I think that, in the years since all of this happened, he has tried to make good with his first 2 kids. He has been more involved with them. He tried to help them in ways that he could from 3,000 miles away, both financially and in ways that a dad should. I know my brother calls him every day and it drives him crazy. He picks that phone up and he talks to him. So, I think he tried to repair some of the damaged that he did.

Ben

You said you have a relationship with your dad to this day. Have you ever had a chance to sit him down and say, "What the hell? Why all the secrecy? Why did you put us through all of this?" and, kind of, settle that?

Caroline

My question wasn't so much of "Why?" For the long term, it was "How?" Until I could understand how a person could do that and live with themselves, "Why?" was almost inconsequential. I do remember sitting on the tailgate of his truck, one night, when I was about 16, and really having that - I hate this phrase - come-to-Jesus talk. I don't know a better way to say it. How could you live with yourself? He said, "It was really, really hard. That's why you didn't see me a whole lot because the guilt was shattering and I felt terrible. Nothing I did seemed like the right thing." I thought that was a really understandable answer. None of us is handed a map or a guidebook to life and said, "These are the choices that will lead to happiness".

Ben

That is the truth. How often do you see him?

Caroline

I live across the country from my parents. So, I actually keep a healthy distance between them and me because they bring up a lot of drama, dredge, and emotion that I don't welcome. Every couple of years, I detached from them with love. I do it with compassion and I don't blame them for their mistakes or hold any kind of a grudge. I just keep them at a distance because that's where I need them to stay.

Ben

How are your little brother and sister doing?

Caroline

My little sister is now my little brother. He transitioned to male 4 years ago. It's still really tricky to keep their pronouns straight, but he's much happier living as a male. That's actually something dad has a really hard time with and is really condescending about - it's a current point of contention in our families. He will very antagonistically say, "My daughter who's a female..." I'm like, "Dad, what difference does it make? If he's happy, just support him. What all your kids really want from you is support and love. Okay?" But he just doesn't have it in him to do it.

Ben

How is your other little brother?

Caroline

He was doing amazing for a few years. He got married when he was 18 to this amazing young woman who was pre law and had all these goals. She was in college. We were just like, "How did you land her? She is so above your level, dude!" It turned out she was marrying him for a green card which we did not know. I guess he knew but he convinced himself that this was love. He has always kind of been a hopeless romantic his whole life. Even when he was a little kid, he always had a girlfriend. So, in a very unkind maneuver, I think, she tricked him into marriage and stayed married just long enough to achieve her end goal. Then, she took an English as a second language teaching position out in Asia, divorced him remotely from there, and has no contact with him anymore.

Ben

Terrible. Awful.

Caroline

Yeah. I mean, he was doing so well and was so stable for so long under this relationship with - who we had come to believe was - this amazing, wonderful girl, but she just put the wool over all of our eyes so cleverly. So, he struggled in the last couple of years. He'll go through a period of stability. He was actually diagnosed with severe bipolar type one. When he starts feeling good, he likes to go off of his medication and drop off the earth for a few days. Typically, we would get a call from jail to come to pick him up because he's been picked up again. That has been the roller coaster that he has been riding for the last few years. We're just really trying to help him stabilize in a long-term situation that he can manage, that feels good for him, that doesn't require him to constantly be saved.

Ben

Well, I'm sure he's very lucky to have you looking out for him. I know you're doing all you can

Caroline

I mean, when somebody's 35 years old and self-destructs like that, there's only so much you can do.

Ben

Oh, I wish him the best.

Caroline

Thank you. Yeah, we do.

Ben

Oh, Caroline, thank you so much for laying out this tremendous saga. What a story.

Caroline

It's my pleasure, Ben. The podcast has been there for me in times when I've been feeling low. I hope that, by sharing some of the crazy stories that I've endured, coming out the other side is what I think is a relatively healthy, stable and good person. I hope this gives someone else who might be struggling a bit of hope as well.

Ben

As you said, it's a story of resilience and - as I see it - a magnificent one at that.

Caroline

Thank you so much.

Ben

Caroline suffered such trauma as a neglected kid, but to also stumble across that secret family that's alive-- it didn't occur to me until Caroline told me later that, remarkably, she was the other family because her family's existence was known by those in her father's secret life. Thankfully, Caroline's mom came into a relationship with a good man who provided stability. Though he might not deserve it, the flashes of love young Caroline caught from her biological dad earned him a place in her life to this day. Not everyone would be capable of such grace - that is a testament to the strength and fortitude Caroline developed as a kid that she exhibits to this day. If you'd like a peek behind the words, Caroline shared pictures of herself, her mom, and her brother. They're waiting for you now on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook handle @secretroompod.

Susie

Next week on The Secret Room | Unlocked, you'll hear the tale of Ellie. When she was just 18, she whisked off to the UK to meet the bass player of her favorite band and spent her life savings without telling a soul what happened.

Ellie

I was waiting for a while. Then, I started messaging like, "I'm calling you but it's really expensive. This is where I'm sitting. Please tell me what to do."

Susie

Join me for Ellie's wild ride

Ben

That's Susie Lark. The Secret Room | Unlocked is a special place where fans gathered to support The Secret Room and get extra content. Sometimes, it's follow ups of the show you just heard with extra details and behind the scenes action. Other times, it's extra interviews here on the show. Everyone's welcome. Join us on patreon.com/secretroom. Do you have a timorous secret to share? Don't be scared. We'll be gentle. Send it to your favorite indie podcast that could, through our website, secretroompod.com. While you're there, check out all our sponsors' offers - they're waiting for you too. Thanks to Susie Lark, Luna Patel, Alessandra Montenegro, and Marco. My music is by Brakemaster Cylinder. See you again in two weeks.

Ben

Okay, let me text you the tagline.

Caroline

Oh, I don't need you to tell me. I know what to say.

Ben

Okay, great. Go for it.

Caroline

This is the secret room, a podcast about the stories no one ever tells.

Ben

To wrap the show, we have this little phrase where—

Caroline

I'm ready. I know what you're gonna say.

Ben

Well, let's wrap the show.

Caroline

Heck yeah, we should.

Ben

All right. Pod on, Caroline!

Caroline

Pod on, Ben!