

Episode 192: Mayson's mom married a murderer

When you're early in life, growing up, whatever you experience is what you consider to be normal.

For example, when I was a kid, our family would go to church every Sunday. We knew everyone there, I had lots of friends there, and there was always a big crowd of people. So naturally, I just kind of assumed that everyone, on Sunday mornings, would be in a church somewhere.

But it was kind of a disconnect when we'd be in the car on Sunday, and we might drive past a park or a boat marina, and I'd see people getting their boat ready to go out on the water. And I'd think, how does that work? Maybe they go to a different church that meets later, or something? I couldn't put those pieces together, because what I thought was the norm wasn't really the norm for everyone.

My guest today, Mayson, also had a childhood that was different from many other kids. From the time she was a baby, she and her mother would go and visit her dad on weekends – in prison. And since that was all she had ever known, she assumed that's what everyone did.

Her eyes were opened on her 12th birthday, and you're about to hear that story.

What Mayson has done for herself is truly amazing. And toward the end of our conversation, she revealed something that she only just discovered as a result of coming on this podcast.

Scott

Your whole story started actually with a lie. What was that?

Mayson

My biological parents met. My mother was bartending at a bar in a small town in Oklahoma where she met my father. I'm not sure if he was a regular or if this was just one time he walked into the right or wrong bar, depending on your perspective. Eventually, I guess they had a conversation and they bonded over being recently divorced. At some point, they fell in love, but he spun a story of having a beautiful blended family. He told my mother that he didn't have any kids, but he was always meant to be a father. She had two children - my brothers - from a previous marriage, and he was like, "Let's blend them. And I really want a daughter." She loved hearing that. So they fell in love and got pregnant with me. When she told him of this happy news, he admitted that he was not divorced, rather he was still married, and he did have children of his own. I think at the time he had just his two daughters.

Scott

It's so weird. I mean, she was giving him what he said he wanted. Maybe he didn't think she was going to call his bluff.

Mayson

Yeah. I mean, obviously, his marriage wasn't in a good place, or maybe it was but he was just in a bad place. I have so many questions surrounding how they met. It just seems so perfect. Maybe she was preyed to him, "This is what I want. You're giving it to me. Actually, never mind. I already have this."

Scott

So what happened at that point? Was he just gone?

Mayson

From what I know, he was like, "I have a family, I have children." I think it got too real for him at that point. Maybe in that moment, he saw the value of what he had with his real family, I guess, and, to my knowledge, they never spoke again. My mother is very religious. She's Southern Baptist - I grew up Southern Baptist - so not having me was never an option. So she became a single parent to three children.

Scott

What a spot.

Mayson

Yeah. Although I have difficult feelings surrounding my mother, I can only imagine the shock and the significant break in trust. I can't even imagine what that feels like.

Scott

So that's kind of the backdrop to this. The real story is about her next relationship. How did that happen?

Mayson

My mother has four brothers and, interestingly, all of them but one have served time in prison sentences of 20 years or more. So she was at a prison pregnant visiting with my uncle. He was like, "I have someone that I would like to introduce you to." I believe Stephen was visiting with his sister at the time and I really wish I knew more about their initial meeting and the conversation that happened like, "When did he tell her? Why was he there?"

Scott

Wait a minute. Let's clear this up a little bit. Stephen is actually an inmate also at the prison. Is that right?

Mayson

Yes. Correct. Yeah. At the time, he had been there for just over 10 years.

Scott

So he's been in there a while. So she just happened to be visiting her brother and someone else was visiting Stephen at the same time.

Mayson

Yeah.

Scott

And her brother - your uncle - wanted to introduce the two of them.

Mayson

Yeah, they were really close friends in the prison that they were at. My uncle was also the— I'm not sure how to say this but he was the chaplain as well - like the inmate chaplain. I think that there's a very common theme of people in prison or jail finding religion and finding that strength there and they bonded over that and became good buds. I've never heard the story of my uncle's side but I would imagine he's thinking, "I have this sister. It's my only sister. You're single. She's here all the time. You're definitely here all the time. So let's introduce you two."

Scott

From the time your biological father fled the scene till your mom met Stephen in prison, do you know how much time had possibly passed? I'm wondering if it was like a rebound kind of thing.

Mayson

Well, I know at least that it was nine months because she was pregnant with me while she was visiting my uncle when they met.

Scott

So a matter of months anyway.

Mayson

Yeah.

Scott

I just find it so weird. I know it happens all the time - most commonly, a woman will fall in love with some man who's in prison - but I don't understand that.

Mayson

And neither do I. Again, I wish I knew more about that conversation because I'm deeply curious just how someone meets a convict and falls in love knowing that obviously you're there for some type of crime. In my adoptive father's case, the type of prison that he was at is one for violent criminals - murderers, rapists, and things of that nature. If she knew that much, at least, and still went for it— Stephen then put my mother on his visitation call list and letter list. They fell in love through recorded phone calls and opened letters - letters opened to check for contraband and things like that. That's how they fell in love. Then, they married the day before I turned one year old.

Scott

Sometimes, even if someone's in prison, they could have some kind of income like a disability or a pension or something like that. Did he have any of that? Or do you know?

Mayson

I do not believe that he has any disability. He was always this really big, strong man, wildly tall. So I don't think that was an aspect. I mean, being an inmate, he made pennies on the dollar, so I really don't think that it was for any financial gain. I think that my mother had a substantial size hole and she wanted to fill that with love, which is totally understandable, but at what lengths do you go before you question, "Is this a healthy relationship? Is this a viable relationship? We will literally never be together." They've never done anything more than a hug.

Scott

Yeah. It's an unusual thing. So you said they got married just before your first birthday. Was she working at the time?

Mayson

I believe so. She had to because she had my two brothers and me on the way.

Scott

I just can't imagine doing that. A single mother with three kids. I mean, what are the chances that she would meet somebody who would say, "Oh yeah, you've got three kids. Yeah, let's get together. That's what I'm looking for."

Mayson

I really think that fed into the romance. She found someone who accepted her. She found someone who would look at her baggage, if you will, which are two children and then a baby on the way from other men and say, "I accept you and I love you and we can create a family. We can create a family around this." I mean, I can see the appeal in that, I suppose.

Scott

How did that progress?

Mayson

I mean, it was great. My time growing up in prison or visiting my father was awesome. I made a lot of friends, other inmates, as well as the children there visiting their fathers. There was a playground so parents could have, I guess, alone time. For me, being my normal, it was an awesome experience. I really looked forward to visiting my father and we did that often. During the school year, we would visit every other weekend and during the summer or any breaks or holiday. We would visit every weekend and, well, it did come with some, now I know, some bizarre norms like getting my little backpack searched and my undeveloped body searched by strange men in uniform. It was still my normal and it always meant that I was going to see my father and there was just this— I don't know. I'm struggling to find the word. Sorry.

Scott

It was a routine that you were used to.

Mayson

Exactly, yeah. And I found great comfort in that routine.

Scott

Since it started from a very young age, you had no reason to question that it wasn't the norm.

Mayson

Yeah. In fact, I questioned my friend's norms. I was extremely uncomfortable being around adult men. When I would stay the night with a friend, I was this bizarre kid, it seems, and from their perspective, I get it because I'm like, "When is your dad leaving? Is your dad staying? Why is your dad here?" They're like, "Oh, a child. I don't know how to answer that." Being with my friends' fathers or around them was a weird experience because I was always used to a hug on arrival and a hug on departure and then sitting across from the table and that's it. So watching them hug and sit on the couch together is just a very uncomfortable feeling.

Scott

You mentioned that you didn't really understand what prison was until your older brother went there.

Mayson

Yeah.

Scott

Can you talk about that? What got him sent there?

Mayson

It's weird when I told this story because, ironically, prison was my safe place, my calm place - I knew what to expect - whereas my life outside of prison was absolute chaos. I have two much older brothers - 12 and 14 years older than me, respectively - and I kind of consider myself to be an only child just because of the age gap. Also, they were in juvie as young teens and then jail and prison as adults, and their crimes spanned from grand theft auto to breaking and entering, mainly drug charges and a lot of drunken DUIs and a lot of gang activity, but mainly drugs. So it's interesting because, when they were home, it was great. I had so much fun with them. They had a lot of friends who all adored me. I was this six-year-old little sister to probably a dozen or so young men or teenage boys. With that, I experienced my first crushes and I had a lot of attention, and it took a while for me to realize that there was a lot of bad in that too.

I grew up knowing this name called the Brotherhood. I now know that was the name of their gang but, again, that was my safe place. So I learned about prison through all of these. "Where's Fatty?" He was one of my favorites. "Where's Fatty?" "Oh, he's behind bars" is what they would say. I was like, "Behind bars? What is that?" And then hearing adult conversations around me about jail and prison... "What is prison? What is all of this?" And then later, I come to find out that's where I spent most of my time.

I guess, going back to the juxtaposition of my life inside of prison being calm and my life outside being chaos is, while they weren't in prison, there was a lot of fear. I've seen so many broken bones from gang fights. I've seen bones just from these massive open wounds that my mother would mend because there's a bullet hole or someone got beaten almost to death with a tire iron and you don't take them to the hospital unless there's an absolute need. It's very much like a mafia film - like you have a little secret doctor. I've tended these wounds myself. I've helped pick out bullet shrapnel from legs and the side of someone's back before.

Scott

And you were still a kid.

Mayson

I was still a kid, yes.

Scott

You finally realized that the prison, that whole system where you were so comfortable, was also the place really where all the bad people went, but yet your dad was there. I would imagine that, on those weekend visits, that was probably the highlight of his week. So he's going to be in a good mood. He's going to be happy to see you and all of that. So that had to create some kind of confusion for you, I would think.

Mayson

Yes, a lot of confusion because he was, like you said, like, in a great mood, just really happy to see us. I've never seen my parents fight before because, when you have a limited time, I suppose there's nothing to really fight about - kind of putting those puzzle pieces together and conceptualizing and building an idea of what prison is. It was just bizarre to think that my dad was there. It made sense for my brothers to go because I see them doing mean things to people, but it never made sense why my dad was there.

Scott

By any chance - this is just a random question - did your brothers go to the same prison where your dad was?

Mayson

I mean, Oklahoma is a pretty small place but, no, they did not.

Scott

That would be a coincidence.

Mayson

That would be bizarre.

Scott

At this point, your mom and the family are going through kind of a hard time. What's going on with that?

Mayson

It started with a lot of funerals that brought on a lot of depression. So again, these young men who were entertaining the silly little jokes and games that I wanted to play— now, I'm attending their funerals, and my mom, of course, is doing the same. I think that made something click in her brain because, at least, for me, that is where I started to notice this disconnect and where, now, my mother is a bad guy and my mother is a mean person. I would love to ask her about this - I never will. But I wonder if all of this loss of young boys that she cared for did something to her because - I mean, almost night and day, I suppose, probably not that clear - there was a point where it all shifted and she developed a very nasty gambling addiction.

It's interesting because I'm surrounded by criminals in my life but my mother never was one in terms of alcohol addiction or drug addiction. That just seems like it would absolutely be part of the story. No, I've never seen her have a drink. Her vice was gambling. That's extremely difficult when you're a single parent. You're spending a lot of money on bail bonds and trying to raise three children. I think that she saw a glimmer of hope in winning a jackpot or just any tiny amount of money. That's where my life took a really nasty turn. Being homeless was embarrassing. Of course, it was scary as well, but it was more so embarrassing because I still went to school. I mean, of course, my mom sent me to school because, at least, there I get lunch and I get air conditioning or heating, depending on the weather.

I still have a lot of great memories of being homeless. Our favorite spot to, I guess, post up was behind the Dollar General's dumpster. I found a deck of Uno cards and I love Uno because it's connected to this crazy time in my life, but such a great time as well. I was embarrassed because of the smell that I had being unclean - not being able to brush my teeth. So, that sort of created a lot of distance between my friends and I. One of the best things about being homeless though is some of the treasures that you find. Again, being behind this Dollar General dumpster, I found a lot of books and I was kind of struggling in school because my home life is just absolute chaos. So I knew how to read. By myself, I developed those reading skills. I feel like this is sort of cliché but I would run away in those stories. I wasn't behind a dumpster. I was in this little story space.

Scott

That's why they call it escape literature, right?

Mayson

Absolutely. And boy, did it help. It was awesome. It helped my imagination. While I did struggle, I just separated mentally and I just daydreamed, and I was just fine.

Scott

The brain somehow figures out how to cope with different situations.

Mayson

Absolutely. On my 12th birthday, my mother and I went to visit again like every birthday. I had essentially two birthday parties - one outside of prison and then one inside of prison. So we would coordinate with all of my little friends who were visiting their parents and it was a great time over a Rice Krispie treat and my parents saying happy birthday. They asked me what I wanted for my birthday and I said that I wanted dad to come home. I think I was over it at that point. I thought that Dad coming home would mean that life would be better and we wouldn't struggle so much. Immediately, I looked over and my mom had tears coming down her face. In front of me across the table is just my dad with this— he's just staring down at the table like he's ashamed. My mom said, "We should tell her." So he proceeds to tell me that he can't come home and that he probably never will come home. "Okay. Interesting. Why not? You're a good guy. You can come home. Actually, why have I never even asked this before? Why are you still here? Why don't you live with Mom and I?" And he tells me that he hurt someone by accident. Self-defense— I don't believe that he used that word because it is not child-appropriate. And everything changed then. He said, "I got in trouble a very long time ago before you and mommy came into my life and this is where I live and this is where I will always live." I really wish that I hadn't asked him to explain just because that didn't give me really any answers.

Scott

When you wrote to me, you mentioned that he expressed or explained that he had a fight with his girlfriend and she went to heaven.

Mayson

Yes.

Scott

You're almost a teenager at that point. That seems like the way you would explain something to a five-year-old.

Mayson

Agreed. I'm surprised and a little offended that they didn't think that I could handle the truth just because of everything that I had already been through. I might be 12 but, honestly, I'm probably functioning on, like, the survival aspect of a full-blown adult. Like, I'm trying to game the system so I can find my next meal and my next roof. So, to say it like that, as an adult now, I take offense.

Scott

And you said your world changed that day.

Mayson

I really wish that I didn't say that I want Daddy to come home and I wish that conversation essentially had never happened because I was living in this awesome state. I have a mom and a dad and that's enough for me. I can't explain it but something did not feel right. It just felt like there was something so much more and, because I'm 12, I'm still a child. I don't have a lot of agency over myself. There's not a lot that I can demand, I suppose. So I'm just forced to live in this world where they are happy with that answer. They think that answer suffices and I knew that there was so much more to it.

Scott

So what do you do at that point? I mean, what options do you have?

Mayson

I didn't have a lot, but what I did do was I stopped talking to Stephen. I told my mom I didn't want to go. In fact, I'm not going. There were a lot of fights. I guess that was my sort of rebellious stage. I'm not going and she didn't make me. I mean, again, there were a lot of fights but she didn't make me. So that was the last time that I saw him.

Scott

And you also said you filed for emancipation. Can you talk about how that works and how does a 12-year-old even know about that?

Mayson

I wasn't 12 when I filed for emancipation. I was 15. My mother forced me to get a job and I was happy to, so it wasn't much forcing. But, on her side, she forced me to get a job so I could pay rent. So for emancipation, at least in the state of Oklahoma, you have to show that you are responsible, I guess, and able to take care of yourself. I had extremely good grades in school and I was like, "You know what? This job will prove to them." So I worked and I squirreled money away that she didn't know about. After I would pay rent and my portion of the bills, I would save whatever was left.

I really took solace in my best friend's family. She had amazing parents. My best friend was going to stay the night. When she dropped her off and she saw the area where we lived, she was like, "You know what, Mayson? Why don't you come and stay the night with us? You guys, come over here." So we didn't think anything about it. Her mom sat me down and asked if I was okay. At first, I was just like, "Yeah. I'm totally fine." No adult has ever asked really if I'm okay. With the trust that she had already built with me over time, I just told her the truth of where I was at and she gave me all of these options and she was like, "You can move in with us," which I did, against my mother's approval, I suppose, but she's too busy at the casino. She's not going to file anything at the police station.

My best friend's mother told me about emancipation and we tried really hard to do that, but I was told that there are children out there who file for emancipation that essentially have it a lot worse, and I understood, I got that. I mean, at that point, I still felt helpless. But yeah, there are people actively or there are children actively being significantly abused and, right now, I'm good. I just want my mother to not have any bearing over my life anymore. So I guess I can wait a few more years.

Scott

And you had to wait until you were 18 before you could really go out on your own.

Mayson

Yeah. Yes. Okay.

Scott

So you turn 18. What happens then?

Mayson

I moved away immediately. I left the first chance I got, which wasn't hard because I had been paying rent at this place for my mom and I was keeping some of my stuff there. I came home

from school one day - this is like the week that I graduated high school - and all of our stuff was thrown out in black industrial bags. It was thrown out on the front lawn, so we were homeless yet again, and I was like, "I just have to make it. In four more days, I'll graduate and then I'm going to take out this money that I've been saving and I'm getting an apartment in Tulsa." I moved 45 minutes away and I started building my own life outside of my family, like having officially excommunicated them for, I guess, at that point, the first time.

Scott

Why Tulsa?

Mayson

Prior doesn't have any colleges.

Scott

And that's the town you were living in?

Mayson

Yes.

Scott

Okay.

Mayson

And that's just what you do. If you want to go to college, you have to go elsewhere. So I moved to Tulsa. I got my own apartment. I was working at Best Buy and I had no business working there, but that's because I just don't know technology, but I had a good job. I had my own place and I had my own car and I was making an honest living and I was doing it all on my own and it was a really great time.

Scott

That must've been just such a great feeling. You're finally free!

Mayson

Yes, it was. Absolutely. I didn't have to be subject to other people's motives and other people's mistakes and crimes. I just had to worry about myself now.

Scott

And you were attending community college. What did you want to go forward with? What kind of degree?

Mayson

I always wanted to be a teacher. I just didn't know what kind of teacher. I was leaning toward English, but I also really loved language, so Spanish. At the time, I was getting a certificate in medical translation, so I would essentially work in a hospital as a translator. Whenever they had someone who couldn't speak English come in, then I would stand beside the doctor and just translate.

Scott

So it seems like you're on the right track at this point. And then what happened when you were 23?

Mayson

When I was 23, I received a phone call out of the blue in a time where you don't really think about spam calls or scams. I answered, "Hello?" And it said, "An inmate, Stephen Armstrong would like to contact you. This is a collect call, blah, blah, blah. I had no time at all to react. It's like, "Press one to accept or hang up." So, in just the snap of a finger, I had to figure out what I wanted to do and I chose to answer. I felt like it was my time to get some answers. It was very awkward at first because we hadn't spoken for, what would that be? 11 years back when I was 12. I didn't think that would truly be the last time I saw him, but it was. So now I'm gobsmacked. I have no idea what to say, think, or do.

Honestly, I really don't remember what we talked about outside of me just getting a backbone, standing up straight, and being like, "Tell me what happened. I'm an adult. I don't believe you. I never believed you. Tell me what happened." He told me that he was about to ship off to some branch of the military and he had some unfinished business with his ex-girlfriend. He didn't want to leave on a nasty note, so he went over to her apartment to make up. He told me that they had gotten into an argument and she had pulled a gun on him. Out of fear, he disarmed her. At that point, she just sort of went wild, screaming, and just a very loud, chaotic moment. She was being loud. In self-defense, he accidentally killed her.

I don't feel like you accidentally killed someone in the way that he killed her. He put a pillow over her face and smothered her. We see in movies where, because of screen time, smotherings or strangulations take just seconds, but no. It takes some time because the person passes out and then you have to keep depleting their air supply. So for me, it was just hard to believe that he accidentally did this. As soon as she stopped fighting back, you're clear, you're good. So again, I called bullshit. I just didn't believe it because he's such a massive man and I've never seen a picture of his ex-girlfriend, but I have heard that she's very petite. Also, to be honest, I don't really care what size you are. There's a point where it's too much, I feel, and he just didn't stop. So he said that he put her in a cold water bath to try to revive her. When that didn't work, he got scared and he fled to Missouri to be with his family and get some advice, I guess, some help.

Scott

But you didn't believe any of this.

Mayson

No, I didn't. I felt like, now, we're getting closer to the truth. Now I'm starting to hear some details like, "Okay, not just we got in a fight and she went to heaven." Now, I'm getting some aspects of the truth, but what is he holding back? I also think, at this point, I just don't trust a lot of— well, I don't trust anyone from my family, so let me fact check this.

Scott

Cause now you're a grownup. You know how to research things online. You can find out stuff. What did you find out?

Mayson

I found out that Lisa was scared and Lisa is her name. I found out that Lisa was scared. Her mother, in an interview, reported in a newspaper that she was pretty afraid of Stephen and that there had been some violent tendencies in the past. I'm not sure what those were, but it wasn't a healthy relationship. Everything that he told me was true except for there was no gun. Lisa didn't own guns. She didn't have any. They never found one. He never brought that up in any interview, I suppose, or any account that he has given except for to me.

He stole a lot of her electronics. In fact, two days later, I believe it was when Lisa's mother hadn't heard from her. I believe they had lunch plans and, when Lisa didn't show, she got worried, went over, and I guess when she walked in, she looked around and saw it was kind of disheveled and that her microwave, her radio, and her TV were missing. That's bizarre. So I would imagine she calls out for Lisa's name and she finds her in the bathtub. What Stephen had done was sell those electronics in order to flee.

Scott

I just can't imagine how traumatic it would be for a mother to find her daughter like that.

Mayson

Yeah, I've thought about that a lot.

Scott

Obviously, you weren't involved in that murder at all, but you've mentioned that you have felt guilt. Where does that come from?

Mayson

I think the guilt comes from loving someone and just thinking the absolute world of them, and having so much trust in that relationship, and knowing that the person who used their hands to love me were the same hands that caused the most horrific pain - they're the hands that took someone else's life - and that was my dad, like dad did this, being his daughter, I just felt it's silly because you're right. Like, I had no part in this. This was way before I was even brought into existence. I guess I feel guilty because I loved him. I showed him love and respect when he, in my opinion, deserved nothing.

Scott

That phone call was now 10 years ago. Have you spoken with him since then?

Mayson

No, I have not, and I never will. I've since changed my phone number. I have blocked my mother. So who knows if she has access to my phone number, honestly, anymore. I would be very surprised if I ever got a surprise call from him but I will never speak to him or see him again even though there are times of darkness when I am very curious.

Scott

Do you feel any sense of loss from being cut off from them? I mean, you cut yourself off from them, so it was deliberate, but have you lost anything because of that?

Mayson

I guess I've lost a typical childhood experience, if you will, but I used to struggle with the sense of loss a lot. There have been a lot of Christmases and Thanksgivings where I spent them completely alone and those times used to be dark. There are many times where I could have used a parent's advice and there are many times, especially being so young and completely on my own, where it's lonely and scary knowing that, if I'm ever in trouble romantically, mentally, financially, I have no one to turn to. I had my car stolen once when it was the second time that I tried to go to college. When I was recounting this story to a new friend, she asked me, "Why didn't you just call your parents?" "Oh, I can't really do that." But in those times, you're scrambling to get back on your feet and figure it out yourself that you don't really have any time to feel a sense of loss and, in my daily life now, definitely not. In fact, I feel this immense power and pride.

I have an amazing husband. I have amazing friends. In fact, I talk to my best friend's mom on social media literally every single day, if not every other. So I have people. When I think through my loss of family, it's been what has opened doors to building trust and relationships with others. So while those thoughts have tried to creep in, no, not really.

Scott

Oh, you've made it.

Mayson

I've made it.

Scott

You talk about your daily life. What is your life like now? What are you doing?

Mayson

I live in the Pacific Northwest. It's always been my dream to move to Seattle. I really like the rain. I live here and I'm a professor. I teach English as a second language and linguistics. So I get to help people who are trying to build a new life in another country. Where things are completely chaotic for them, I get to help and that has always been my dream.

Scott

And you're living it now.

Mayson

I am indeed. Oh yeah.

Scott

What made your story different? I mean, lots of kids come from poverty and dysfunctional families and they're still in that cycle, but you're doing well. Do you have any idea what the difference is for you?

Mayson

This is a question I have asked myself so many times throughout every stage of my life. I think I experienced so much fear, insecurity, instability, cruelty, manipulation, and violence that, at a very young age, I was forced to have a thought that no young child should contemplate. It's a thought that was way too big for me at the time, and that was, "I don't want to be like this. What can I do to not be like this? What can I do to make sure that I don't behave this way?" So that was always my guiding light, my path, I guess. I did everything the opposite of what my family did. They never graduated from high school. I made sure that I was going to, and that it was going to be really good, that I was going to have really good grades. They never had a dream or a goal, no matter how big or small. So, I really latched on to that.

I think by my own intention and circumstance, I didn't get wrapped up in the social systems of my family. I also learned independence at a very young age. So while I grew up in the traps or around the traps of poverty and violence, I was determined to grow up not totally inside of it. My body could go through the effects of poverty but my mental fortitude, I suppose, needed to stay elsewhere and I've just never felt like them. I mean, I didn't mention this when I wrote in but I've even legally changed my first name. I chose this name on my own because I don't want any connection, and that has always been the case.

Scott

You've done it. It's so wonderful to hear a story like this.

Mayson

Yeah.

Scott

Have you ever thought about contacting your biological father?

Mayson

That's interesting. I was always pretty curious to do it. I've seen him on social media. He has a full fledged family and it looks like they have a great time, so I never reached out. Then, one day, I got on just out of curiosity and I looked him up and I learned that he had passed. He passed last December. So that door is obviously officially closed. Even if I wanted to now, even if I had a shift five years from now and decided that I would like to, it's not going to happen.

Scott

One thing you mentioned earlier is that just before your first birthday, Stephen in prison signed your birth certificate. Did that mean that you were legally adopted by him?

Mayson

I had never thought of it until you asked me this question.

Scott

—a few days ago.

Mayson

Yeah, just a few days ago.

Scott

Okay.

Mayson

I had never considered it because I didn't think it was a question that ever needed to be considered. I suppose I took it at face value and thought that was the process and him signing my birth certificate. That's what it meant. But in preparation for this, I was very curious, so I did some research and it turns out that, in the state of Oklahoma, it does not constitute paternity or I would imagine the same for maternity. What you have to do is you have to file an acknowledgement of paternity and get it notarized and then signed off by a judge, and then you become, I guess, in the eyes of the law, the legal father. So I have just now learned that Stephen was never my father, and I understand that neither blood nor laws— that doesn't make a father. but it's definitely a shift in my reality.

Scott

Yeah, you're right. I mean, it's just a legal status but it's something that you've thought to be the case for 33 years, and now you realize it never was.

Mayson

Oh, yeah.

Scott

Yeah, it's going to take a little time to process that, I think, right?

Mayson

Just add that to the list of trauma, I guess. Yeah, I'll be thinking about that and talking about that, I'm sure, in the weeks to come. But yeah, that was a big surprise. It's hard to talk about because it just happened. So I don't even have all of my thoughts formulated yet, but it is just, again, surprising. One thing that I was the last to know about and just another thing that I had to find out through research.

Scott

Why do you want your story to be known?

Mayson

Before I became a professor, I taught at an inner city high school and these kids were just like me, born into poverty and violence, and I've seen the way that they are looked at. I've received those looks of, "You're a lost cause." I've been treated differently because of the name my brothers and my father and my mother have made for themselves, and I think that's the worst thing that could happen to them - being given up on because they will give up on themselves. So I share my story and I have seen by saying, "Hey, look, man, I get it. Here's my experience." And they're like, "Oh, but you're a teacher." "I know. Crazy, right? Look at me now. This could be you." And it starts a conversation. I think when I am vulnerable with this, I've seen it inspire people - I guess young kids. For those that share in any aspect of my story, I hope it brings them peace knowing that it can end well and I hope maybe, perhaps, it gives them the strength or inspiration to make a difficult decision that maybe they've been grappling with and just know that you absolutely can break the cycle and find your own success, peace, and happiness.

And just to be clear, I want it to be very understood that, when I say success, I don't mean you have to have a college degree, you have to have formal education. I tell my students this all the time. You don't have to have that to be successful. So whatever it is that you are chasing, you can do that.

Scott

And you know what? The fun part will be 10 or 15 years from now when a student contacts you and says, "Hey, guess what? I made it!"

Mayson

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I really can't wait because I've done that to all of my high school teachers who did that for me, so it's really awesome. I hope that one day I'll be on the receiving end. That would be very cool because then it's not all for nothing.

Scott

After our conversation, there was one other thing I wanted to ask Mayson about – I was wondering if there's ever a chance that Stephen will get out on parole.

Mayson

I believe, every three years, he comes up for parole. So, technically, there is a chance, but Lisa's parents have made a very strong community of protesters in Lisa's memory and honor. Every year he goes up for parole, I check and see how many letters are reported to be written and it's a pretty staggering number. So, I think with the help of that community, I do not believe that he will ever get out.

Scott

You might have a question for Mayson that I didn't ask her. If that's the case, she's in the What Was That Like Facebook group, along with about 8000 other listeners. And a lot of the guests from previous episodes are in there too. And we talk about a lot of things, not just podcast episodes! In fact, this past Tuesday in the group I posted the question "What were you addicted to, that you no longer consume?". Yeah I used to be addicted to something so I posted my answer and so did a lot of other people. Come on over and join us!
[WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook)

Got a voice mail from a listener – and this one needs a content warning, since the caller is talking about SA on a child –

Female 1

Hey, Scott, it's been a while since I've kind of wanted to share this, but I recently listened to your episode where Justine talked about her brother. I have a person in my family, my grandfather, who I really don't like to call my grandfather. Five or six years ago, I found out that he had raped a 12 year old girl and gotten her pregnant. I did everything I could to try to get him in jail. Because the family was trying to protect him– although they never knew that it was me who called the cops on him, they have a high suspicion of it and he never got to jail and I have a suspicion that someone in the family maybe paying off an officer or something due to police corruption happening there. But it was confirmed that he had raped the girls. There was even a fraternity test done by one of his sons and it was confirmed to the family and it was true.

Now, in a way, I kind of live in fear. Although that side of the family doesn't know that it was me, they have a suspicion. So, it's really rough. It's a really crazy situation. There are so many other things to go along with it but that requires more time. But every day, I kind of have to live with knowing that I have family members who are pretty much terrible people who are okay with that, and seeing and hearing her story really helped me when I heard it just today because it lets me know that I'm doing the right thing and that I did the right thing and that I don't have any regrets.

Scott

The episode that caller is talking about is from a few weeks ago, and it's titled "Justine feared her brother". I've had a lot of really positive feedback about that one so go check it out if you haven't heard it already.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And now, the segment you've been waiting for – the Listener Story. Every episode ends with one of these – just a 5-10 minute story sent in by a listener. You can send one in too! Just record it on your phone and email to me, at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

When you hear this week's story, you might find yourself thinking, wow, that guy really knows how to tell a story! And that would make sense. This one is from my friend Gregg, and he hosts his own podcast, called The Compulsive Storyteller. This story is one of my favorites from his show, and if you like this one, he has lots more for you to binge.

Stay safe, and I'll see you here next week with a Flashback episode!

(Listener Story)

Ratatouille 2...

I'm embarrassed to tell people that we have a pet rat. When I first met Laura, she had a pet rat, which I thought was pretty weird. She was a fantastic woman in every way, so I decided I'd try to put up with it. When she moved in, he moved in, and I've definitely warmed up to the little guy. He's half white and half gray, as if his hindquarters were dipped into a can of gray paint. He's mischievous, smart, and independent. We renamed him Ratsky. Today, I'm putting the finishing touches on his new four story home. I've repainted an old bookcase, cut holes in the three interior shelves, and run little ramps between the floors. The ramps are configured one above the other in the same way that staircases are in most buildings. Ratsky now lives in an old dilapidated parrot cage. He can only spend time on the floor of the cage, so it's not the ideal setup for him. However, most of the time he just explores all the nooks and crannies of our loft. I have built this new house in part because, a week from today, next Friday, we will have some very important guests visiting. I want to get rid of the parrot cage habitat. I had the idea of this new home which we would hide away when the guests arrive.

My girlfriend, Laura, is a temporary translator for a newly arrived French diplomat, and he and his wife are coming out to our loft for dinner. He's also a serious art collector, which explains in part our efforts in preparing for his visit. Laura tells me that she thinks they want to check out our art as well as our loft and see how a couple of real New York artists live. Laura is creating something special for their visit - a new avant garde couch of sorts. She's purchased eight big blocks of foam rubber, four cubes to sit on, and four thick, taller rectangles to lean back on. The overall couch will be L shaped and she's engaged a tailor from down the block to sew zippered light gray canvas coverings.

Now, it's Sunday evening and I move Ratsky from his old parrot cage into his new digs. He's been allowed to roam the space most days, but we keep him locked out of his cage when he's exploring. That way, when we call him in the evening, he's hungry and he always comes. Then, he's locked in for the night. I always call him by singing out his name in a falsetto, "Ratsky! Ratsky!" And there he is. Tonight I call him to his new home and he comes hesitantly because of the change in routine, but he's hungry and there's food inside along with water and some clean rags for a new bed and also some pet toys. He enters, eats, and explores.

On Tuesday, the foam rubber and the canvas coverings arrive and everything fits perfectly. Ratsky has also adapted well to his new four-story house. The day after his first night there, he moved in a few of his treasures from the parrot cage - a piece of red rubber, a scrap of sequined cloth, and a peanut shell. We've also supplied the cage with all sorts of new small toys. Thursday has arrived and we start shopping in earnest for the dinner party.

Yesterday, I chose the wine and decided to avoid French wine - because I don't want to make any faux pas of any sort because of my lack of knowledge of French vineyards - and instead chose a few bottles of white from an excellent California vineyard. In the evening, I call Ratsky, and he shows up immediately and races into his new cage for a meal and a night's sleep.

Today is Friday, the big day. We shop in the morning, whole wild salmon, asparagus and shallots, and those different colored little baby potatoes. We got some great desserts from Dean in Toluca. We'll be making our own hors d'oeuvres. There is one big potential problem, though. The couch has been set up and sat on a few times, but I've never really thrown myself down on it. When I do, the vertical back blocks tip over and I fall backwards. I think to myself, damn, now we need a quick fix because we plan to sit on the couch with our guests for appetizers and drinks before adjourning to the dinner table across the loft.

We decide on a two-part solution, sandwiching multiple strips of two sided adhesive tape between the back of the blocks and the standing rectangles. And then, to be on the safe side, I use some heavy twine to sew them together behind the base blocks. Voila, problem solved. The other problem is Ratsky. We moved his cage into the laundry room. I'm pretty sure that our guests, like most people, are not fond of rats. It's funny. I've been so completely converted by Laura to liking Ratsky, that I, like her, find most references to rats in popular culture to be offensive. You dirty rat. They ratted him out. He's a filthy rat. This place looks like a rat's nest. References to gym rats and mall rats are less offensive. But of course, we both resist telling people how we feel about their unkind words towards rats. It's just too weird on our part.

They are due at 7. So, at 6.30, I called Ratsky. I sing out his name and, today, of all days, no Ratsky. We both wasted valuable time searching even though there are still preparations to be completed upstairs, in the studio, the laundry room, and the office.

"Ratsky! Ratsky!"

But he's nowhere to be found, so we decide on a fallback plan if he doesn't appear before they do. One of us has to be on the lookout in case he makes a beeline for our guests. That someone is me.

When the buzzer rings, we both look anxiously at each other, close our eyes, touch foreheads and shake our heads from side to side. Then, we put on our happy faces and greet our guests at the door. We all make small talk about their getting up the freight elevator and our great views of the city. Then, we sat down at the couch for appetizers and wine. I'm incredibly anxious but a glass of wine does wonders. It also makes my eyes lapse for a few seconds from Rat Patrol. Suddenly, from the far side of the space, Ratsky makes his move.

The woman has just raised a pretty little hors d'oeuvre to her lips when he jumps on and across the coffee table and runs straight up the front of her dress. She screams a scream that is truly operatic - a horrified, blood curdling scream - and at the same time, she completely straightens her body out of fear. Ratsky has taken off the hors d'oeuvre as soon as she starts screaming, but she doesn't know that. Because she stiffens her body, our two sided tape job and sewing completely fail and the rear of the couch flips backwards, and she does too. Continuing to tumble backwards, she ends up with both her pantyhose legs flailing in the air, and still screaming, and the bottom edge of her skirt has fallen down to her hips.

The biggest problem is that for Laura and I, the situation is completely hilarious. The harder we try not to, the louder and more uncontrollably we laugh. We're laughing so hard that we're crying, but not so the diplomat. As I laugh, I clumsily try to help his wife herself, not knowing exactly where to take hold of her, and she inadvertently gives me a good kick.

Then, her husband pushes me aside and helps her up. He hugs her, whispering, "Mon petit chou" in her ear to calm her. And then he has some very nasty French words for Laura and I. She stops screaming and is now crying, but still our muffled laughter continues. What we're doing is so, so wrong, which makes it all the more funny. After a flurry of French expletives on the part of the husband, they leave in a hurry. Laura and I fall onto the couch and out comes Ratsky, not to take a bow, but to clean up all the hors d'oeuvres that were scattered on the floor.

The upshot of the evening is that Laura is barred from the office when she goes in to apologize. Her things are unceremoniously given to her in a cardboard box and she's asked to leave. They never return our phone calls nor respond to our apology note, the writing of which makes us both hysterical again. No matter how we phrase our apologetic description of the events of that evening, it's beyond funny.

At one point, we made up a name for her, Madame Raquemier, who was one of the subjects of Ingres most famous paintings. Since then, whenever either of us needs a pick-me-up, the other one just has to call out, Madame Raquemier, and we both giggle and sometimes howl with laughter. Sadly, Laura's and my relationship didn't make it, but we did briefly get back together for Ratsky's funeral. He lived for four years, which is a long life for a rat. He's buried in a grave in Greenwood Cemetery, marked only by a couple of his treasures, both of which disappeared over time. To this day though, I'm still offended when people say nasty things about rats.