**Shelley Roberts Gyllen**

**Narrator**

**Amy Sullivan**

**Interviewer**

**August 17, 2017**

**Ely, Minnesota**

Shelley Roberts Gyllen -**SRG**

Amy Sullivan -**AS**

**AS:** This is Amy Sullivan I'm here with Shelley and I'm going to let Shelley say her name because it's about to change. It's August 17th. We're at a cabin in Ely, Minnesota and the other noise you might hear in the background is a little puppy named Logan. Shelley do you give me permission to record this?

**SRG:** I do. I, Shelley Roberts Johnson, soon to be Shelley Roberts Gyllen.

**AS:** So why don't you start by talking about your childhood, some of the first memories of your life.

**SRG:** A lot of them are actually up here in Ely. We came here all the time as kids. Labor Day, Memorial Day, a week in the summer, and then eventually two weeks in the summer, and then eventually my parents bought this place and it's great. We had so much fun. I think part of it was just who our parents are and part of it is the childcare that we were at, which is on a hobby farm. We both just developed a love for being outside and boredom certainly entered into our lives, but the answers to it were things like go outside and build a fort or wander around a wetland and play an imagination game as opposed to watch a bunch of TV, which we did, too. We were not no-screen kids, but we definitely had that outdoor adventure aspect.

**AS:** And just so we're clear, you're younger than Spencer?

**SRG:** Yes, two and a half-ish years younger.

**AS:** So, your whole life is a memory with a big brother.

**SRG:** Yes, I have flashes of memory from one time when I was in the hospital because we were at a family picnic at the daycare that we went to and there were sheets hanging up. The older kids were all playing baseball and this sheet was their home base backdrop to catch pitches. I was running with my friends behind it and someone swung a bat and I got clocked in the head from the other side of a sheet, hard. This kid was swinging a baseball bat to hit a ball. I have a memory of my dad and my brother visiting me.

**AS:** You would have been like four?

**SRG:** Maybe even younger. I don't know how old I was when that happened. I definitely remember Dad and Spence visiting in the hospital. I think they gave Spence a little hospital gown to visit me in. Who knows if that's a real memory, but it's there. I remember a lot of Sunday nights we would get our laundry out and we would have to fold our laundry and then after folding our laundry we would put it up on the ottoman and get to build forts in our laundry baskets to watch Sunday night TV which was like *Life Goes On* and *The* *Simpsons* and there might have been one more. Sunday night family time, it was great. That was definitely a tradition.

Wintertime, the house was built on a hill and so in front we had a more gentle sloping hill, which was great when Dad would go and scoop it out and make this really cool run for tubing. The tube would sail up the sides and we had a back more steep hill and then the wetland off of that. We would play for hours in the winter outside. My dad would do his [whistles] whistle and it would carry across the wetland and it'd be like, "I guess we've got to go in." In the den we had this old, old heater. You'd go and you'd turn it up so that it clicked on and you'd go put your feet on it until your feet burned to try to warm up.

**AS:** Did your property back up to a wetland?

**SRG:** Our property backed up to a wetland. You can see it from 494, when you're driving north it's on your right side right before you get to 394. We called it “The Island,” like a hump of land in the middle with a bunch of trees on it. We would always just hike out to The Island, more so in the winter than in the spring or summer because it was often so deep. I vaguely remember being able to canoe out there one time but I was really young, I can barely remember that.

**AS:** So tell me about school and your big brother.

**SRG:** When I was younger I don't remember being like, "I have a big brother who's in this grade," which I'm sure I did. School was just like "Ahhhhh, this is great. I can just go sit in a corner and read books and have friends."

**AS:** So you liked school?

**SRG:** Yeah, I liked school a whole lot. I still like school. If I could be paid to go to school instead of paying to go to school my life would be perfect. I'm a lifelong learner for sure. I almost went on a tangent about learning. I remember maybe like second grade I have strong memories of playing with friends. He, obviously being older, had already established some friendships. I was actually talking about this last weekend at my bridal shower with one of the other moms. We were trying to remember how all of the friendships got forged. She remembers her son who was Spencer's age, also a redhead, came home from school and was like, "Mom, there's another redhead." They started playing together. She also has a daughter who's my age and so then we played together and I think were in each other’s classes, too. Within biking distance there were two other families in the district with sons Spencer's age and daughters my age and then another family with a daughter Spencer's age, but they didn't really play, and a daughter my age. There was a neighborhood full of kids all going to the same school. It was fun because then all of the sudden we'd have four families over at the house and have these romping playdates is the word they use now. We'd just go and be in the wetland. We'd have all these adventure games. In the fall we'd have the tractor out. At one point we had a moped and some go-carts.

My cousins that were the same age as us would come over and play too. The same thing: we'd always be running around. Of course the older kids would annoy the crap out of the younger kids and vice versa. I'm sure there was lots of, "It's not fair," going on. Just a ton of getting to learn about negotiating as a human being through play, which was really cool. Getting to romp around in the woods and be like, "Do you think it's a good idea that we're this close to a buck fight?" Just stuff like that. I think I was in fourth grade and he was in sixth grade, it was the last year we were in elementary together. It was the first year we were home alone after school for a few hours until my parents got home. At least I think it was the first year. Spence and I, he had been working on a fort with his friends out in the woods. We were playing in the fort and we heard a buck fight going on. It was so cool. At a certain point Spencer was like, "Alright, you have to go inside." Not inside the house because that was too far and you had to go past the buck fight. He was very much like, "Okay, this is starting to get dangerous." Didn't come inside the fort himself. The fort had a fully enclosed area and then a top. I did, and then I'm sitting there and I'm like, "Wait a minute, why does he get to watch?" Also, I would much rather be able to see it coming if I need to run instead of get trampled. Very cool, but definitely he was a risk-taker. Playing certainly involved a lot of risk and then later on being like, "Hm, maybe we should do this thing that will keep us safe."

**AS:** Were you a risk-taker at all?

**SRG:** I was less inclined to it. I was a "good kid" to use really big quotes there, but not also a good kid. I knew how the system of rules worked and especially by the time I was in high school and got over my fear of getting in trouble. I knew how to work the system. Definitely knew how to get around it. I learned how to take risks because of Spencer.

Up here there's a part of the lake that has this sheer rock cliff and it's perfect for climbing because there's lots of different handhold levels. It was like a Memorial Day or Labor Day weekend. He had a friend come up, but I didn't. I played with them a lot. They decided they were going to go climbing this thing. I was like, "Okay, I can go, too." I followed along. Then at a certain point we're out in the middle of this. I'm terrible with judging distance with my eyes but it's like from here to the cars in terms of height. It's not an insignificant height. A couple hundred feet, and it's very wide and we're in the middle of it. I remember hearing my mom or my dad on the dock being like, "Ah!" I all of a sudden realize and Spence and his friend were just like, "Follow us, try not to look down. If you do look down just accept that that's your fate."

**AS:** Did you jump into the water? Was it over the water?

**SRG:** No, it was over the water but there was no safe way to jump. It was enough of a slant in that there were a ton of rocks below us. It was one of the rare parts of the lake that didn't slant in super quickly. There was rubble and rock at the bottom. It was a terrifying moment that was also a really good growth moment. It was like, "Oh, hey, you just confront the next thing ahead and you find the next handhold and the next foothold. You do it." That has been an allegory in terms of the whole experience with Spencer's addiction and death. You find the next handhold and if you look down you just think, "This is my fate now. This is what it is." You hope you reach the top. We did that obviously. None of us fell to a rocky death.

**AS:** With your parents watching.

**SRG:** Encouraging, but also like probably half mad. What are they going to do? Follow us and endanger themselves? I think I remember one of them drove over in the boat and was trying to coach from below. They can't see all the nuances of the little holes and handholds. It was literally following Spence and his friend up the side of this cliff and hoping to God that it wasn't some sort of "I'm going to get you now, little sister." He never had it out for me. Not at least more than regular sibling rivalry would state.

**AS:** I keep hearing the story that he was very, very shy and you were very, very social.

**SRG:** Yeah, that is true.

**AS:** Is there a point where you kind of remember that or where that stands out to you?

**SRG:** No, because it's just how I've always been. I think more poignant is as the last year and a half has gone by and I've figured this thing called grieving your sibling out I have become less social, and that's different. I am far much more in need of my me time. It's one of those weird skills that you can't learn until something super shitty happens that is ultimately I think a self-care skill. I got a lot better at being like, "Oh, I need to do this for me." For at least a week there was a whole like, "I can't do anything else but be selfish."

Then a few months after that figuring out how to function in the world again. A few weeks after Spencer died Prince died. Everyone cared so much and I'm like, "How do you care so much?" Removed from the immediacy of Spencer's death I get it, I do, because people become really important culturally. At the time it was so hard. The end of the year posts because a lot of famous people died in 2016 and a lot of stupid crap happened. People were just like, "Fuck off 2016." I was like, "No this is the last year my brother was alive. How could you possibly?" Then I'm like, “Oh yeah, people are entitled to their life experiences.” Figuring out how to claim that space and exist in the world. I've always been a super empathetic person, too, which I think goes along with the outgoing in a sense that I just get people. I can have empathy with the manipulative behavior of addiction.

**AS:** Did you get your brother, or did it go in and out?

**SRG:** Yeah. I mean especially when we were kids I got him. I think when you have siblings that's where you do the most of your social negotiation and figuring out how to function in the world. It's this whole different relationship than you have with any other human being. You can't treat everybody the way you treat your siblings because you don't know the backstory. Then in terms of one of the hardest things about his addiction—and when he was around, and when we were together and confronting that—was that he would say things and I knew he was manipulating me. He's my brother; he's always known what to say to get under my skin. I don't think it was until my late twenties that I finally stopped just letting it roll off my back and being like, "No, I disagree with you. You're being a jerk." These things that at the same time that I need to stand up for myself I'm like, “What if I say something that makes him go use again?”

**AS:** That sense that you have some control, that your behavior can somehow impact what he does or doesn't do.

**SRG:** Yeah, which it can't. Wouldn't that be an interesting character trait, if we could control other people? You can with manipulation. There are these things, but that's another soapbox for another day.

**AS:** Do you feel like talking about your own struggle? Some of your own mental health struggles?

**SRG:** Yeah, I can talk about that.

**AS:** That came up in your parents’ conversations, just trying to deal with that. What was that like for you and how did that play out?

**SRG:** I think it was ninth grade.

**AS:** We're talking about what year? What year were you born?

**SRG:** I was born in 1984. I'm thirty-three now in 2017. Ninth grade would have been 1997-98 school year. I don't remember if it was the summer before ninth grade or the summer before tenth grade. I just got real lethargic and didn't care about a lot all of a sudden. That was weird. I'm a happy-go-lucky, horns-of-the-bull, grab life sort of person. It was just all of a sudden like not having any energy. This bizarre irrational sense that I would die in my sleep and then I had a really hard time falling asleep. Then would have a really hard time staying awake because I was exhausted but also terrified of sleeping.

Looking at it now and knowing as much now, it was some really hardcore anxiety and puberty stuff. At the time, I agree with the doctor's prognosis that it was a lot of depression. I was put on antidepressants and did a lot of counseling with a wonderful woman in Plymouth. It was so weird to just go and talk to someone. "Did you feel sad this week?" Yeah because I have to go and do homework and I want to go play and this boy and that person. I'm a teenager—of course I'm sad! Then at the same time because I'm a teenager not realizing the impact on my personality that medications are having, just figuring out the nuances of side effects. Now knowing what we know now about how brains develop my brain is still developing. My personal experience was a very bad one with antidepressants. Ultimately, I became a part of the statistic that antidepressants make young people even more depressed and suicidal. In high school we got a really good handle on it. I was just on a maintenance level and then I went to school.

**AS:** To college?

**SRG:** To college. I went to DePauw University and had chosen it because they had an education program. It was far away, but not too far away. A big factor was I got a really big financial aid package, too. I got there and they were like, "We're disbanding our education program. Get a degree in whatever you want and then do a fifth year program." I was like, "Okay, because I just worked my ass off to get here." It didn't even occur to me that I could be like, "Well this isn't for me then. Thank you. Goodbye." That's another soapbox for another day.

I struggled. It was hard. I thought about coming home. I'm also very stubborn. I built these friends. I'm sure I saw moving schools as a failure. I made it through my freshman year and had signed up for an anthropology class and loved it. I declared in my first week that I would take anthropology partially because I loved the class and partially because my first year advisor for whatever my first year seminar was not a good fit, we'll put it that way. I just didn't want to have to go talk to her about my life and everything.

Sophomore year I moved into the sorority house that I rushed. I had decided not to rush, but they offered me a snap bid, or something, which is just enough of them knew me and thought I was great and a good fit. Without reconsidering, you decided not to do this for a reason, I just was like, “Oh yay I feel included. This is great!" I joined the sorority. It was fun and sisterhood and all of those things that is again another story. I moved into the sorority house sophomore year. One night just was at my desk and took a bottle of Excedrin. A whole bottle, which will kill you as it turns out. I was up the whole night, the overwhelming constant fear that I was going to die in my sleep, which was irrational.

**AS:** You still had that?

**SRG:** It came back. It came back out of nowhere. I've gone back and read what I was journaling that day. Nothing about it is depressed sounding. It's a journal, so why would I mince words or anything? I'm also a pretty open book much to my mother's chagrin for a while. On paper I attempted suicide but I still don't consider it that. It wasn't me.

**AS:** Do you think it was the antidepressants?

**SRG:** I do, one hundred percent.

**AS:** Now they know that.

**SRG:** Even a year later these ads were coming out. I'm like what the fuck? Why was I on that? Then I got diagnosed with bipolar. They're like, "Clearly blah blah blah." That's what they knew at the time. I can be angry about it, but it's also the truth of what they knew at the time. Again I can look down and see all of those rocks below me and I got to the top of that cliff eventually and I'm happy for it. I was on all sorts of stuff.

**AS:** That was a misdiagnosis?

**SRG:** Yes, that was a misdiagnosis. I was on an anti-psychotic. I don't remember very clearly like two years of my life.

**AS:** In college?

**SRG:** Yeah. I remember some big events but I don't have, I can't pull out. I went back later on when I was doing my education coursework—went back to find a paper I had written on something. I was like, "Oh, I have that book." I have no memory of writing this paper or reading the book. I have shelves and shelves of books and plays that have my notes in them and I have no memory of reading them. It's a little terrifying. It was hard. I know it was hard for Spencer. He definitely, again, would when he needed things or wanted things and was trying to manipulate me would use that as ammunition, which was really hard, too.

**AS:** He would use what?

**SRG:** Use the attention I took away from him from my parents, with my parents supporting me so much as ammunition. He would say some terrible shit when he wanted to wound me. He could be a really big asshole, a really big asshole.

**AS:** Let's pause this for a second.

[Break in Recording]

**AS:** At what point did his addiction, at what point was that clear to you? Did you know about what was going on with him?

**SRG:** I remember in junior high him getting kicked out or suspended because he had brought booze to school and someone asking me out on a date because of it. The unfortunate part is that I super liked this guy and so I totally went out and dated him the way you do in seventh grade for two weeks.

**AS:** Because your brother was cool?

**SRG:** Yeah, and so therefore I was probably really cool. Fun fact: I was a really big nerd. Then also in high school I got into the things that high schoolers got into. I didn't really drink in high school. I wasn't really a partier. I did get high starting in I don't know what grade. Then my sophomore year that was kind of my year of exploration. That was my first time that I went to a party and lied to my parents that her parents were home. I got drunk and I got high. That spring also my best friend's little sister died from leukemia and I didn't know how to handle that. One of my friends at the time over spring break we just went with her boyfriend and some people that he knew and got in their car and went to St. Cloud and did some drugs that I didn't know what they were with some people. She went home in the middle of the night and left me there. She had a ride home with someone. I don't know why we thought any of this was a good idea.

I don't really remember much about Spencer's response other than I was sleeping everything off and he came in and was like, "That was really stupid. You could have died," which in retrospect is what it is. We didn't really talk about it beyond that. We would smoke pot together. In college years we would take mushrooms together and would do cocaine together. One day I was like, "Well this is all very stupid and a waste of my money and I will get into trouble." I just walked away. I think I called my parents and was like, "Hey, I have to tell you something." It was more of a way to keep myself accountable because I get to that point where I'm just an open book. I'm like, "Hey, I've been doing this really stupid thing. I'm going to change that."

**AS:** Did you tell them Spencer was doing all that?

**SRG:** I don't think so. I don't know. I don't remember. This was also during college when I don't remember a large portion of things. I don't think I started doing coke until after I was off the anti-psychotics. I was also super terrified about drug interactions. It was more the last three semesters that I was at school. Then again it was like, "Well, I'm done with this." When we were in town we'd party. Spencer would become mad that I was becoming too close to his friends. He'd yell at me for flirting with his friends. I was like, "Then why are you inviting me to hang out with your friends that you think are cool if you don't want me to become friends with them? Your friends are cool." I have a different opinion about that now. I think a lot of them are actually all pretty cool people. There was that time—I think for me I was able to walk away from it, so I wasn't really worried that he couldn't either. He just needed to get to the point where he made that choice to walk away, too. "He just hasn't gotten here yet," which is a different thing.

When he and Jamie were dating and living at the old house they were talking about getting married and stuff. Are you going to continue doing drugs and all these things? Jamie was like very much I don't want this lifestyle anymore. Spencer was saying that he didn't and then they got pregnant and at one point during Jamie's pregnancy Spencer was growing in a closet. He was growing pot. I was like, "This is the opposite of giving this up," but also like very much deferring to Jamie. “I want to maybe tell my parents because I bet they don't want this at their house, on their property that they own. You're going to have a kid.”

It's hard because pot for a lot of people is not problematic. It's less problematic than alcohol. That's just a thing that exists in the world that is a discussion I constantly have with myself and it changes every day whether I think it's a problem or not. I don't know the answer still and that's okay. It's tricky because I've seen it hurt a ton of people. There's also the influence of the DARE program and the whole marijuana is a gateway drug, which I don't really think is true. I also don't know because that's not my field of study. From my personal experience I don't see that as a truth. Anyways, that's that.

**AS:** I think for people who were kind of hardwired for addiction it can definitely be a gateway drug, but not for everyone who uses it.

**SRG:** That's the true thing about alcohol, too. If you're wired for addiction then it doesn't matter if it's beer or scotch or wine. It's there. I definitely, as the years have progressed, have been like "Am I drinking too much?" Then I'll just quit drinking for two months just to see if I can. I just don't have that and it's kind of hard to reconcile.

**AS:** It kind of haunts you?

**SRG:** Yeah, it's like, “What's up with my brain that I can just walk away?” I was just, "Alright, I'm done," and then walked away. The day after Spence died when we went to the sober house and hearing people talk about how that addiction is always there even when you're sober. I smoked cigarettes a lot. That's the closest I have. It took me a really long time. We'll see if it sticks this time. I really like smoking. There's a lot of things I really like about smoking despite knowing that it's horrible for me and could kill me. That's the closest I could relate to and it just felt so ingenuine to be like, "I get what you guys are going through." I don't at all. I walked away with no problem. Then part of it was feeling that guilt. Was us doing some drugs together contributing to that? Maybe and probably. Did it contribute in such a way that it caused Spencer to die? No, there were a hundred factors and the main one of them being that he was severely addicted.

**AS:** And to opioids.

**SRG:** And to opioids, which I never got. I remember getting injured at work one time. He was like, "When you go to the doctor tell him you can't sleep because it hurts so much and they'll give you blah blah blah." I remember being at my grandma's, I think we were down there for her ninetieth birthday. He told me he'd found my grandpa's, and my grandpa had died in like 2005 and this was 2009, these pills were dated before he died. Spence found these pills and he just took them. I didn't think anything of it.

**AS:** He just ingested them or he took the bottle?

**SRG:** I think he put them in a different bottle. He left the pill bottle but left it empty. I'm sure my ninety year old grandma didn't notice. I don't remember if I ever told my parents about that. It was that whole “the sibling code of secrecy” sort of thing, which was also hard. If I tell Mom and Dad that he did all of this cocaine then I also have to tell them that I did. It was a silly fear because I told them. I got so wrapped up in what Spence was going through. He was super manipulative and knew how to say just the right thing to get under your skin. He would be vicious, which is just hard to say about a person that you love that is now dead. There were some crappy things about him. There're crappy things about me.

**AS:** Addiction can also bring out things in people that you wouldn't really consider it an inherent part of their personality.

**SRG:** It magnifies all the worst things.

**AS:** I understand what you mean. I know that you love him.

**SRG:** I totally do.

**AS:** It does bring out the worst in people. When did you learn that he had a problem with pills? Or did you? Was it not until he came back from Montana?

**SRG:** I knew that he kept doing them. Aidan was born in September. In the months between then—and it was Oscar night I remember, late January, early February. There were three different occasions when Jamie called me in tears like, "We have to have an intervention." I was like, "Alright, I will support you. We'll go over to Mom and Dad's right away in the morning." Then she'd call me in the next morning and be like, "No, things are okay." Finally the third time this happened and I'd been talking to a really good friend of mine. I was at his house for an Oscar party and the phone rang. He saw that it was Jamie and he's like, "You go. Do your thing." It was an Oscar party so we had dressed up. I'm standing outside on the sidewalk on Colfax in Uptown in heels and a dress and my coat probably smoking a cigarette sobbing with Jamie. Just being like, "We're going to do this in the morning." Hanging up and calling my parents. She's not going to turn this around on me again. I don't know that I have the strength to stand up to her. So much of it was like, “It's your family and I don't want to tell you.” That's a deficit in my personality is that I have a hard time saying, "No, this is actually really problematic." For as much as I'm a teacher, I don't want to be overbearing.

**AS:** That put you in such a difficult situation.

**SRG:** I want the best for him. It was a really tricky situation. I called them and was just like, "Jamie and I are coming over in the morning because we've got to talk about Spencer." Usually when they tell this story they don't remember that part of it. They always just talk about how it was Jamie. I'm like, "The fuck?" That's a small thing to be upset about so I let it go. I called them so many times in the middle of the night when I was dealing with my anxiety and depression and misdiagnosis. That was a really solid, easy thing to remember. I'm sure I questioned it before then though.

**AS:** That's 2009?

**SRG:** Yeah, or 2010 because it was January I think or February. He went into his program. When someone goes into a program there's a certain amount of admission both on their part and also on your part as a family. Alright this is a problem and we're going to confront this. Then it became really hard because you go through all of that initial, “Why didn't I do anything sooner?” I'm so mad we even have to do this. He would just always be like, "I just don't believe it. I don't understand why I'm here for pot. There are people who are here for blah blah blah." Lo and behold we learn all of this later.

I don't have a strong memory of him using meds. I remember there were a couple times where he would be like, "Oh you have this thing. You should tell them you can't sleep because of it and they'll give you this." I remember him getting appendicitis. He would come to every one of my plays. He was my biggest supporter. I have parents who are super supportive. Even the silly stuff, the stuff my parents couldn't get to he would try his best to show up to see shows. I remember him being at a show that I directed and just being out of it and in pain. He had just gotten his appendix out and they were going to move to Montana soon.

Then that the following year when they had lived in Montana for six months I was doing the Reading Corps, it was Minnesota Reading Corps. It's not Teach for America it's the literacy version of that's under AmeriCorps. For spring break I took the train out. I could kind of tell some stuff was going on just because of the way my parents couldn't give me a real reason they thought visiting Montana was maybe not the best idea.

**AS:** So they kind of tried to hide this from you?

**SRG:** They definitely did. They did. They definitely were trying to hide it for sure. I went out and things were just tense. Aidan's a year and a half at this time. Things were tense. They weren't outright fighting, Spencer and Jamie. They'd squabble and skirmish more than normal. Spence was, he just seemed constantly high. I don't remember that he was necessarily smoking pot. It was just kind of like, it wasn't awful to be around him, but I didn't really want to hang out. This isn't cool. I just played with Aidan a whole lot. He went into the hospital with pain. Jamie and I went out with Aidan one day. It was becoming apparent that something was going on.

I ultimately at the end of that trip when I was getting on the train, Aidan came home with me. My parents bought Aidan a ticket. Aidan and I took the train back and he stayed here for I don't know how long while that situation was getting figured out. That was the first of the, "Okay, there's something going on." My parents still weren't really telling me anything and Spencer was still like the pain narrative with me. Jamie was just like unless I was there in person we didn't really talk a whole lot about it unless it was stuff about Aidan. That was kind of like the beginning of the unveiling.

I remember many conversations with my mom and dad being like, "Why aren't you telling me these things?" "Well, we don't want you to be burdened." "That's very sweet of you, but you're actually burdening me more by keeping me out. Now I feel stupid. I feel uninformed. There are other people in the family who are asking me how Spence is and I don't know why the hell they're asking me. Everyone else knows because you talk to your brothers and sisters who talk to their kids about this." There was a lot of anger around that. You work through it.

**AS:** Do you think part of them wanting to protect you had to do with their experience with your mental health issues? That they felt that would somehow tip you over the edge or something?

**SRG:** Yeah, like it would trigger it or something. I think that's why I was most angry about it. Why don't you trust me to tell you I don't want to know this if I don’t? I definitely do and there was a lot of anger around not feeling like I was trustworthy.

**AS:** By this point you're in your...?

**SRG:** I'm in my twenties, mid to late twenties. There was a lot of discussion with my mom because she is the opposite of me, or was at that time in terms of being an open book. She was like, "Don't tell people you're depressed. You don't have to share everything with everyone." No I don't, which is why I don't. I share certain things that I've given thought to. Less thought then than I do now. It's interesting to see how she is now where she's like, "We have to talk about these things, that's how stigma happens." Fighting against that “don't tell anyone” narrative. What's the point? Then you're just sitting there suffering in silence. Then there was a lot of anger around that as well. Her worry that I would just turn around and post it on Facebook, which if you don't want me to and then say, "Hey don't." Will I always listen? Not one hundred percent of the time, but I'll frame it in a certain way.

**AS:** At that point she was very afraid of people finding out.

**SRG:** Yeah, and the stigma around it. I get it. It's hard when one of your kids is struggling with something and your other friends have kids who are seemingly perfect. That's just because nobody talks. If we change the narrative and we start talking to each other then we understand that we're all struggling and it's great. Then we can all celebrate when things are great and we can help each other when things suck. It's been a rough period. We've gotten to a really nice place with it. There was a lot of having to ask always.

**AS:** Can I talk about this?

**SRG:** Or even asking, "Hey, is something going on?" Like asking "What's this?" Then feeling horrible because I'm the last one to know. Then feeling like I can't get mad and confront them about it because they're dealing with a kid who's addicted to heroin.

**AS:** So you kind of fall in the shadows a bit even under the guise of them wanting to protect you from the hardest parts of it.

**SRG:** Then at the same time being the person who just gets and has that empathy. I get why they made that choice. I get it. While I'm mad about it I also get it.

**AS:** You feel like you could have been more of a support to them?

**SRG:** Yeah, and also if maybe you don't want to deal with it ask me and I will cancel my vacation and stay home and hold down the fort. Give me the tools so it's not only ruining my life. It can ruin all of our lives together, which feels terrible to laugh about, but it's easier to go through a shitty time when you have other people to go through a shitty time with you.

**AS:** They did talk about a time when they went to go bring Aidan back and Spencer was here at home or he was in treatment and you were alone at their house and he called.

**SRG:** He called and wanted to come in. They had very strict rules about it. I was like, "I'll put this sleeping bag on the porch for you." He was playing us against each other. Then I found out later in the morning that he had dug up something in the backyard. I don't know if it was stuff he had stashed there to pawn later. I don't know if it was a key to the house so he could get in to grab stuff. He'd stashed something but he dug it up from the yard in the middle of the night. That was crappy.

Then there was the time when they had come up to close the cabin, this was the fall before Spence died, and I had just moved in out of a really shitty living situation. I was student teaching. It was the Renaissance Festival and I had just met Jeff who I'm going to marry in sixteen days. Spence was also at home. I heard the TV on when I went to go to the bathroom at like two in the morning. It was Sunday night so I had to go to work in the morning. I'd been at the festival all weekend, which was hot and exhausting.

**AS:** You were working at the festival?

**SRG:** Yeah, I'm a street performer. I walk on stilts and I do puppets. I hear the TV on so I look over the banister and I'm like, "Hey Spence go to bed." He got really mad at me for telling me what to do, which should have been the first sign. Then he did eventually like two hours later come upstairs and go to bed. At that time he was just like "It's really hard to sleep." All the things he says. We had this really deep conversation, which in hindsight I'm like, "Oh you were coming down." He was like going through that cycle of feeling, I think, guilty. He was doing a lot of like, "I just miss when we were kids. I'm really sorry." All of that.

Then he's like, "I've got to go to the bathroom." He came back and he was a different person. It was a progression but it just got weirder and weirder and he would fall over. I'd be like, "Let's go to bed." He was nodding off. Hopeful me is like, "He's fine." I should have called the police and been like, "My brother is super high." What would they have done? Kicked him out two hours later anyways. I went to the bathroom and I found a spoon on the counter and a needle. The side of the tub had been pulled away, which is a place that he stashed things. It was all literally dirty, covered in dirt. He was like, "This is just really old. I found it because Jamie is making me super mad so I want to send it to her and show her what she makes me feel like doing." I stupidly, stupidly, stupidly let him dispose of the needle, which I'm sure he didn't do. I don't remember if I told my parents about it. It was the beginning of when everything was going crazy.

**AS:** This was just six months before he died?

**SRG:** Yeah. They had come up here to close the cabin down for the winter. I think a day or two before he was super sober. Otherwise I don't think my parents would have come up here together to close the cabin. He met Jeff. That's the only time that Jeff got to meet him when he was sober. Then every other time it was shitty. I promise I have all these really great stories, too. It's not only this. It's only been half this. One third this, I don't know. Then everything went back on that rollercoaster of losing hope and finding hope, having hope and everything being in a good spot.

I saw him super briefly two or three days before he died. He was at the house. I was coming and he was going or vice versa. It was just a, "Hey, how's it going?" "Fine. Good to see you." That's the last time I saw him alive or saw him. I'm glad that was a positive interaction. He seemed pretty sober at that point, too.

**AS:** That's what your parents thought. Everybody thought that.

**SRG:** It seemed like he was doing so good. The thing that sucks about it is it's even more awful heroin. All heroin is awful, but had he maybe not had this exotically strong heroin that he had shot up he wouldn't have died. Is that useful thinking? I don't know. It serves whatever purpose it serves and then you let it go. It was really weird because I was in a yoga class that Sunday. I had a Fitbit, which I was wearing during class. It was linked to my phone and it started buzzing and it was like the last couple minutes of class. It started buzzing and it was my mom calling. It was the first time since Spencer's addiction that I wasn't like, "Oh no, he overdosed." I knew. I just knew. I just laid in shavasana and let myself have that. They called back.

**AS:** All these other times your mother had called you, you never thought that?

**SRG:** I had. All the times she'd call, especially if it was a weirder time of day, I was like, "Oh is this..." This time I didn't have that thought, which is how I knew.

**AS:** This is the first time you weren't concerned when she called. How long had you been anticipating Spencer's death?

**SRG:** I think for sure at Christmas I was like, "God, I don't think he can do it." That Christmas was hard. Here I have my new boyfriend. Welcome to the family. This is just our life. Then before that I remember having a conversation with my dad where he had admitted to me the hard truth of wondering if that was coming soon. Then again the hard truth if it happens: is that the worst thing? It is at the same time that it's not. It sucks so much but it also sucks so much in both situations. The person he was when he died was an asshole. He wasn't my brother, but he was also. It sucks so hard.

**AS:** Is it the worst thing?

**SRG:** It is. It's the worst thing, but it's also a really great thing. There're so many great things about it. He's done with that struggle. We're done with that struggle. It's so selfish, but it's so true. You feel crappy for saying it, but it's also like my parents got to go on vacation and they didn't have to worry. It was so good. They went to Ireland and they’ve been to Florida. Now they have to worry about a wedding, but that's a different kind of worry. It sucks and I would change it if given the option, but I also admit that there are things that are better. It is better to not live daily wondering if my mom's calling to tell me my brother died. It is better to not see my brother in that pain and shame and guilt and struggle. It's better that it's over even though at the same time it sucks and I don't want it to be over. There's always that little voice of could I have had him back? Could we have scaled the cliff? Then feeling really terrible that I couldn't show him the handholds on this particular allegorical cliff.

**AS:** That's a great analogy.

**SRG:** It's worked out well for this situation. Then going forward and knowing that addiction is a thing that can tear apart families. Could I do it? Could I do what my parents have done? I've always wanted kids and now I've questioned wanting kids. I do but it's terrifying and is it worth it? I think one hundred percent it is.

**AS:** When you have a kid you give yourself over to the unknown in so many ways. That's also how we continue to be a species. We give ourselves over.

**SRG:** I think it's really hard to live in that fear of making the wrong choice or having a kid and having them grow up to be an addict. It's not fair to let that change your mind against it. I don't know if it's not fair. I would rather live my life continuing to hope. It was really hard to continue to hope in those last months.

One of the times he was sober before he died and I was telling him about the trip we were taking to Costa Rica. He was like, "You've got to hold a monkey and send me a picture of it." I didn't get to hold a monkey, but we were at Marcos Antonio Park [Manuel Antonio], that's not quite the name. A big nature park in Costa Rica and one of the beaches has a bunch of little monkeys on it. I held out one of my hands and the monkey came and held my hands. Jeff got it on video and I started crying. This is like three weeks after Spence died. I didn't get to send him that, but I did get to do it and have that nice memory. That was the birthday trip—the trip on my birthday. A little gecko wandered into our room that was the exact size of the gecko that he had given himself a tattoo of. That felt like a nice little coincidence.

I'm not a religious person. I don't really believe that there is a Spencer out there that is sending me things or anything. I do really appreciate all the little things that exist that remind me of him. Then the hard part is at a certain point I'll run out of the things that I said I'd do. I think there's only one left. I told him when he was sober for a year I'd take him skydiving. He's now been sober for a year. At some point I'm going to take his ashes with me and go skydiving. I don't think my mom's very excited. I don't know if I've told her. I think I probably won't tell her until after it's done. The other times I've went she's like, "I don't want to know. How could you do that? Why?"

**AS:** The other times you've gone skydiving?

**SRG:** Yeah. It's super fun.

**AS:** Thank you.

**SRG:** You're welcome. I don't know if any of it's useful.

**AS:** It's all useful.

**SRG:** It's so hard to sum up a person and talk about it. Thank you for writing this book.