

Daisy: The way I think about it is, when you're a kid and you say, when you're in distress, you say, "Mommy. I want my mommy." But I didn't have a mommy, so I was just like, "Okay, I'm going to do it, 'cause Mommy's not here. And Mommy told me that whenever you're in distress, you just stay put, and you just take it on, and be strong, and keep going until you see your mom." But I was a kid. I didn't fully grasp the aspect that my mom wasn't coming back. I still looked for her everywhere. [end preamble]

Dana: [start intro] Welcome to *I Swear on My Mother's Grave*. My name is Dana Black, and in 2016, I lost my mom. And now I'm talking to other people who have also lost their moms. And I don't just mean in death, because there are so many ways you can lose a mother. And we're going to get into it. So let's talk about our moms.

When I started this podcast a few months ago in my closet next to my Spanx and my mom's jewelry, I never thought that one day I'd be talking to a 16-year-old girl who I'd never met, over Zoom, about our moms and addiction, and about whether or not either one of us wants children, and talking about my relationship with my boyfriend, and just life in general. I never thought that would happen, and I never thought it would be so healing and helpful and fun and rewarding.

I talked to this guest at the end of last year, and I loved every minute of it. I was introduced to her through a friend named Sarah here in Chicago, who met her through a performing arts organization called Hearts to Art. And Hearts to Art helps 7- to 14-year-old children who have lost a parent deal with their grief through music and art and writing and theater. And this guest applied during her eighth-grade year. She was 13 years old. A bunch of teachers said, "You should really apply. You're a great writer. You should go." And she went, and it changed her life, and she loves it. And she's now a junior counselor with this camp. When I logged onto the call with her, I noticed right away that she had a sweet, quiet voice; beautiful blue/purple-dyed hair. And when I asked her if her microphone was all set, she said, "Oh yeah, it's all set up. It's over here, next to my computer on a stack of Harry Potter books. I'm good." Yeah, she's awesome.

I wanted to start this conversation with my guest talking about the feeling of when she first walked into that camp, and she looked around the room at the other kids there, who had experienced a similar loss, and for the first time she felt seen and understood in a way that she hadn't before. She was home.

This is Daisy Salto. [end intro]

Daisy: There's something different about being 13 (laughs) and walking into a room of kids and being like, "Oh my god. This is the first time I've ever walked into a room of people where I don't have to translate, and I don't have to overshare for them to understand what I've gone through.

Dana: And what did that feel like?

Daisy: It was a wave of relief I think I remember. 'Cause I remember being nervous initially about going in, because I didn't know anybody. But there's an unspoken trust that was already there, that I have no words to explain. And even though I didn't know anybody, even though I

was fully stranger, I walked in, and I was already comfortable. It was just in the air, a sense of community. And I had these two girls come up to me—and their names are Madison and Octavia—and they were just like, "Hi, we see that you're new here," 'cause they had been there for several years already. And they were like, "What's up? Do you want to be friends?" And I was like, "Oh my god, yeah."

Dana: "Yes I do."

They call it "the worst club in the world," when you lose a parent. But sometimes you learn that later in life, as I did. I lost my mom at 37, but you lost yours so young. So then to be part of that club so young, tell us—'cause you just said, "They got it. I didn't have to explain it. I didn't have to talk about it. [5:00] I didn't have to overshare." So then how does it feel when you're younger?

Daisy: I was eight years old, like Sarah said. So obviously I was the token orphan in my school. And at first, I didn't have a club. Obviously I knew that there were people out there, who had lost their parents the same way I did or very similarly. But I was eight years old. I was alone. I do have my siblings, who were also there with me going through it.

Dana: Were they older than you or younger than you?

Daisy: They already gotten past ten years old. Not to take away from their experience or anything, but I was just younger. I still held my mom's hand when I walked across the street, and I still needed that sense of security. So at first, I didn't have a club. I didn't anyone to go to, so it was really lonely those first couple years.

Dana: Was your mom a single parent?

Daisy: Technically yes. My dad wasn't really around when I was a kid. So when she died, my brother just kind of took over.

Dana: How old was he?

Daisy: 23.

Dana: And he's all of a sudden running the family.

Daisy: There's five of us in total, so he just kind of picked us up.

Dana: And how do people talk about her after she passed?

Daisy: My mom was sick—and by sick, I mean she was an alcoholic. So her whole life, people have talked down on her, and in the way that people talk down on addicts. And I remember after she died, and people were gossiping in my school, and people were saying horrible things. And once people had put two and two together, they'd been like, "She had it coming." Kids are mean. People are mean. They've been like, "If she didn't want to die..."

Dana: Adults can be mean too. They can say shameful things about someone who sick. But kids have no filter. They have no...

Daisy: ...no idea what they're saying.

Dana: And maybe some of those kids were dealing with it themselves. That they have addiction in their family, but they don't know how to talk about it, and so they're lashing out. I don't know. What do you think?

Daisy: I've heard everything in the book. I've heard everything: against me, against my mom, against my dad. Kids used to sing, "The sun'll come out tomorrow," to me, 'cause they thought they would call me Orphan Annie. (laughs) But about my mom—people are ruthless. (laughs) I remember I would get into arguments, and if I was winning that it'd be like, "Well, your mom deserved to die," to end the argument. 'Cause what am I supposed to say after that? "Cool"?

Dana: Did you know what they were saying? Did you understand? Did you know? When you're eight, you can't know enough about addiction. My mom was a functioning alcoholic and an opioid addict, and so we can get to her story. I'll absolutely share whatever you want me to share. But I'm saying I didn't really understand what alcoholism was until I was in my thirties. So did you even know what they were saying to you? Did you understand?

Daisy: Well, I was a kid, so in the connotation I did. But in the actual definition, I just knew she was sick, and I knew she was hurting, and she had habits that I was familiar with.

Dana: What were those habits?

Daisy: Hiding soda in her room, and me thinking it was just soda. And being like, "Mom, why can't I drink the soda in the closet?" (laughs) And her being like, "'Cause I need it later." And I'd be like, "For what?" [10:00] I've never seen my mom go to sleep, or I've never seen my mom sleep. Or just the smell, the eyes. You just know it after a while. And as I kid, I just got familiar with it.

When you're a kid, you look at things, and you're like, "Is today going to be a good day or a bad day?" And that's kind of the way I did. But when people were talking to me about it, I was just kind of like, "No, that was just my mom." As a kid, I just thought that was part of her personality. So I remember when I learned about alcoholism, and I learned about what addiction was, and I connected all the dots a couple years later, and I was like, "Oh. Oh."

Dana: Did you watch her lash out at people around you, or apologize and say it'll never happen again, these tropes of addicts? My mom did a lot of bargaining, or she was real private about things. Same with drinks in her room. It'd be like, "Is this water?" She's like, "It's just water." It tasted like wine or vodka.

Daisy: I'm sorry, I just blanked. (laughs) Can you repeat the question?

Dana: Did your mom lash out and manipulate? All those things you said when you look back, and you go, "Oh yeah, that's a sign."

Daisy: I remember the periods of depression, and then the small moments of coming out of them, and then the anger, the irritation of withdrawals. Obviously as a kid, I didn't know that she was withdrawing. I didn't know that she wasn't actually mad at me, so I thought she was mad at me. And I thought she did hate me at some times. And I was just like, "Well, I don't know what I did." And then when I was older and I connected the dots and the lashing out and the everything else, I was just like, "Oh, well."

Dana: Do you have any positive memories of her when you were young?

Daisy: I do.

Dana: Do you look back on things you guys did together?

Daisy: (laughs) In the mornings, when she would take me to school, we'd watch *Curious George*. And I can't for the life of me tell you why it was *Curious George*. It was just on at 7 in the morning. And my mom would make us late every day because she thought he was so funny. My mom was not an English speaker, so she didn't even understand what was going on. But because *Curious George* is a kid's show, she was watching the pictures and laughing so hard, rolling on the floor laughing at *Curious George*, and being like, "That crazy monkey," in Spanish. (laughs) Oh god, every day, without a doubt, I was almost missing my bus with my sister because we watching *Curious George*.

Dana: Do you feel, by working at that camp Hearts to Art, do you look at children differently who have lost a parent? Do you have more sympathy for yourself, thinking about how maybe little you didn't know?

Daisy: I don't even—because I remember being eight years old and thinking I was so much older than I was. And then I remember going to Hearts to Art, and seeing those eight-year-old kids, and being like, "That was me. I was them," and realizing how small I was. And, oh my god, I never looked at it outside from myself. And I have a niece and nephew, so I remember deep anxiety until after they passed eight years old.

Dana: They got through that hurdle, now they're passed. That's a mile marker for you.

Daisy: And I remember just this wash of like, "Oh my god, they made it." (laughs) Obviously they didn't make it, but they made it.

Dana: [15:00] That's so interesting, 'cause a lot of people who are—let's say, older or my age—will say, "I'm about to turn the age my mother was when she died: 41, 52, whatever it is, and that that's their trigger. Or, "I'm about to be the age my mom was when she had me, in your twenties," so these interesting mile markers that happen. And yours was way too early, but that's your mile marker.

So when you say you felt older, what do you mean by that? You said, "When I was eight, I thought I was so much bigger. And then I look back, and I go, 'No, I was so small.'"

Daisy: That's probably because of the adultification that comes with addiction, even if it wasn't on purpose. I just thought I was older. And I didn't have my dad around, and when my mom

was there, she wasn't really there. Trauma ages you. Trauma develops you in so many ways, so much faster. So when I was a kid, and I didn't have any of my parents, I just couldn't relate to the kids at my time. Or even now I still have trouble trying to relate to teenage problems, and I'm just like, "It's hard," when I was 12 years old and was already going through the meaning of life or whatever. (laughs)

I recently went through a breakup at the beginning of 2020, in February.

Dana: Right before COVID?

Daisy: Right before COVID, yeah. (laughs)

Dana: Well, maybe that's a relief. (laughs) I don't know. You tell me.

Daisy: I don't even know. But when they broke up with me, they told me, and I quote, "Your baggage is too much for me." And I remember being like, "What? Huh?" and going into COVID, and having several months to think about that, and analyze what that meant and what my trauma meant. 'Cause I was like, "It's too much for you when you didn't go through it, when you didn't experience it?" And I was just like, "Wow."

Dana: If kids are saying mean things to you when you're young, or you're always feeling kind of separate from children your age because you grew up so fast, how did you deal with the bullying then, or even now? Who did you turn to? Who did you go to to say, "They're calling my mom these horrible things"?

Daisy: I didn't go to anyone, which is the horrible truth of it. But I didn't tell anybody, 'cause I was just like, "It's not their problem."

Dana: Your siblings?

Daisy: As I grow older, and remember this repressed bullying trauma of what people said to me, and make jokes about it—and they're looking at me like, "That happened?" And I'm like, "Oh yeah, it did. I'm sorry." It's just that when I was a kid, I thought that it was my problem in itself to go through. I thought this was what every kid was going through. So I was just like, "Be strong."

Dana: Even though you knew no one was—you felt alone, and nobody was really going through exactly what you were going through. But you thought, "Children go through trauma alone."

Daisy: 'Cause it was normalized. I thought that was what you were supposed to do. And I remember hearing that you're supposed to get help, when I was 13, after the fact, after I was over that initial trauma. I was like, "What?" (laughs) "Actually? Really?" And I just laughed at it, 'cause I was like, "That's so silly." I look back on it now, and I'm like, "No, you were silly. And now you hurt. And you really self-sabotaged yourself when you were nine years old." (laughs) But what was I supposed to do? 'Cause I didn't have a mom, and my brain was just—the way I think about it is, when you're a kid and you say, when you're in distress, [20:00] you say, "Mommy. I want my mommy." But I didn't have a mommy, so I was just like, "Okay, I'm going

to do it, 'cause Mommy's not here. And Mommy told me that whenever you're in distress, you just stay put, and you just take it on, and be strong, and keep going until you see your mom." But I was a kid. I didn't fully grasp the aspect that my mom wasn't coming back. I still looked for her everywhere.

Dana: Where did you look for her?

Daisy: I looked for her in—well, I was a kid, so I wasn't allowed to go to the burial. So I didn't see her in the ground.

Dana: Did your other siblings go?

Daisy: Yeah, because they were all older.

Dana: They were older, over 10.

Daisy: In retrospect, I'm glad that I didn't see that. But I didn't grasp the fact that she was fully dead until I first visited the cemetery and saw her grave. And I was like, "Oh." It was a lot of "ohs." (laughs) So I looked for her after school, when she would pick me up. Or I would go to her room and be like, "Good morning," expecting her to come out. And every time she didn't, I just would be like, "Oh, she just didn't come home last night," until I realized, "Oh, she's not coming home."

Dana: Do you have photos of her?

Daisy: I do. I have one in front of me that I'm looking at. (laughs)

Dana: Oh good, mine is here as well.

Daisy: We're sharing.

Dana: Let's show our moms to each other.

Daisy: Yeah! This is my mom. That's baby me. (laughs)

Dana: Oh, oh my god! Your mom's beautiful.

Daisy: Thank you, so is yours.

Dana: This is college.

Daisy: Oh, I love moms.

Dana: Moms, right? But sometimes when I see photos of my mom, it's such a great relief. It feels so good. It feels so comforting. It's so warm. And you feel like you're hanging out with her. And then sometimes I take pictures out that I haven't seen ever or in a long time, and it feels like someone is slapping me across the face. It's such a visceral betrayal when you realize you aren't hanging out with her, and that you're just putting her back into a box. It's just a photo. But it's still so comforting to have them. But they take my breath

away sometimes. I don't know how you feel when you look back at photos of her. I don't know how many you have—I shouldn't assume. My mom loved scrapbooking.

Daisy: My mom definitely liked to take photos, (laughs) but not of herself. So there aren't many, but we do have some. And it changes every day. I feel like sometimes I look at them, and I'm like, "Wow, so beautiful. Look at my mom." And then sometimes I look at them, and I'm like, "What the heck, universe? I was eight years old. Give her back." (laughs) It changes.

Dana: Do you get angry when you look at her?

Daisy: No, I don't think I could ever get angry. I did when I was a kid, because I was sad. I was sad. And it wasn't until three years after where I could look at her photo and not be angry or not be upset, 'cause death is so final. And as a kid, you're supposed to have everything open to you. And it just rips you away from somebody that you thought you were supposed to be with forever, especially when you're a kid, and you don't have that understanding. But now, it's just like, "That's my mom. My mom is dead." And that is sad, and it sucks, and it blows, and I will never be the same again.

But I'm okay now. 'Cause there was a period in my life where I was like, "I'll never be the same. I'll never live the same life I ever did. I don't want to live the same life." But here I am, living the life. (laughs)

Dana: And she still loved you. You don't question the love? You don't question any of that?

Daisy: Never, never. [25:00] I don't. I couldn't. The mom-and-child aspect of it, the connection between a mom and a kid is still there, despite everything.

Dana: Do you ever write to her? You were talking about saying, "Mommy," and wanting to talk to her, and I know you write. So I was curious if you ever write to her or talk to her that way.

Daisy: As a kid, I wrote endlessly. I wrote songs. I wrote poems. I wrote notes on the napkin in the lunchroom cafeteria, reaching, feeling like I was talking to the sky. And I still do sometimes. I find myself on sleepless nights—because I have a lot of those (laughs)—just talking out into air sometimes, and sometimes it'll veer the direction towards my mom. And I'm like, "Yeah, even if she can't hear me, it's just nice."

Almost like therapy. I'm just like, "Okay mom. Today I ate something, mom. Today I painted. Today I didn't do my homework." (laughs) Just talking into the air, because otherwise I think I would actually go insane.

Dana: Do you go to counseling too? Are you someone who talks to someone, or is able to?

Daisy: I go to therapy.

Dana: That's good.

Daisy: Because after Hearts to Art, it took a while.

Dana: Does your brother still live in—does he still raise you?

Daisy: Well, basically, my siblings raised me, 'cause it takes a village. So my brother and my sibling have lived here in this house for eight years. So, yeah, this is the house my mom died in.

Dana: How do you feel about—I started this podcast, and I've gotten a lot of people reaching out who are friends of mine or people I don't know very well, who are like, "This has been so amazing to listen to. And it's made me miss my mom, who's passed." Or they say, "It makes me want to connect with my mom again. And I miss her, and I'm going to call her." Or, "I sent the podcast to my mom. And I'm going to interview her I think soon, 'cause I have so many questions for her. She wants to listen to it." And I get so much joy, of course, knowing that they are experiencing that through this podcast. And then I get really resentful of like, "Must be nice." (laughs) I get really frustrated that they get to have that experience with their mom.

Daisy: Mother's Day?

Dana: How do you battle that?

Daisy: Mother's Day as a kid—I got a lot of teachers really having the audacity to be like, "You have to do this Mother's Day project." And I'm like, "My mom's dead." (laughs)

Dana: What? They would make you do it?

Daisy: Yeah!

Dana: In honor of your mom?

Daisy: Yeah. But it was like...

Dana: I'm upset. I'm angry. Daisy, I'm angry at these teachers. (laughs) Wow.

Daisy: (laughs) Sometimes it was nice. I remember once in fourth grade, I made a bouquet. And it was beautiful, and I left it at the grave. But in fifth grade, when I was angry, and my fifth-grade teacher was like, "You have to do this Mother's Day project," I was like, "I really have the time today to tell you, 'No, I'm not going to do it. Please get away from me.'"

Dana: Daisy, that's so interesting, 'cause as an adult, as you get older, there's days that Mother's Days are very comforting, and you want to hear from friends, and you want condolences. And then the next year or during COVID, all of us are like, "Don't reach out to me."

Daisy: "Don't tell me anything."

Dana: "Don't say anything to me. I don't want to deal with it today."

Daisy: "Oh my god, like, please."

Dana: Because it's so heightened. So I'm saying, that is crazy. I cannot imagine that at fourth grade or fifth grade or sixth grade, being forced to do a project. And yet some years, you really got a lot out of it.

Daisy: It changes, 'cause healing isn't linear. I do have two long-lasting friends, that every year they text me on the day my mom died, her birthday, and sometimes to check in when I visit the grave. And they're always like, "Hey, I love you. I'm checking in on you, because I want you to know that you're loved. And if you ever need motherly comfort, my mom loves you." (laughs) But sometimes I'm just looking at it, and I'm like, "I never want to talk about this again." (laughs) It just happens. It's valid. It changes.

Dana: And their intentions are beautiful. A lot of people talk about the intentions are great. "Thank you, friend," and yet...

Daisy: "Thank you. I just don't want to hear it."

Dana: "You don't need to say anything."

Daisy: "I just don't want to hear it today."

Dana: I know you're very young, so you don't have to answer this, but you seem wise beyond your years, my friend. How do you think about children now, and having your own children in your life, without a mother? [30:00] How do you think about it, as a kid? And if you don't think about it, that's fine too. You're young. But I was just curious.

Daisy: You know the internalized misogyny of being a kid, and the first thing people ask you, "Oh my god, like have you ever thought about how many kids you're going to have?" And you're like, "No." (laughs) And then my mom died, and I was like, "Aw man." At first I was like, "I'm going to be the best mother there ever was." (laughs) "I'm going to really put in the work." But now I'm 16, and I am not having kids.

Dana: (laughs) You've got your own stuff to worry about.

Daisy: I can barely think about having a plant. I can't take care of myself as it is. A child, a child? It would be the same result. I just know that for a fact. And I can't have a kid. (laughs)

Dana: Care for another human being. Is some of it fear of letting down a kid, or having to disappoint, or not be there? Is any of that?

Daisy: The funny thing is, because of my trauma with parenting, I feel like I would be a great parent. But the actual act of raising one is very different. And oh my god, I'm never having kids. (laughs) Do you have kids? Are you thinking of having kids?

Dana: No, no. And I don't—I'm 41, and I have a boyfriend of 9 years, 10 years, so we're working on the marriage part of our life, the conversation around commitment. But children is a no. Children's a no for me. Not that I always felt that way. And I had a really good childhood, and I felt like I had a great ride for a long time. But I just don't think I'm cut out for raising—just exactly what you said. I think I'd be a great parent. I

think I've got the skills to do it. I think I've got decent genes. But I'm scared to get married without my mother present. You want your mom there. You go to my mom's part of the journey, if I believe in marriage, if I really want to be married, which I grapple with that as well, with monogamy for the rest of my life. But I'm like, "How will I raise kids without her?" And I want to focus on my life and me. I'm just kind of—not selfish—but I want to live the life I want to live, and I don't know if I can bring kids into this world.

Daisy: I love this energy that we've created in the studio. (laughs)

Dana: (laughs) But it is misogynistic. That's so interesting that you said like, "Do you want to have kids?" to a young child, how you were asked that way before you were 16. Like, "How many babies do you want to have?"

Daisy: It's from the womb, really.

Dana: "What? Stop that."

Daisy: Do you know what really weards me out? There's those shirts that say like, "Ladies' man," for a three-year-old. And I'm like, "Uh?"

Dana: That's weird. Or like, "What a looker," or, "What a flirt."

Daisy: That's a child.

Dana: That's a baby.

Daisy: You know what really happened? You know when you're in school, and people are like, "You're growing up"? They call you a young lady. Every time somebody called me a young lady in school, I'd be like, "No, I'm an underaged minor." (laughs)

Dana: You would say that? (laughs) I love you. Oh my god, yes. But that's true! "I'm an underaged minor." These are the facts.

I always like to end these calls asking my guest to tell me their mom's name, and how you're feeling about her today, in this moment, right here with me. What's coming up for you?

Daisy: My mom's name is Petra Salto Zarco. She was 40 years old when she died. She had five kids, and she was a wife. And right now I miss her. And I will miss her 10 years from now. And I will miss her on my deathbed. But that's life, man. (laughs) It's like how I will never be comfortable comfortable. But right now, this normal: I'm okay, I'm here. She's here.

Dana: [start outro] We didn't keep it in this episode, but at the end of this conversation, Daisy told me that I have a good aura. And well, I felt really cool. I'm old—I got to take what I can get. Daisy, you are so special, and I am so grateful to have met you through Sarah. And I hope that someday soon [35:00] I get to meet you in real time. Wouldn't that be fun, in the world, out in the world? Maybe we could hug? Aw, that'd be awesome.

If you wanted to see some pictures of Daisy, and read some of her writings, and learn more about Hearts to Art, the organization we talk about in this episode, you can go to our website, which is mothersgravepod.com. Or come follow us at Instagram. We are @mothersgravepodcast. And you can find all the information you need about the amazing team who works on this podcast in our show notes. They are the best.

If you don't think that word-of-mouth helps a small podcast, then let me tell you: I have got the story for you. I had a really good friend reach out to me and tell me that she was talking to her therapist in a state far away from my state, and she mentioned this podcast to her therapist. And her therapist said, "Yeah, I've heard of that show." What? Is that fame? Is that what fame is? I have no idea. It probably isn't, but it's supercool. And yay for therapy, and yay for spreading the good word. So do all the things you're supposed to do for podcasts: rate, subscribe, review, tell your friends, tell your mailman, and keep spreading that good word. You guys are awesome.

I was recently reminded of the phrase, "There's no good time to lose your mother." It's such a cliché. It sounds like it should be on a Canva slide in an Instagram story about grief. It probably is on a Instagram story about grief as we speak. But it's so true. There's no good time to lose your mother. I remember when I logged into this call with Daisy last year. I didn't know much about her. I didn't know much about her story. I didn't know much about her mom. And I was nervous, not just because I didn't know her, but I was nervous that I would pity her, or feel a sense of guilt that I had my longer than she did, that I had it good, that how in the world will we be able to really connect or relate to one another. She's 16. I'm 41—I hesitated there, 'cause I actually forgot how old I was. See, it happens. And just because we're vastly different people with different experiences, different lives, different ages—we both lost our mom.

I also remember the moment so viscerally when I learned about her mom's addiction. I had only really been alluded to that. I didn't really know much. And when she started talking about hiding drinks and the lashing out and the feeling of, "Where did Mommy go?" well, I immediately felt seen and understood and that I could connect to someone in a way that I hadn't been able to connect to other people in my life. I, in that moment, was looking at a peer, was looking at someone who got it, who understood. Obviously I'm not a child, and losing your mom in childhood is a vastly different experience than losing your mom in your thirties or your forties or your fifties or your sixties. Being ripped away from you in the early stages of your life is so unfair.

And yet, Daisy never questions whether or not her mother loved her. She didn't even hesitate when I asked that question. She said, "Never, never. I couldn't. I could never question that. The bond between a mother and a child is special." There's never a good time to lose your mother, but there's always time to remember that she loved you. And it doesn't have to happen only on Mother's Day.

I'll talk to you guys next time. [end 39:21]