

I Wish I Was An Only Child – Athena and Seth Kugblenu

[Guitar and Recorder music]

CATHY MASON: Okay, so think. Um, uh, punch bag... balloon... hot air balloon... bangle... dangle, um, grape! Uh... think!

RACHEL MASON: [laughs] Well shit, I'm not terrible! You're terrible! That's obvious!

CATHY: No it's not! Um, holding a fig.

RACHEL: [laughs] Okay.

CATHY: This is the... fishing!

RACHEL: No!

[Recorder music]

[Bird sounds]

[Cathy laughs]

RACHEL: Okay, go on.

CATHY: Welcome to 'I Wish I Was An Only Child', where we, Rachel –

RACHEL: That's me.

CATHY: And me, Cathy Mason, speak to other siblings about the dynamic of their relationship so we can see where we're going wrong.

RACHEL: In this episode, we speak to writer and comedian Athena Kugblenu and her twin brother Seth.

CATHY: Athena writes for Horrible Histories, the Russell Howard hour, and is a lead writer for the sketch show Sketchnation.

RACHEL: And her brother Seth lives in Australia.

CATHY: I found them confusingly harmonious.

RACHEL: And I thought it sounded like quite a nice life.

[Recorder sounds]

CATHY: Who's the funniest?

SETH KUGBLENU: [laughs] Well, she's professional!

ATHENA KUGBLENU: I'm the – I mean I'm the – I feel like I'm an asshole saying it, but I'm –

SETH: I *think* I'm the funniest.

ATHENA: [laughs] There are people in this world – and my partner's like this too – I think there are people in this world who just sort of aren't funny. And I think my brother's one of them, and my partner's one too.

SETH: Yeah.

ATHENA: Like you just – it's not like they don't try.

SETH: I'm not funny.

CATHY: So you think Seth isn't funny?

ATHENA: [laughs] He's not funny.

SETH: I'm not funny.

CATHY: Seth, I'd be furious if Rach said that!

SETH: No, I know I'm not funny. Maybe I'm a funny person, but I'm not like your comedian funny.

RACHEL: Right, so you mean people laughing at you rather than –

CATHY: Rach!

SETH: Yeah, probably.

RACHEL: No, that's – I don't understand! I don't understand.

ATHENA: To commentate, I think what it is is Seth's very technical.

SETH: Yeah.

ATHENA: And I'm very creative. I think when you have a very literal brain... humour relies on like a real flexibility with the way you see things and thinking outside the box. Whereas Seth is the more literal person and I'm less so. So when we say someone's not funny, it's like funny isn't a given. Like I'm not particularly

good with numbers, you know, like it's just – for me it's a neutral personality trait. And obviously like I've been performing comedy for like 8 or 9 years. So not only did I start off funny, I've been engineering the funny in my brain. Do you know what I'm saying?

RACHEL: Yeah yeah yeah.

ATHENA: So I'm sure had Seth took a stand-up course like I'd done and then hit the circuit, they'd probably be funny within that. But I think it's to do with the literal way of thinking more than like, you know, an insult.

CATHY: But I find that interesting because I don't think anyone doesn't think they're funny. I think if you talk to most anyone – I've never said to anybody, 'do you think you're funny?'... Everyone thinks they're funny except Seth. I've never heard anyone say that. Really! Genuinely!

[Athena laughs]

SETH: Really? Ah, I don't think – yeah, I don't think I'm funny at all.

CATHY: That's amazing!

RACHEL: Right, so... Athena, you're more creative, you're saying, and Seth's more... what do you do, Seth?

SETH: I'm a business analyst.

RACHEL: Ah, okay.

CATHY: Of course.

SETH: IT. In IT.

CATHY: Of course, so you're the introvert.

SETH: No, I'm not!

ATHENA: No no no, I'm the introvert.

SETH: I'm quite extroverted.

ATHENA: I'm the introvert, yeah yeah yeah.

SETH: Yeah.

CATHY: Really? So how does that work?

SETH: Um, yeah, I like... I'm very social. I like to be entertaining but not in a funny way, essentially. Maybe I am – maybe I'm quite amusing. But not in a typical way that you would say I make jokes or I make people laugh.

CATHY: Right.

SETH: But people laugh about my mannerisms and things I do. And sometimes my reaction to things are quite... I have quite extreme reactions sometimes and people find that hilarious.

RACHEL: Like what, for example?

CATHY: Do you just explode?

SETH: My voice goes up really high. [laughs]

CATHY: Well I hope that happens in the podcast.

SETH: Ever since I've been younger, people just... when I say things, it kind of sticks. So even now, from 15 years ago, people will say something that I've said in an extreme voice, because my reaction was so extreme at that time that they find it hilarious.

CATHY: Oh, I really hope that happens.

RACHEL: Athena, can you give us an example of that?

ATHENA: Oh, it's weird. Because I lived with him for a long time, I couldn't give you one example of him being extreme because it was just a daily occurrence.

CATHY: That's amazing!

ATHENA: So it was just... I would say that, I mean, Seth probably won't appreciate me saying this, but I would say in terms of... you know when you're not allowed to get what you want from your parents? I would say Seth would probably react a bit more than I would. I just remember one time – he won't remember this – we had this computer. And we're old, so back in the day having a computer was a big deal.

CATHY: Was it a ZX Spectrum?

ATHENA: No, it was like a – I can't even remember the brand, but it was like a desktop PC. We loved it.

SETH: The Amstrad?

ATHENA: No, it was a tiny, tiny thing.

SETH: Oh, the tiny...

ATHENA: Yeah. And we loved it because... we just worshipped it. We both really liked computers when we were younger. And before the internet, you had to build your own network. So you literally had to take a computer to someone else's house and connect it. That's how it worked. It was called a LAN connection or whatever.

RACHEL: Ahh.

ATHENA: And so there was one evening when Seth wanted to take this computer to somebody's house to connect it. Now you have to understand that this represented like 5 years of my mum's savings, right? We didn't notice at the time. You don't think like that when you're a kid. And the idea of it being taken out of the house was mortifying to my mum. So she was like, 'you can't take the computer out of the house.' And Seth's reaction... I just remember staring at him go, 'bloody...' This is humiliating for you. Stamping his feet and just going, [screams] just like that. And I just remember thinking, it's just... you want to play Duke Nukem, like it's not a big deal. Like, you're just going to play Doom.

SETH: I think it was Command and Conquer.

ATHENA: Yeah, you just want to play a silly little game in someone's house. And the whole point of going to someone's house is that you don't have to use the phone line. So little things like that I remember. Because I always remember sort of being very accepting... not all the time, but I was very accepting of discipline. I wasn't that social of a kid. I was like easy come easy

go when it came to hanging out with my friends. So I was like, 'oh, we can't go? Great! I want to stay home, read a book, and eat biscuits.' It was like, 'please let me stay home!' So yeah, that would be one example.

RACHEL: Seth, do you agree with that?

SETH: Yeah, yeah. I sort of like – like when I wasn't allowed out of the house to socialise, I'd like be in a strop. I was always very kind of active and going out. And I still am to a certain extent.

CATHY: So you were the rebellious one? You were totally the rebellious one?

SETH: Yeah, but um... I wasn't too rebellious.

RACHEL: In a square way?

[All laugh]

RACHEL: So to give us... sort of set the scene, where did you grow up?

SETH: Uh, North London. Suburbia.

RACHEL: Okay, so you grew up in North London. How would you describe each other in a nutshell? So Seth, how would you describe Athena?

SETH: In what way? Personality wise?

RACHEL: Yeah.

SETH: To me she's very reserved. And not secretive, but she keeps herself to herself. I think we both have a bit of that as well. I think she's very observant. She kind of doesn't... she doesn't talk... and I talk a lot. I talk a lot of nonsense. She doesn't talk that much. And when she does talk, you listen because it's like she's talking sense, essentially.

CATHY: It's profound. She speaks profound.

ATHENA: I'm like Obama. [laughs]

CATHY: Exactly.

SETH: I don't think I've ever recalled you being... like you're always very calm. Always. And kind of content with everything. Whereas I —

RACHEL: It's that because Seth, yeah you took all the rage and the, uh, tantrums.

SETH: Yeah, pretty much. And I was always kind of yelling and just being just generally annoying. So maybe that's how we grew up. But yeah, she's always really calm and peaceful and just really content with everything. And she's obviously very... loves to read, loves to keep herself to herself. Whereas I'm a bit more... just a bit more extroverted.

RACHEL: But strangely, Athena, you've ended up as the performer.

CATHY: That's quite common though, isn't it? Yeah.

ATHENA: But I'm like... I'm angry all the time. Do you know what I mean?

CATHY: [laughs] High five!

RACHEL: But you're quietly angry?

ATHENA: I'm furious. Yeah, I'm furious. And that is exactly... most of my comedy and my creative work comes from my fury, you know? I'm furious. I'm furious with, um, sorry, but white people. You get on my nerves! [laughs] Do you know what I mean?

RACHEL AND CATHY: Yeah.

ATHENA: You wake up in the morning and you just think how... why is the world like this? I'm furious with men. Why are they like that? [laughs] Why are you like this? I'm furious with the government. So... but I think what it is is I've become quite articulate quite young. Being articulate is so important. It's such a life skill for young people especially. Because if you're angry, and not all the time, but it's an emotion and you don't necessarily have the words for how you're feeling. Whereas I always had the words. 'I'm happy with this decision, but I understand the context in which it is...' do you know what I mean? So I was always able to really process my emotions very clearly. So lots of things, I mean so many things... I wake up angry every day. I'm so... it's probably why I've got grey hair. My brother doesn't have as much grey hair as I do because he probably lets out his rage in a very healthy way. Whereas because I process a lot, and it's all in my head, it comes out through... you know, I look like Billy Ocean if I let down my hair. It's just ridiculous.

CATHY: But the comedy's allowing you to have an outlet?

ATHENA: Oh yeah, absolutely. Absolutely, yeah. But I'm furious all the time at things I have no power to change, which makes me even more angry. But that's life, that's how it is.

CATHY: But that's not how Seth described you. So that's quite interesting that Seth described you as –

SETH: Yeah.

ATHENA: Yeah, and I'm pleased. Because I wouldn't want someone to know me as... I wouldn't want people to genuinely know how angry I am on a day to day basis. [laughs] I wouldn't have any friends, do you know what I mean? People would just be staying out my way. I'd be the drunk girl on the bus that barks at people, right?

RACHEL: So Athena, how would you describe Seth?

ATHENA: God, he used all the words already. So I'd say like quite extroverted, very social, very loyal to his friends. He's a very loyal person. He has... like he's very big on sort of commitment. So he lives in Australia but he comes back to the UK, you know, all the time. He's very good at like staying in touch with his friends and things. Whereas with me, I can be quite... I'm always saying sorry to people. Like, 'oh, it's been 30 years!' or whatever. So that's part of my introversion and his extroversion playing out. But those are the big things, like loyal, sort of quite committed, and extroverted and social.

[Recorder sounds]

CATHY: Well you had a baby on the same day. You both had babies on the same day. That's right, isn't it?

SETH: Oh yeah, yeah.

ATHENA: Yeah.

SETH: So we haven't done anything together for ages and ages, and then all of a sudden we both... then our mum was always asking us when we're going to have – when she's going to have grandchildren. And then she got –

ATHENA: No no. Can I just stop you there? That's – you're not getting across the desperation. She wasn't like, 'oh, when am I going to have grandchildren?' It was like, 'where are they? What's happening? Where are the grandchildren?' It was insane. It was one of the few things me and my mum have argued about. Genuinely, it was incessant. I would have friends come to her house and like... because my mum had a nice house and I used to house share. I would have gatherings at my mum's house and she would ask all of them where their grandchildren were. It was just – [laughs]

CATHY: No!

ATHENA: It was insane!

SETH: Yeah.

ATHENA: And the reason it would make me insane is like you can't just go to Argos and pick up a grandchild. Do you know what I mean? So I'm out here in London like trying my best and these trash men are fucking me around. And my mum's going, 'where's

the grandchildren?’ And I’m like, ‘ask this dude, okay? Don’t ask me! I’m ripe for the picking!’ You know? So just to intervene there, it wasn’t a normal, ‘oh, I’d love grandchildren!’ It was just literally... it was like when you don’t pay the council tax and you get those summons.

SETH: It was.

ATHENA: It was like getting summons for grandchildren.

SETH: Exactly that. It was incessant.

CATHY: For both of you?

RACHEL: You both felt the pressure?

CATHY: It wasn’t just you, Athena? It was both of you?

ATHENA: Absolutely both of us.

SETH: Yeah, for both of us. Both of us. Like it was a constant, constant barrage of this, ‘when are you having kids? When are you having kids? When am I having grandchildren? When am I having grandchildren?’ It was a topic of conversation. I lived in Australia, and every time I phoned back it was the same conversation.

CATHY: Is that why you moved to Australia?

[All laugh]

SETH: No!

ATHENA: Could you imagine?

CATHY: I mean seriously!

RACHEL: So your mum must've been through the roof when you both had children on the same day!

SETH: Yeah, she still is now.

ATHENA: Yeah.

RACHEL: She must've been beside herself.

ATHENA: She was in hospital with me and a friend... I mean, I had a very interesting birth. I wish I'd been in Australia to be honest. But I'm told Seth had his first and I had mine like second. And I'm told when mine was pulled out, she cleared air. Like there was about two foot... she's an old woman, do you know what I mean? She just jumped. And it was just, you know, she definitely would've got... in her age category, there was probably some kind of record broken, you know? It was... I'm told there was a big leap. So she was very happy, yeah.

CATHY: So did she visit you, Seth? Or was your child completely ignored?

SETH: No.

CATHY: No?

[All laugh]

SETH: No, she hasn't visited. No, it's a long way.

RACHEL: How old is your child? How old –

CATHY: Well, how old are the kids?

SETH: Um, nearly two.

ATHENA: Yeah, they're two.

RACHEL: Okay.

CATHY: Ah, that's tough.

SETH: We've come back to England, so she's met her. So that's –

CATHY: Was she hysterical when she met her?

SETH: The first... actually, the first time, I had to stay back in Australia. So the first time my partner brought her over. And obviously she brought her back to the house and my mum was loving it. She loved the fact of having the two – the twin cousins, as we call them – just hanging around together. And it was the cutest thing ever. All the photos are amazing. But yeah, she's not come out to Australia. My brother has a few times, so that's good.

CATHY: So what other siblings do you have?

SETH: An older brother.

CATHY: Okay, okay.

RACHEL: What's the age difference?

SETH: 12 years, is it?

ATHENA: Yeah, well 12 or 13 depending on the time of year.

SETH: 12 or 13 years.

RACHEL: Are you – are you close to him?

SETH: Yeah, pretty close.

ATHENA: Yeah.

SETH: Yeah.

ATHENA: It's funny actually, I'm probably less close to him now I'm older than when I was younger. But that's also to do with like proximity. So he lives like just outside of London now, um, and I think when you have that much of an age gap between siblings, the older sibling has a bit of care and responsibility. He would discipline us, he would give us homework and you know, things like that. And that was... that dynamic is quite natural. I don't think it's unusual. And when you're a parent, you give responsibilities to your kids because it's outsourcing, isn't it? [laughs] It's outsourcing. But he was happy for that as well. I don't know if you'd agree with this, but I think one of the reasons... so he doesn't have kids now. And I feel like whatever desire he would've had to kind of raise children, I think that was fulfilled with us. So he's just like... I would say that was a big part of him not having children now. He's been through it.

CATHY: Oh, interesting.

SETH: Yeah, I think that too.

ATHENA: He's changed nappies, he's had... and twins as well! I've got one toddler now, I can only imagine the joy of having two.

RACHEL and CATHY: Yeah.

ATHENA: They're just amazing.

RACHEL: That was a question: having been a twin, would you want to have twins?

ATHENA: Yes, I think. I mean I wouldn't engineer it. [laughs] I wouldn't –

RACHEL: No no, but you know, having been in that position, Seth, you went [huffs].

SETH: I don't know. Like with one it's hard enough. Two at the same time?

RACHEL: We've both got one and I can't imagine having more than one. Yeah, and twins.

CATHY: Couldn't do it.

SETH: I don't know how my mum coped with us, you know, having twins. It's amazing, I think it's incredible to have that. So with one I find it so hard. Especially now with lockdown, etc. and having to work and all these things. I have more and more respect for people who have twins or triplets, etc. that they... the amount of resource and time it takes and just energy is incredible.

RACHEL: Yeah, yeah. You really... when you have a child, you really respect... you realise what your parents have done.

CATHY: I think I look back because we were brought up by a single mum. And she had no money and she was a single mum. And it was... I look back and I think... and two, I was quite a troubled kid. And bringing us up, I just don't know how she did it. I don't know how she did it.

ATHENA: You know what's weird? So ours are two years old now. And I look back to their first year of life, and I don't know how I did it! I can't remember. [laughs]

CATHY: I know!

ATHENA: So I think actually how you do it is you take each day as it comes.

CATHY: How do you feel about both of your kids? Do you wish that – because I really want our kids to be really close. And Rachel's moving out of London and I'm furious. So how do you feel about your two kids not, you know, spending every weekend together?

ATHENA: Oh, sad. Sad, yeah. Especially because they're twins as well. So my daughter's middle name, in the Ghanaian language, means female twin.

CATHY: Aww.

ATHENA: So... but hopefully, I mean we show her pictures of Seth's daughter all the time. And, you know, we always go through the pictures and watch videos. And she knows who she is.

There are pictures in my mum's house and whenever she goes to my mum's house, she points to the pictures. So she... I think... it's so hard when they're little. You don't know what they remember or not. But she gives me all the signs that she knows what we're doing. And I think, you know, it's a real shame that we had this interruption. But in the future it's something that I'd like to address, actually. Because we never really had cousins growing up. Our family lives abroad, like our extended family. So –

RACHEL: So was it quite intense because it was just the two of you and your brother? I can't work out, because you... yeah, in terms of how close you were then and how close you are now.

ATHENA: I wouldn't say it was intense at all. Like I didn't feel like, 'ah, I wish I could go to my cousin's house.' I never felt that way at all. And also we were always aware that we had massive families in north... big family in North America and a big family in Ghana. So because we were always aware of them... and we did go... we went on holidays and saw them. And they would come here. So I never felt it was a pressure cooker or anything like that. I never had that feeling. I don't know about Seth, but I never felt that.

SETH: No, I didn't. I always remember it being quite relaxed in our house. As in quite... you know, we just hung around. Hung around with my brother quite a lot and just chilled out. It was quite, yeah, a relaxing environment. It was never a kind of pressure... I never had... even though it was a shame that we didn't interact with our cousins or see the cousins as often, I never felt the need to. Because I always had my family with me, so it was fine.

CATHY: Did you not fight then, as kids? Was it –

ATHENA: I'm sure we fought.

SETH: Yeah, we fought.

ATHENA: Yeah, I'm sure we fought. Yeah. Standard.

SETH: I think a lot of the times we fought, I would be being ridiculous. And Athena just knew how to shut me up.

CATHY: How would she shut you up?

SETH: Just be smarter than me.

[Athena laughs]

SETH: Even now. Even now. Basically, she knows... usually if I'm annoyed about something, she can just know how to either calm me down or just shut me up. And actually, you know, in a sense you're already realising that I'm being stupid about it. Because like I said, sometimes I'd get hyperactive and get annoyed about certain things for no apparent reason whatsoever.

ATHENA: Yeah, that's funny.

SETH: She knows how to just kind of like shut me up and say, 'you're in idiot,' basically.

ATHENA: Yeah, I don't know what to say to that. I mean I guess there's some truth in that. But I don't... I remember arguing, um, over silly things. But we were never the kind of family to be like, 'I want the remote control!' 'No, I want the remote control!' Like we just never... and that might've been because I'm the kind of person where if Seth's had something that I wanted, I'd just let

him have it. Do you know what I mean? I wasn't like a confrontational person. So –

RACHEL: I think that's quite unusual though.

CATHY: Yeah, I do.

RACHEL: Between siblings. Because it seems like everyone we speak to... you know, you've got your territory, you're arguing about things, you want what the other person's got. I think that's quite unusual.

ATHENA: I'll put it down to good parenting, I guess. Do you know what I mean? We grew up in a home that wasn't like... we didn't have a massive disposable income, do you know what I'm saying? It wasn't like, you know, all our friends have really nice clothes and really nice trainers and go on holiday every summer and blah blah blah. We'd go to like Greenwich, do you know what I mean? We were lucky to grow up in a nice home that my parents had bought in the 70s. It was actually quite a large home. Because it was bought when you could do that kind of thing. So I think when you had... space is a massive psychological benefit for children. We had space. We had a front garden, a back garden. We had our own bedrooms. Like I said, we had everything we needed to indulge ourselves. We had technology. We had a TV from the DER.

SETH: From the DER!

ATHENA: Do you know what I mean? We had a VHS and we'd watch movies. Yeah, so... we never owned a TV, we had to pay rent for our TV. But that means we always had the best TV.

CATHY: We did that!

RACHEL: We did that, yeah.

CATHY: We did exactly that.

ATHENA: Yeah, so little things like that meant that, okay, if someone's in one corner of the house doing something that I wanted, I could go to the other corner of the house.

CATHY: Yeah.

ATHENA: And our mum kept us really occupied. We used to bake, you know, so that used to keep us occupied. And my mum taught me to cook. My mum gave me quite a lot of responsibilities, perhaps more so than she gave my brothers. So I was preoccupied with, you know, cooking or cleaning.

CATHY: Was that okay or did it make you angry?

ATHENA: It didn't make me feel anything. I was always quite neutral to it.

CATHY: Okay.

ATHENA: I'll tell you something. Again, I said the word life skill earlier, like it has made me... it sounds a bit corny, but I can run a household now. And I've been able to run a household since I left home.

CATHY: Yeah.

ATHENA: That's something that's been denied – not necessarily denied to my brothers, but that's... why would you not give this to

your kids because they're boys? That's bizarre. And I'm really glad that my daughter will inherit the kind of things that I inherited from my mum, in terms of like food and culture and cuisine. At the time I wasn't thinking that. I wasn't thinking, 'oh, I'm really happy to be making these rotis! So I can make them for my kid!' But I don't know. I guess I wasn't a very argumentative kid so I never really objected to it. And I was intrigued as well. And I liked cooking.

CATHY: Of course. Yeah yeah yeah.

[Recorder sounds]

CATHY: So do you like each other's partners?

ATHENA: Yes.

SETH: Yes. Well have –

ATHENA: Have you met (Athena's partner)?

SETH: Yeah I have, but I've got to say we haven't spent much time together.

ATHENA: How – when did you meet him? I can't remember.

SETH: In November last year. November?

ATHENA: I can't remember.

SETH: Remember I came to your house? Remember I came to your house?

ATHENA: Oh of course! How could I forget this?

SETH: I was disgraced.

ATHENA: Oh my god! You were –

RACHEL: What happened? Why were you disgraced?

ATHENA: You tell the story. I want to hear your perspective on it.

SETH: [laughs] Alright, so obviously this is the first – I've lived in Australia, so I'm back in England for the first time with my daughter. And we're going to Athena's new house, meeting her partner for the first time. And, you know, the daughters are going to be playing together, and as a family we'll be going to lunch and dinner. And uh, the night before, I had a catch-up with all my old school and uni friends in London. So the next morning, I woke up and I had the worst hangover on record. Like it was bad. And I felt 10 times worse because like, 'oh no, I've got to go to Athena's house and she's going to cook dinner, we're going to have food, I'm meeting her partner for the first time. Like I'm a disgrace! I'm a disgrace.' And then we get a taxi over and I have to open the window because I can't – I can't stop myself from feeling sick while the taxi's leaving.

CATHY: Oh no, you did *not* throw up in the car!

SETH: No I didn't. But as soon as I got into the house, I said to Athena, 'where's your bathroom?'

RACHEL: Oh no!

SETH: And I walked straight into the bathroom and just threw up everywhere in the bathroom. And I come out and just lie on the couch. And the worst thing is my mum thought I was ill. My mum thought I was sick in some way and she was telling my sister to look after me. And then my sister's like, 'he's got a hangover! It's his own fault!' And I just felt really awful. And obviously I'm meeting your partner for the first time and I'm just a disgrace. And I've got my daughter there. It was bad. It was really bad.

ATHENA: I'd genuinely forgotten it. I'd forgotten this whole story. Because I move on from things quite quickly. Just to give you an example of that, I've just forgotten.

SETH: And even now, my partner reminds me of that. Reminds me of how bad I was. And I was like... I didn't mean to, it just happened! It was really awful.

ATHENA: But this is a really good example of this thing. Like our mum has always been far too soft on you and our older brother. Far too soft.

SETH: Yeah.

ATHENA: And you know, just like zero sympathy for that individual on that couch. Like zero. Like you know you're coming here today. How easy is it to meet your friends at our big age and not get shitfaced? It's so easy! It's, you know, we're not 12. It's the easiest thing in the world. I'm just remembering now, I was more annoyed at my mum for being, 'aw, are you okay? Oh, Athena!'

CATHY: Yeah.

SETH: Yeah.

ATHENA: And my mum has always made me feel like I'm quite a hostile, aggressive person for being quite honest. Like, 'you've got to be more sympathetic, duh duh duh!' But I'm very much like, 'you reap what you sow'. Like I think that's such a –

SETH: Yeah. And the thing is I 100% agree with you. 100%. As in it was totally my fault. And I was like, you know, it was my fault I was in that state and I was a disgrace. Whereas my mum kept on like pandering over me. And I was too hungover to say anything as well, so I couldn't say anything.

RACHEL: Did you two have a row?

SETH: No.

ATHENA: Oh, no no no. Not at all, no.

RACHEL: You were more annoyed, Athena, at your mum.

SETH: I think Athena knew that I knew that I was obviously in the wrong, totally. In that I think she know that I wasn't thinking in any way, shape, or form that I didn't... I hadn't been just totally ridiculous. Because I had been totally ridiculous. But yeah, my mum refused to kind of just actually condemn me for it. Instead she was trying to get everyone to pander over me. [laughs] Yeah, I recognise it because it's happened as we were growing up, our whole lives. Even when I was very young, or we were very young. There wasn't much I could do wrong, even though I was the rebellious one.

CATHY: Really?

SETH: Yeah, it's true. There wasn't much I could do wrong. I was treated in that way. Maybe because I was the youngest twin. I get reminded that I had jaundice as a kid, even now. [laughs]

ATHENA: But when he was like 6 months old, do you know what I mean? It's like bloody hell! It was like, 'get over it!' But I think –

SETH: Athena and my brother would always go, 'it doesn't matter! He's got nothing to do with it now!' And I'm just like, 'okay, whatever.'

RACHEL: But that seems to have set the pace.

SETH: Yeah.

ATHENA: Seth was a more – slightly more sickly child than I was. So he needed glasses, I didn't. He always needed fillings, I didn't. You know? Little things like that.

CATHY: Yeah.

ATHENA: So when I say sickly, I don't mean he was poorly. But I just mean my mum would say, 'oh, we don't worry about Athena, she's fine.' But Seth, 'oh dear!' And it's all bullshit. It's all crap.

CATHY: But do you feel angry about that, Athena?

ATHENA: No, not at all!

CATHY: No, because it's made you a stronger person.

ATHENA: Yeah, I guess. Yeah, I guess so. I feel like if you had to choose how you wanted to be treated – do you want oven gloves

or do you just want to be given encouragement and have independence nurtured – I would choose the independence, the nurtured independence, over the oven gloves all the time.

SETH: Hm.

ATHENA: I was going to say, our mum has Indian heritage. And it's a very patriarchal society she comes from. Like her, you know, her eldest sisters were never taught to read. They were illiterate. They were expected to child rear and do that kind of thing. I think that plays into it too: like boys need to be looked after, you know, they're special. I mean if you talk about it, it's contextual. Indian society massively oppresses women. Like if you have a female fetus, you abort it in India. It's not uncommon, right? So there's a legacy of that in Guyanese society. Absolutely, there's definitely an element of, 'Athena, get in the kitchen. Boys, go and play videogames.' Because I had a lot of cultural respect for where my mum comes from, that probably makes me less angry and more understanding of it. Even if it is ridiculous. Our brother is 50, and the way my mum talks about this 50 year old actually sometimes makes me vomit. Like it's just vile. [laughs] He's 50 years old, he's half a century old, you know.

CATHY: Yeah, yeah.

ATHENA: You get 50 runs at cricket, that's a good bloody inning. Do you know what I mean? 50! It's just wild that she still can't get out of this. And he's the first born.

CATHY: Yeah.

ATHENA: So, you know, I don't think she will ever really get out of this mothering, maternal, kind of pandering, patronising. But I

don't – the other thing with me is she doesn't do it with me because I don't welcome it. I'm going to see her on Saturday. She's like, 'do you want me to cook?' And it's like, no! I'm just coming to see you! And I want to see you on a Sunday too, I don't want you to cook two days in a row. Like what are you, a Harvester? So I don't – I think I spent so long resisting it, she's kind of sort of given up on trying to be very... that way inclined with me as well. Which I feel bad about, because that's where she gets purpose, from that, and I'm kind of denying her this thing that makes her really happy. But it's like, I don't want this woman with her arthritis and her bad shoulder in the kitchen for two hours.

[Recorder noises]

RACHEL: So how close are you?

ATHENA: Oh that's interesting. It's weird. I would say we're close but probably not by other people's definition of close. We don't talk every day, for example. We don't really video call often and stuff. But it's not – it's a closeness that we're familiar with. Does that make sense?

SETH: Yeah.

CATHY: But if you have a problem, do you phone the other one?

SETH: No, I don't think... we wouldn't, I don't think. We've become closer since we both had daughters.

ATHENA: Yeah.

CATHY: Oh, that's interesting.

SETH: Like I actually look to Athena to guide me on a lot of things. Like I try to get her advice on things and things like that. But in general, if I had a problem, etc., no. I wouldn't really phone Athena at all.

RACHEL: So how often do you speak?

SETH: Oh, messaging. We message quite a bit. But like speaking-wise, maybe once a month we'll try and do a video call. I'll try and video call so the two cousins can see each other.

ATHENA: Yeah.

SETH: But the time difference is really hard from Australia.

RACHEL: Yeah.

ATHENA: And also, something we haven't really raised is that Seth went to university and never really came back home. He just lived away and then I stayed at home. So this distance isn't like, 'oh my God, how will I live without him?'

CATHY: Right.

ATHENA: I haven't lived with Seth for, you know, nearly 20 years now.

CATHY: But when he went to university, how did you feel?

ATHENA: Fine.

CATHY: Oh okay.

ATHENA: [laughs] No, it wasn't –

RACHEL: I think they're normal. I think this is what siblings do.

CATHY: I think you're right, sorry. We have a very intense relationship.

RACHEL: Yeah, and I think we're learning a lot about it.

ATHENA: Let's talk about your relationship, guys! This isn't just –

CATHY: No, it's a disaster!

RACHEL: Go for it! Go for it!

CATHY: Don't even go there.

RACHEL: No it is! We didn't get on as kids.

CATHY: Hated each other.

RACHEL: So I'm fascinated to hear what is a very balanced and normal brother/ sister.

ATHENA: Yeah.

CATHY: And lots of people are like that. I think we started doing this podcast because people always ask what it's like to work together. And I thought we would get interviews and you guys would be shouting and screaming saying, 'I've never forgiven you!' And you're not! And we're asking these questions and

people are just going, 'yeah, yeah, it's cool, it's cool.' And I'm like, 'what?'

RACHEL: And of course there's like, as we said, big age gaps between some siblings. But fundamentally it's much calmer.

CATHY: Calmer, yeah.

RACHEL: And I'm going to point the finger. But you know, she's the troubled one. So I think this is going to be very therapeutic for us.

CATHY: Is there anything you wish you had from each other? Any trait you wish you had from each other? Seth, I know you said book reading. But any more?

SETH: I wish we lived close together. I listen to her podcast quite a lot and I kind of wish I could have those discussions with her. And get more of her insights. Because the way she looks at things I find amazing. And the outlook she looks at things I find so interesting. And I wish I had more... that kind of frame in my brain to kind of challenge different thoughts and different kind of opinions and learn more about them.

RACHEL: So what is your brain filled with, Seth?

SETH: Logical stuff. [laughs] I see everything very logically. I'm very pragmatic in things I don't... I find it hard to see things from up above. I'm always kind of in the detail. That's basically my job, for example. And something I want to do more of is take a step back and look at things from a higher level.

CATHY: Yeah. And Athena, what do you wish you had from Seth?

ATHENA: Oh, I wish I was a bit more spontaneous. Like I'm happy that I spent most of my life in London, but it would've been... there was probably a window of opportunity in my 20s maybe to kind of go out of it more. As in, not go out literally, but maybe be abroad or work abroad. With what I did for a living before comedy, I definitely would've been able to travel with those skills.

RACHEL: What did you do?

ATHENA: I was um, loads of things. [laughs] But I was fundamentally a Project Manager. That's the umbrella that covered all the things that I used to do. It would've been – not easy, but it would've been a possibility for me to maybe spend one or two years in another country doing something. So I feel like I missed that opportunity. Now, especially with my mum getting older and having a kid. So yeah, I wish I'd been a bit more spontaneous. And a bit more gregarious in my teens. Like I said, because I was quite... it took me a long while to deal with my introversion. I probably missed out on... I said no to a lot of stuff as a teenager. Which I hope my daughter does!

CATHY: Yeah, of course. It's different because it's your kid.

ATHENA: She has to say no! She has to say no to all her friends. But I said no... I didn't say no to everything. It's funny now because I've recently – as in the past two or three years - reconnected with my old school friends. And they talk about some of the things they got up to. Some of the things I was there for, and some of the things I wasn't. And I was like, 'ah damn, I should've just gone,' you know?

[Recorder sounds]

CATHY: Seth, what do you think of Athena's job? Are you shocked knowing that she was this sort of bookish introvert?

SETH: She never told me that she was going to be a comedian. I just found out from a friend of mine. It was a friend of mine –

CATHY: No! How did that work?

SETH: I was in Bristol and a friend of mine said, 'do you know your sister's a comedian?' I was like, 'what?' [laughs] And she showed me a video on the internet. And then I went and spoke to Athena and I was like, 'you're a comedian!' And she goes, 'yeah, I've been doing it for a few months.' So I was like, 'oh, wow.'

CATHY: Really?

SETH: Yeah. Then as I've obviously seen her perform, now I'm used to it. But at the time, it was kind of... it was very surprising. Because yeah, she was quite introverted, and quite quiet, and didn't say much... a few words. But just all of a sudden realised that that was what was going on. She was having this observation of what was going on. From listening to what comedians think, what they think about the different ways... some people think of things very literally, like I do. And they'll see the comedy in something, the kind of – what's the word – they'll see a different aspect of it and be able to relay it in a comedic way. And obviously, watching that I found it quite remarkable and amazing.

CATHY: Sorry, why did you not tell Seth when you first started?

ATHENA: I didn't really tell anyone.

CATHY: Okay.

ATHENA: Because when I started doing comedy, it was a genuine vision to become a comedian and to have that as a career path. It wasn't just, 'oh, I want to try comedy! Oh, I'm doing comedy!' I always felt like – and I still feel this to this day – the first time you perform stand-up comedy, you're not a comedian when you do that. You're literally an apprentice and you're learning. So I kind of felt like I can't tell people I'm a comedian because I'm not funny. And oh okay, I'm funny now. I can't tell people I'm a comedian if I'm not getting paid. Okay, fine. I can't really tell people I'm a comedian if I'm not getting paid more. Because your first pay is like £20 for like 10 minutes or whatever. So it became this thing where I became ever conscious of... I was always really aware of – not always, because when you get into it you don't have a clue – but I realised very early on that there's this pathway towards being a comedian. And it's not something you are; it's something you learn.

RACHEL: Totally.

ATHENA: And no shade to anyone who's starting, but you do get people who start comedy and they build a website. And they're called a comedian. They're on Twitter going, 'I'm a comedian!' I've got a bit too much respect for the craft. So I didn't really tell anyone for the basic reason that when you're on the open mic circuit you're not a comedian, actually. Sorry, you're not. Sorry guys! [laughs]

CATHY: Mhm.

ATHENA: You're just somebody and you're learning your craft. And also I was really conscious that I would perform comedy and I

would see someone who was better than me, obviously because they'd been going for longer. And I'd be like, 'I can't tell my friends I'm a comedian when there's this guy who's been going for three years who's incredible!' Or whatever. So I was always really conscious of, you know, where I was at when I started.

CATHY: It's weird because my partner's a comedian and the amount of graft that my partner put in... I mean, literally put his life... you know, his life stopped for years. And there's a lot of young comics that sort of don't think –

RACHEL: And it takes years!

CATHY: It takes years.

RACHEL: To hone your voice. As you said, respecting the craft.

ATHENA: I'm only now a good comedian I would say.

CATHY: Yeah, exactly.

ATHENA: I always say I started in 2012 and I got good in 2015. That's when I got good at comedy. I only quit my full-time job last November.

RACHEL: Yeah.

ATHENA: I was working. I was still doing Project Management on some level until last November. And then it got unsustainable. Even when I was doing quite well, I was like, 'I'm still going to keep my other job, I think.'

CATHY: Totally.

ATHENA: So I never told anyone because I was still doing my day job and that's what was paying my bills. So I didn't think I needed to tell people I was a comedian. As simple as that. [laughs] That was what it was.

[Recorder noises]

CATHY: Have you ever been embarrassed by each other?

ATHENA: Oh, that's interesting. I'm just trying to think. Do you know something? It's hard for some – [laughs] this is going to sound really bad. It's hard for somebody who does what you expect them to do to embarrass you.

[Seth laughs]

ATHENA: Do you know what I mean? If you expect them to go get drunk and be sick, that's not embarrassing.

CATHY: Yeah.

ATHENA: Because that's what – they've done it so much.

SETH: True, I have.

CATHY: I'm emetophobic, by the way. So I can't even talk about it. Literally can't even talk about it.

ATHENA: Oh okay. Well we won't talk about it any more.

SETH: Yeah. [laughs] It's always memorable. There's always something... I do it when I don't have to. Well not when I have to, actually, when I least want it to happen, that's when it happens.

CATHY: But Seth, there's nothing about Athena you're embarrassed about?

SETH: No! Nothing at all.

ATHENA: [gasps] I can think of a time! I can think of a time you embarrassed me!

SETH: What?

ATHENA: When we went to Ghana for the first time. So our dad's Ghanaian and we went to Ghana for the first time when we were

—

SETH: 18?

ATHENA: Uh, 17 / 18. So it was after our A levels. Now God bless Ghana Airways. It doesn't exist anymore. No, this is Ghana International Airways. So, you know, interesting airline in that it was shit. And it was one of those airlines where if you book a flight for Tuesday, you're going home on a Friday. It's one of those ones. And on the way back, we were due to arrive like the day before our A level results or something. And our flight got delayed literally by over 24 hours so we had to call our dad and go back to our Auntie's house and stuff. And we had to call our mum and stuff. And I was like, 'this is not a big deal'. And you were making a really big deal, because he was like, 'I want to open my exam results with my friends! I can't believe this! I can't believe this!'

And I'm in this airport thinking to myself, 'what a wanker.' Like literally we were in the motherland. Who gives a fuck?

SETH: I don't remember this!

ATHENA: Because it was a long time ago. But I just remember our two reactions. I was very much, 'the flight's delayed. It's Ghana International Airways, of course it's delayed.' And your reaction was, 'uh, this is so ridiculous! Oh my god! I don't get to have that moment with my friends now!' And you bombed your A levels anyway, so all that fuss for nothing. [laughs] So it was like –

RACHEL: And how did your – how were your results, Athena?

ATHENA: They were great, I got two A's and a B.

CATHY: Of course. Yeah, brilliant.

SETH: I didn't bomb my results!

ATHENA: What did you get? I can't remember, what did you get? I can't remember.

SETH: ABCD.

CATHY: That's good!

RACHEL: Oh, that's good!

ATHENA: Yeah, that wasn't bad. That wasn't bad. I'm exaggerating.

SETH: I can't remember that at all.

ATHENA: I just remember really clearly feeling like you looked like a spoiled British brat. Like, literally. [laughs] It was just ludicrous.

SETH: I think I just missed a night out.

CATHY: So a final question: is there anything you want to say to each other that you've never said before?

[Seth laughs]

ATHENA: Never said before?

RACHEL: Mhm.

ATHENA: Oh, um... I've always admired the way you don't feel the need to do your hair.

[All laugh]

CATHY: That's profound.

SETH: [laughs] I've done my hair! What are you talking about?

ATHENA: It's very admirable.

SETH: What? Do you know how long it takes to comb an Afro?

ATHENA: Yes, I do! I have a daughter with one! [laughs] Like yeah, I know exactly how long it takes!

SETH: Aw, thank you then. I don't know what to say.

RACHEL: Seth, you've got to say something equally moving.

SETH: Moving?

RACHEL: No, you can say anything. You don't have to say anything, but if there was something.

SETH: Maybe... I don't say often how proud I am of my sister. And how kind of... as in I'm always in awe of everything she's achieved and everything she does. It's just amazing. And I think I don't say that often to her. And I just want to say that.

ATHENA: Oh! Can I say something? Another thing.

RACHEL: Yeah.

ATHENA: Oh, it has to be positive?

CATHY: No, not at all! You can say anything!

ATHENA: Oh, so I got into running in my mid-20s. And I loved it. It was something I regret not being able to do at the moment just due to time. And then one day, Seth goes, 'oh, I'm going to do a half marathon.' I'm like, 'cool.' And he does it in 90 minutes.

CATHY: That is impressive!

ATHENA: What a fucking bastard! Like my whole –

RACHEL: Yeah, that's not fair.

ATHENA: Out of all – that’s just rude. And I’ve been doing them, and I think I got down to like 1:45, maybe 1:40. And he just goes and does it in 90 minutes.

[Cathy laughs]

ATHENA: And running had been a big part of my life up to that point. And I never told you how disrespectful that was.

CATHY: I hear that because I’m a runner. I hear that.

ATHENA: [laughs] I never... just rude. Just sit down for 10 minutes. Look at your watch and be like, ‘ah, you know what? Yeah, let me keep it social.’

SETH: Yeah, I remember doing it and you were really annoyed.

ATHENA: I have a shoebox full of medals. Worthless.

[All laugh]

ATHENA: Worthless! Overnight. Became worthless.

CATHY: I feel your pain.

[Guitar and Recorder music]

This has been a Little Wander production. Music from Rhodri Viney. Local artwork from Cathy Mason. With special thanks to Beth Forrest, Steve Pickup, Sam Roberts, Henry Widdicombe, and Jo Williams. Other podcasts from Little Wander include Here to Judge and Welcome to Spooktown. Subscribe now on iTunes,

Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. Voiced by Melanie Walters.

CATHY: Seth, you're the king of sick.

RACHEL: That's – that's a really nice title.