

I Wish I Was An Only Child - James Serafinowicz, Peter
Serafinowicz, Helen Linehan

[Guitar and flute music]

[Thunder and rain]

CATHY MASON: It's recording!

RACHEL MASON: Sorry, I stopped it. Okay.

CATHY: Fuck's sake!

RACHEL: Can you stand up, Cath?

CATHY: Why?

RACHEL: Because I can't stand on that – sit on that chair
anymore.

CATHY: But you need to be by that!

RACHEL: Yeah, I am by that.

CATHY: Okay, I'm –

RACHEL: Okay, welcome to 'I Wish I Was An Only Child', with
Cathy –

CATHY: That's me.

RACHEL: Me, Rachel Mason. Where we speak to other siblings
about the dynamic about their relationship so we can see where
we're going wrong.

CATHY: Today we spoke to Helen Linehan and her brothers, James and Peter Serafinowicz. I would've loved to have had two brothers. I think it would've made me more confident around men [laughs]. No. Um, why would I want two brothers? Oh, I just think it would be a really nice dynamic, wouldn't it?

RACHEL: Yeah, I know what you mean.

CATHY: I mean we had too much women in our childhood.

HELEN LINEHAN: So two brothers and no sister.

CATHY: Just knock her off. Going to have to – no, I think it would be lovely to have two brothers and one sister.

RACHEL: No, you're – that is – you're really ad-libbing there. You don't mean that. You like the idea of a triangle. You like the idea of two brothers and you.

CATHY: No, I just think it would be amazing to have two brothers.

RACHEL: You'd like to ditch the sister, definitely.

CATHY: No, I wouldn't ditch you. I'd have you as a cousin.

RACHEL: [laughs] Yeah.

CATHY: I want Rach in my life, massively.

RACHEL: Yeah, but two brothers would've been nicer.

CATHY: I'd like two brothers.

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: Yeah. Would you rather have brothers?

RACHEL: No, I can understand that. I wouldn't demote you to cousin.

CATHY: Oh, what would you demote – what would I be?

RACHEL: Brother and one sister, I think, would be perfect. And I'd like to be the middle child.

CATHY: Okay, yeah no no no, that would be –

RACHEL: That's what I would go for.

CATHY: So Helen had it nailed.

HELEN: But wouldn't you get less attention if there were more children?

CATHY: Uh, well that is – [laughs] yeah –

RACHEL: Do you now want to change –

CATHY: Okay, can I be an only child, please? Today we spoke to Helen Linehan and her brothers, James and Peter Serafinowicz. Well, you should say something about how much you love their relationship.

RACHEL: Yes, I can say that. But also should we not –

CATHY: Rach, you look really with that – that hunchback –

RACHEL: I'm freezing cold.

CATHY: Go and put my jumper on, fuck's sake!

RACHEL: Should we not say – you – it's Covid jumper.

CATHY: It's not got Covid on it!

RACHEL: Should we not say all of them work in comedy and all of them were absolutely lovely? Such a nice relationship. It just left my feeling very warm inside.

CATHY: Ugh.

RACHEL: Ugh.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: Who's the funniest?

HELEN: Uh, me.

PETER SERAFINOWICZ: Helen.

JAMES SERAFINOWICZ: Yeah, unfortunately that is true [laughs].

PETER: It's just true.

JAMES: It is, yeah. She's kind of like – she's the best poker player out of all of us and she's the best – she's the funniest. What else is she?

HELEN: The keenest.

PETER: She's the best liar.

JAMES: Yeah, she's the best at everything. And – [laughs]

HELEN: The best at having babies.

PETER: No, I'm – I'm the funniest. Then it's – no, I would agree. I would say she's always been the funniest, um, and she's the most sort of outrageous, I think.

JAMES: Yeah.

RACHEL: The most outrageous?

PETER: She would tell the most outrageous – like say the most outrageous things. The most shocking thing out of the three of us, I reckon.

JAMES: Yeah, all the time.

RACHEL: Helen, was that the only way to get attention?

HELEN: The only way. That's the only way. I don't know, I didn't – I didn't need to get attention apart from... yeah, no, I don't know.

JAMES: It's just her stupid sense of humour.

CATHY: You're not the classic middle child: quiet, introverted... no.

HELEN: I guess – I don't know, I guess I've grown up –

JAMES: No no no.

HELEN: [laughs]

JAMES: There's nothing classic about her at all. [laughs]

PETER: Nothing classy about her? Is that what you said?

JAMES: Ah, sorry. Yeah yeah yeah, that's what I meant.

[Flute sounds]

RACHEL: See, clearly you're really close.

PETER: No, yeah, we are. It's lovely. Um, and uh –

HELEN: Yeah, I don't really know any other siblings – apart from you guys obviously, now – who are as close as us.

RACHEL: And do you – do people think it's weird? Because we do get – I mean it is weird and I think it's hard for our partners.

PETER: What, that we have sex with each other?

HELEN: Peter!

[All laugh]

RACHEL: I mean they've accepted it now.

PETER: They join in so it's fine.

CATHY: I would never discuss sex with my sister. Don't go there.

RACHEL: No.

CATHY: That's disgusting.

RACHEL: As close as we are, we don't discuss that. But –

JAMES: Helen does with us.

PETER: No, not with me.

JAMES: But uh, it's not reciprocated. [laughs] It's not reciprocated.

HELEN: With James, not with Peter, ugh.

CATHY: Oh, why is that?

RACHEL: Why?

CATHY: Why?

HELEN: I love James.

PETER: I don't think women should have sex.

[All laugh]

CATHY: Fair enough. I agree with you, Peter. I'm with you there.

RACHEL: So you grew up together in Liverpool.

HELEN: Mhm.

PETER: Yeah, grew up together. I mean, I don't think I was like a big brother, like a sort of big, strong, big brother, kind of like a tough guy –

HELEN: Yeah, you were.

PETER: I – you know, like that at all.

JAMES: No.

PETER: I wasn't like that. I was –

JAMES: You were fun. Fun. Both of you were really fun. Because, you know, me and Pete shared a room until you were what, 18 I think?

PETER: Uh, yeah. I think so, yeah. Bloody hell.

CATHY: Oh, that's tough.

HELEN: Yeah, that was tough.

RACHEL: How was that?

HELEN: It stank.

PETER: Actually... actually it was alright, wasn't it?

JAMES: It was, yeah yeah yeah. I missed them when they left. Because I had a lot of time on my own without, you know, without either of them, which was tough.

CATHY: Hang on. Peter, when did you leave then? How old, James, were you when Peter left home?

JAMES: I would've been 10.

CATHY: Oh, okay.

HELEN: Aw, Jay.

PETER: Jay, I didn't – I didn't leave until I was 20, I think.

JAMES: No, I think you – it was –

PETER: I think.

HELEN: You did Camp America, P.

PETER: Yeah I did, when I was 18. Um, but then I had time in Liverpool after this amazing adventure I did in New York, where I was there for like 3 months. And when I came back it was – it just felt quite sort of bleak, really. Because like all my friends had gone to university. I couldn't bear to carry on with education and – and uh, most of them had gone. And the rest of them just spent their time just trying to devise and invent elaborate bongos, and that would take up the whole day.

[All laugh]

PETER: You would see them, just you know, these things looked like a mousetrap, you know?

HELEN: Like a French horn.

PETER: Yeah yeah, that was uh... that was around Bobby Crumpets.

HELEN: Oh god. You know what? It's funny you mentioned his name because I was thinking about him last night. Bobby Crumpet was a neighbour of ours and he was in my year in school. And I hated him so much. Really hated him. I really hated him.

CATHY: Why?

HELEN: Because he was, uh... creepy, ugly, and he really smelled like... he really smelled. And um –

CATHY: Like your brothers.

HELEN: Yeah, he was incredibly ugly. [laughs] I don't know if that's a terrible thing to say.

CATHY: That's terrible!

JAMES: Can you delete the real names out of this?

RACHEL: Yes.

CATHY: Totally.

JAMES: Yeah? Is that cool? Okay, because he looked like a sort of Neanderthal, didn't he?

HELEN: Yes, he did.

JAMES: He had the really –

HELEN: Very heavy brow.

JAMES: Yeah, and a little skull.

HELEN: Yeah.

CATHY and RACHEL: Aww!

PETER: Yeah, I know. I'm not joining in on this.

RACHEL: No.

HELEN: But do you know what? He did – what he did to me. I really fancied this lad called Ray Travolta.

PETER: Cool name.

HELEN: And he, uh – John Travolta was his little brother. And he was in Bobby’s class in SFX, the same school that Peter went to. And he broke his leg. And for some reason, Bobby knew that I had a crush on him [Ray Travolta]. He phoned our local radio station that we all listened to and put on a request on on my behalf, and it got played.

CATHY: No!

HELEN: And I didn’t even know until I went to school the next day!

JAMES: That’s lovely! What a nice guy.

HELEN: Terrible! It was terrible because Ray Travolta really did not fancy me [laughs].

JAMES: So why did he – did he do that in a malicious or mischievous way?

HELEN: A malicious, twatty way, yeah.

JAMES: Right, okay.

CATHY: That’s awful.

PETER: But you know, I was talking to my daughter about – I was telling her about Bobby Crumpet’s dad. What was his name?

PETER: Yes. Shawn Crumpet.

HELEN: Oh yes, yeah.

PETER: And he was from Ireland [imitates Irish accent] and we would always see him, uh, coming back from the pub at like 6:00 in the evening, striding down the road and going [imitates Irish accent].

JAMES: [laughs] And never knew what he was saying.

HELEN: [imitates Irish accent] 'there's a fire, there's a fire'.

PETER: It would be some kind of quip, you know? It would be a kind of – because he was funny as well, but you couldn't understand what... he was quite charming, actually.

JAMES: Yeah.

HELEN: Yeah, yeah. And easy on the eyes.

JAMES: And handsome, yes yes yes.

PETER: He was handsome.

RACHEL: What happened to him?

PETER: I don't know, um, but he... he uh... I don't know, really. He was a big drinker. Handsome and I guess had a touch of a George Best gene about him, because he was always in the pub and he had that sort of, you know, where he could just drink and drink until he hits about like 55, and then twang, everything just stops.

HELEN: Yeah, he just turns into a purple blob.

RACHEL: And James, you remember this as clearly? Because obviously with the age difference –

JAMES: Yeah I do. Yeah, because, well, see my – my recollection of him is this woman on our road called the Mad Woman –

HELEN: Yeah.

JAMES: Would put like –

HELEN: That was literally her name.

JAMES: That was her name, yeah. She would put like messages in her windows that she'd, like, handwritten on flags. And usually like Irish flags, you know? And it would be anti – what would she say?

HELEN: It was about – it was about the Crumpets.

JAMES: The Crumpets, yeah. And one time she came out of her house – we were playing football on the road – she came over to our house and stabbed our football with a – with a big kitchen knife.

CATHY: [gasps] That's horrible!

JAMES: Terrifying.

PETER: Do you remember the morning that there was music blaring out from –

JAMES: Yeah.

PETER: Because our – where we lived then was a little cull de sac. And the Crumpets lived next door. What was her name? Can anyone remember her name?

HELEN: No.

CATHY: Mad woman!

JAMES: The mad woman's name.

HELEN: I was too afraid to know it.

PETER: She um... the music was coming from her place, clearly. It was like walking to school time, so it was like 8 in the morning. Walked in there, this music, it's um... Bob Marley. What – Don't Give Up the Fight? What's that song?

RACHEL: Oh.

HELEN: Get Up, Stand Up –

RACHEL: Stand Up For Your Right.

PETER: Yeah, right. So that, right, blaring out. And on her windows, she's got – you know they have in discount stores... well they used to have this in Liverpool a lot. In discount stores, they used to have this particular type of orange fluorescent cardboard and then with black writing on it. It was like to advertise the offers of the day. And it's such a gaudy, um, little combination. It's so – it's so tacky and horrible. And she had these messages that were all in that weird scrawl of somebody who is like really like Arkham Asylum insane.

HELEN: Needs attention.

PETER: Some of the words... like all the um, the uh... the kerning is just off completely.

JAMES: Yeah.

PETER: And like the different spaces between the letters. And some is all scrunched up and some is like in big poster letters. I can't remember even what the messages were. She was also in the top floor window, like the – you know it was only like a two story house. Hanging out the window with a megaphone singing along to this, in falsetto: [sings] 'stand up for your right. Get up, stand up.' It was bizarre.

JAMES: Yeah, bizarre.

CATHY: And what happened to her? I'd love to find out.

HELEN: Well after Peter went out with her a couple of years –

[All laugh]

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: Most of the people we're meeting, I can't get my head around the fact that they're not that close. Most siblings seem to be, 'yeah, whatever. We don't' –

RACHEL: They need their own lives.

CATHY: Yeah, very much so. But you – did you have lots of friends outside the family? Or were you very much a threesome who kind of didn't want to... I don't really want to look outside Rach, basically. I get everything I want from her. You're looking at me like that's not the case with you guys.

JAMES: I was desperate to be friends with all of your friends, you know. Because you would have – you know, like – you know, Stephanie, Simon, and everyone. You know, because it was cool hanging out with older people. And when – when they left, like

I've got a really good set of school friends who I'm still, you know, in constant contact with.

PETER: They're really a really fine set of friends.

HELEN: Gorgeous.

CATHY: Oh good, oh okay.

JAMES: You never really made friends like that, did you? I mean from school. You did with Simon, Peter. Helen, is there anyone you're in contact with?

HELEN: Only on Facebook.

JAMES: Yeah yeah.

HELEN: Uh, not really. I made all my bezzies... for me I just couldn't wait to leave Liverpool, which sounds terrible. But it's that – it wasn't the city. I think it was just that thing that a lot of people have that when they grow up. They just can't wait to get out of there, wherever they're from, and start anew. Because I don't know, I just –

PETER: Especially if they're from Liverpool.

HELEN: Yeah. [laughs]

CATHY: So you weren't worried leaving your brothers? You weren't – that didn't –

JAMES: No, because we – we ended up – Helen ended up moving in with Peter. Then I did after that, you know?

CATHY: Oh, okay.

JAMES: And there was a time when we all kind of lived together for a time, wasn't there?

PETER: Yeah.

HELEN: Yeah, we'd all sort of split up with our boyfriend / girlfriends. And we all ended up living together. It was so lovely.

RACHEL: How long was that for?

JAMES: I don't know, it was a bit –

PETER: It happened on and off, really, didn't it? Over a few years. Probably about 3 or 4 years, something like that.

HELEN: Yeah, we – Peter's been like, he's been so amazing, like always – always there to help, you know.

PETER: Yeah.

HELEN: When life gets a bit shit.

RACHEL: Yeah, but it sounds like you all are for each other. Because you're really close.

PETER: No –

RACHEL: We can't – there's – we can't find any shit here. We're digging through –

CATHY: Oh, come on. I need shit! I want rows, I want stuff that angers you about each other. I want jealousies.

RACHEL: Yeah, so what have been some arguments?

JAMES: Helen tried to get off with me once when –

[All laugh]

HELEN: [gasps] Jay!

JAMES: We shared – we shared the same bed and Helen was so drunk. And the only reason she thought she – she'd woken up –

HELEN: I'd just met this guy and –

CATHY: How far did you get? What did you do?

JAMES: Well, luckily because her breath was so bad, that's what woke me up. I was just like, 'oh my god!'

CATHY: Peter can't cope with this. He's like the parent in this set up, he cannot deal with it. Wow.

JAMES: Yeah, she just stank of booze and fags.

HELEN: Well Peter once sat on my head and farted and I puked. That was when I was about 7.

JAMES: Yeah.

CATHY: Do you remember that, Peter?

PETER: Uh, yes.

[All laugh]

PETER: Do you know what? I actually... I don't know if I do remember that, actually. But –

HELEN: I even remember the plaid pyjamas you were wearing that day.

PETER: I remember those pyjamas, yeah.

JAMES: No, but remember, Peter, we had – me and Peter had this stupid argument once in town, can you remember? He had this pair of platform boots that were like – he's 6'5 and these made him 6 –

HELEN: James, you're getting him mixed up with Boots Calippo!

JAMES: No no no, these made him 6'8, right? So then I used to nick them and wear them. And remember we had this stupid argument one night that we lasted for like, you know, 10 hours or something.

RACHEL: Because you were wearing the boots?

JAMES: No, it wasn't – I can't even remember what it was about.

PETER: Oh, I remember though how we made up. Do you remember what we did?

CATHY: You farted on his face.

JAMES: No, it was Halloween Eve we had the fight. And the next day we went to see – we were trying to go and see The Exorcist. And because it was sold out, we ended up seeing There's Something About Mary – [laughs], do you remember?

PETER: Oh, was that the time that I – because I just remember The Exorcist, but no – There's Something Incredibly Unfunny About Mary.

JAMES: And we ended up leaving after like 20 minutes.

PETER: Oh yeah. Well after the sort of, the iconic scene where he rubs sperm into his hair.

JAMES: Yeah, we were just like, 'no.'

RACHEL: That's enough, yeah. Is that how you remember it, Peter?

PETER: Yeah, it is. Well, I hadn't remembered we'd had a fight, uh, when we saw that film. But I do remember that – I was thinking about that very thing the other day, that time we went to see that film. Bloody hell. Bloody hell!

JAMES: I know. I've tried to watch it again.

CATHY: So what age were you then?

JAMES: I was about 19.

PETER: That's right.

JAMES: Peter, you were about 20 – 20 – yeah.

PETER: Mid-20s.

RACHEL: Peter, you had those amazing boots. What about other childhood sort of obsessions that you remember of each other? Strange – whether it's clothes or whatever? Music? I remember I had my white crinkle shirt with the black leather tie, that I was incredibly proud of, when I was into Howard Jones.

JAMES: Peter, you had a leather jacket with a fringe on it that you printed stuff onto.

HELEN: That stank of cigarettes.

JAMES: Yeah.

PETER: And Helen, you – you know, I always remember your glam metal phase, or whatever it was.

HELEN: What? I don't know what you're talking about.

JAMES: No, your heavy metal, you mean.

PETER: Halloween.

HELEN: Halloween, yeah.

CATHY: But Helen, you had your own bedroom?

HELEN: I did. I had –

JAMES: She did.

HELEN: The shitty old box room filled with spiders.

JAMES: Yeah, that was freezing.

PETER: Helen, was your bedroom one day –

HELEN: Yes?

PETER: Absolutely full of bees?

HELEN: Bees? Yeah.

PETER: Helen didn't find them, I did.

HELEN: No, I wasn't living at home.

PETER: Yeah. Earlier, yeah.

HELEN: And apparently there was a noise coming from – it was a bit like Hereditary.

PETER: Yeah, there was a noise coming from upstairs and I went into Helen's bedroom. And it was like alive with – it was wasps.

CATHY: That's awful!

JAMES: And it was just full of wasps, yeah. It was just disgusting! Apparently they swarm in like – in hot – it was like a really sunny day.

HELEN: In hot girls' rooms.

JAMES: In hot girls' rooms, yeah yeah. [laughs]

CATHY: So what was it like growing up with two boys? Because you've often – you've quite often mentioned smell.

HELEN: Yeah, you know what? Um...

JAMES: We weren't smelly.

HELEN: We – your room was a bit.

PETER: I was a bit.

HELEN: It was lovely. So like, you know, I was the only girl. And our parents – my mum and dad never had the sex talk with me or told me about periods.

CATHY: Oh no.

HELEN: But um... and I think it was just because my mum wanted to... she didn't want to sort of ruin our, you know, little childhood brains with all that filth. Um, so –

JAMES: Yeah, Helen hasn't had this discussion with her daughter yet, either.

HELEN: Yes I have! Uh, what I was going to say is whenever I had a period, I would always get a hug from them.

CATHY: Aw!

HELEN: It was always – and it was really nice to talk about, when it was quite a taboo thing in my, you know, with my mum and dad's sort of generation. For me it was so nice to be able to sort of share about how shit it is to have a fucking –

CATHY: That's amazing.

RACHEL: That must be quite unusual, I would say.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: So did – you laughed a lot together?

HELEN: Yeah.

JAMES: Yeah.

PETER: We did, we did. One of my favourite memories is of us all sitting in our dining room –

HELEN: Dining room.

PETER: On Bellevue road. And reading bits from John Lennon's books to each other.

HELEN: Yeah, poems.

PETER: And being silent with laughter.

JAMES: Yeah, and – and I was going to say, the Faulty Towers script as well, you know? Peter would be – would be Basil, Helen would be Polly and Sybil, and I'd be Manuel.

HELEN: Oh my god.

PETER: Did we do that?

HELEN: I can't remember that.

PETER: I can't remember that either!

JAMES: The Faulty Towers script book and the cover was like... Basil's tweed jacket. That kind of uh... that's what the pattern was on the front.

PETER: Okay.

CATHY: That came from your parents obviously. Because you wouldn't have just arrived at that yourself.

JAMES: I think Peter, you would've bought that. You would've bought that at a car boot sale or something.

HELEN: Yeah.

PETER: You know actually, my dad bought me that John Lennon book.

JAMES: Right.

HELEN: What was it called? A Spaniard's...

PETER: And I remember thinking –

PETER and JAMES: A Spaniard in the Woodworks.

PETER: And In His Own Right.

HELEN: Yeah, yeah.

PETER: And it was very Spike Milligan influenced, but really his own thing, you know?

HELEN: But also we used to watch Monty Python together as a family on a Sunday when they started showing it. And I remember this really – very clearly. James – so James, you must've been about –

JAMES: I was about 9.

HELEN: I was about 12.

JAMES: Oh maybe – okay, maybe I would've been about 6 or 7 then, yeah. I know already what you're going to say.

HELEN: No I think you were a tiny bit older. There was that brilliant – we'd seen it, we'd hoarded the episode and we were

watching it. We'd already seen it and we were re-watching it with our parents. And there was a Terry Gilliam animation in it with the Mona Lisa where she unzips her top and her boobs fall out. And James knew what was going on so he left the room and pretended to run up the stairs and run back down again and came back in. [laughs]

JAMES: I was so embarrassed. But I mean, you know, it was like even if – even if like someone's kissing or something on television, my mum and dad – they would turn the channel or turn the television off or whatever, you know. There was a time after Peter and Helen left that I – I think it was – it must've been half term. And my friend had got two horror films out of the video shop near us. And I think it was – it was *The Puppet Master* and then another one that I can't remember. But anyway, we watched one and it was terrible. No swearing in it whatsoever. And then we were watching the second one, called *The Puppet Master*. And my mum came home [laughs] – my mum came home and I remember seeing her car pull up – I'm talking about that horrible grey Sierra, you know? And uh... and then – I remember saying to my friend –

HELEN: The one we had to push a lot.

JAMES: Yeah yeah yeah.

HELEN: 'Come on kids, come on!'

JAMES: 'Can we – look, we're going to have to turn this off. We're going to have to turn this off or my mum will go mad.' Because it was like an 18 film, you know? And – and he was like, 'aw, don't be such a pussy', or whatever, 'come on, we'll just keep it on.' Anyway, so she came in. I was torn between my mum and not looking like – kind of trying to be cool in front of my friend, you know? And anyway, my mum walked in. And

literally the first swear word in both films was literally when she walked in. She – some girl said, 'oh, you can' - oh, I'll have to watch it again but it's something like, 'you can have the deal or you can fuck off!' And my mum honestly was just – she went so fucking mad. And then turned it off and my friend had to leave. So it was like the worst outcome that could've happened, you know? But that was the kind of – that was the kind of – like, you know, they were –

CATHY: Were they very strict?

HELEN: Well, yeah.

JAMES: Well, strict in kind of their – those ways, you know?

HELEN: You know I was doing a film course in this college, right? So I was about 16 or 17. And Psycho was on telly. And I recorded it, or left it on record and went to bed because it was on late night. My mum paused the scene – the shower scene – and then starts recording again. So she did a live edit basically.

RACHEL: No!

CATHY: That's amazing.

HELEN: I remember watching it thinking, 'what? That was the best bit!'

CATHY: Wow.

HELEN: I was doing a film course. I was 16, do you know what I mean?

CATHY: Were you a bit scared of your parents?

HELEN: Yes. [laughs]

CATHY: Yes, they were terrified of their parents.

RACHEL: Really?

HELEN: Yes.

JAMES: Were we?

HELEN: I think terrified of if they found out that I had –

JAMES: Of getting into trouble.

HELEN: Had drunk, smoking, snogging.

JAMES: Yeah.

CATHY: So were none of you very rebellious?

JAMES: They taught us all to be great liars, you know? Because the only way of getting –

CATHY: So you were rebellious?

JAMES: Yeah, but in secret, you know? I was brilliant at like – like doing stuff but never getting caught. Like in school I would never get caught doing anything bad because I could sense danger and swerve out. But because of my mum and dad, you know? Of like knowing – knowing like the signs. It didn't put me off going out and getting assailed at night, but you just have to do it in secret, you know?

CATHY: But did you have each other's backs with that? Did you protect each other being a bit rebellious? Or did you want to – you know –

PETER: No, we were never –

CATHY: I would've screamed on Rach.

RACHEL: You would've turned – you found a condom down the toilet and you told Mum!

HELEN: Oh no, I'd never rat on them.

JAMES: No, never. Never never never never. No. I can remember Pete – we were all supposed to be going on holiday to Wales and Petey, he'd got – somebody had bitten your finger [laughs] in a fight!

PETER: Yeah, I'm still scarred.

JAMES: Yeah yeah yeah. He came and showed it to us and it was like one of those joke rubber fingers you get in like – in like a joke shop. It looked – because it was so swollen and you had like a flannel tied around it. And then I can remember – I can't remember what we agreed, but we were like, 'okay, we'll just say to Mum and Dad that this has happened, you were ill or something,' and then you never came. We were going to Wales or something on holiday.

PETER: Were we meeting them there and I didn't come?

JAMES: No, you came in through there. But I just remember saying, 'oh, you were ill in bed'. And you know, I think you hid your hand under covers or something, you know?

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: Were any of you jealous of each other? Or are any of you jealous of something in the other?

HELEN: I'm jealous that I don't have a penis. [laughs]

PETER: You know, don't be. Don't be.

CATHY: Really don't be.

PETER: It's not that – it's not that brilliant, is it Jay?

JAMES: No, no. No, it's not. But no, I'm not. I just –

HELEN: I'm incredible proud of my little bros.

PETER: Yeah, me too.

JAMES: Yeah, same.

PETER: I don't think we're jealous of each other, no.

CATHY: Or is there any trait the other has that you wish you had?

PETER: I wish I had James's – his ability to focus and his industry and his, you know, how he can – you know, how he's so dedicated, writer. And it's the hardest thing to do, that I've ever tried to do. Any type of job and uh... and he's just really – he's just amazing at it. So I – so I um... how would I say that? I don't uh envy it, but I –

CATHY: Wish you had that?

PETER: Yeah, I do. I sort of –

HELEN: Wish he wasn't good at it.

CATHY: Yeah, there you go.

PETER: No, it's what I aspire to, I suppose, you know. But yeah, he's got a real – yeah, um...

HELEN: What about me?

PETER: No, you haven't.

JAMES: You haven't, Helen.

[All laugh]

CATHY: Exactly! Have you got nothing, Helen?

PETER: She's got something, but not what James has got. No, Helen, you're amazing.

JAMES: Thank you for saying that. Yeah, you are amazing. And like Helen – you've been such an incredible mum and then doing all these things on top of it, like, you know – Helen ran her own shop and also created, you know, a really successful television show. You know –

PETER: It's like discount sex toys.

JAMES: Um, no but just doing it all just sort of breezy, you know? You never – you never really complain about – about stuff. You're –

HELEN: Aw, thanks Jay.

JAMES: No, but it's true. You kind of do it effortlessly and – and, you know, that's amazing.

PETER: We all just really – we just really get on.

JAMES: Yeah, I've never wanted to like perform, you know? So there's never been a jealousy of you being a... I've always just been like – when we did Peter's sketch show together, every day I was just in awe of your talent. And I just couldn't believe – you were just so brilliant, but there was never a kind of thing of wishing I – I could do that.

HELEN: Do you not think it was a bit forced?

PETER: Very 'look at me', isn't it?

JAMES: But I always felt like I'm so lucky to be – to be sort of benefiting from being your brother, you know? So there was never any kind of jealousy or like that.

HELEN: But Peter's always involved us as well, like you know, in Look Around You, we were all in it.

JAMES: Yeah yeah.

PETER: Yeah.

HELEN: Like my grandad, my mum, my dad, our dog Bess, James, Patario, cousin Jonathan.

JAMES: Yeah yeah yeah.

PETER: Yeah.

HELEN: We were all on it. And it was so great because I was watching it with the kids the other day, and it's just like watching, you know, like old family footage.

CATHY: That's brilliant.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: What did you think each of the others was going to be when they grew up?

HELEN: I was going to be a secretary.

JAMES: You were going to be, um, a handmaid to Princess Diana.

HELEN: A maid, a maid, yeah. I've got the letter – I've got the letter framed that I got back in reply to my request. I send her a plastic necklace and uh, a request.

JAMES: And she wore it, didn't she?

HELEN: She did. In fact, she was wearing it when she died.
[laughs]

CATHY: I suppose it was obvious what Peter was going to be. No? Yeah?

JAMES: But I'd say like, yeah, I totally knew you were going to be a performer.

HELEN: Our family would always be like, 'he's going to be on stage! He's going to be on the stage, that one!'

PETER: I was – I was always, you know, I was never shy in front of you two, but like – outside of that circle in the family of, 'go on,

do some impressions for everybody', just even now it makes me feel embarrassed just thinking about that then, you know? I don't know where they got that idea that I was some kind of performer. Because I used to hate performing for them.

HELEN: It's because you'd do that radio thing on Radio City in the morning.

PETER: Oh, yeah yeah yeah.

HELEN: Remember? You'd do the weather as like Sylvester Stallone and everyone would be listening to it.

CATHY: What is that? I don't understand, you would actually do something on a local radio?

HELEN: He would read the weather reports as a character, like as Sylvester Stallone. Um, I think that was the only impression he could do.

JAMES: Yeah, and Lloyd Grossman.

PETER: Lloyd Grossman, yeah. [laughs] [lowers voice] 'How's the sibling podcast going, then?'

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: Christmas. Can you tell us about Christmas? Do you still spend Christmas together? Do you – did you – tell us what it used to be like and what you do now.

PETER: We do, don't we? I mean that's – we do.

JAMES: Yeah. Fingers crossed we will this year.

HELEN: Yeah. I remember the first Christmas James was with us, because he was – when I was 6, James was born. He was born in December, so he was only a couple of weeks old. I remember coming down the stairs and seeing the Christmas tree and the presents and James was in a crib. So I didn't really look at James, but I looked at the Christmas tree [laughs] with this little baby in it. It was really magical.

CATHY: Did you think it was the baby Jesus?

JAMES: It's kind of how I was treated, yeah.

PETER: There was a bit of that about it, but you know, having a baby at Christmas time –

CATHY: Yeah, it's brilliant.

JAMES: Yeah, it was a week before. A week before.

PETER: There was a – we had our picture taken with you. Were you in the like the nativity?

HELEN: As a baby? As James –

JAMES: In the school, I think so, yeah. And I think also when I was christened –

HELEN: This was when he was christened, yeah.

JAMES: Yeah.

PETER: Oh was it? Okay.

CATHY: Oh, they didn't use him in the nativity as the baby Jesus?

HELEN: I don't think so.

CATHY: No.

HELEN: I think they held him up and everyone in the school had their photo taken with him or something like that.

CATHY: Oh James, that's the best thing I've ever heard.

HELEN: So weird.

JAMES: I know, yeah, it is weird. I think they all kissed me, yeah.

PETER: Weird.

CATHY: And neither of you were angry when James arrived, though? Neither of you thought –

HELEN and PETER: No!

CATHY: Oh shit, sorry. I'm trying to find some shit on you guys, please!

HELEN: We did used to place James between us, didn't we, P?

PETER: Yeah.

HELEN: And try and get him to, 'come on, who do you love? Who do you love the best?' Kind of thing. And James would always go to Peter, which was really annoying.

JAMES: I'll tell you one thing they would do to me was they would put on, uh, Revolution Number 9 –

HELEN: Number 9?

JAMES: Yeah, they would put that on in our bedroom. In our bedroom that me and Peter shared. And, uh, turn the lights off and close the door. Because it used to terrify me, that song. And so I would just be like in darkness listening to this song.

PETER: Oh, I think you – you say that as like a regular occurrence. I probably did that once for about 10 seconds, if that.

JAMES: You're lying, it was more than that.

PETER: I did.

HELEN: Sorry Jay.

RACHEL: And did you have any weird traditions as kids at Christmas?

HELEN: I guess we did, uh... I don't know. But I remember the game Tickle Time that we used to play.

JAMES: The one thing we call – I don't know why, but we call, uh, French toast 'fluffy ruffs'.

HELEN: Oh yeah. Because of our mum.

JAMES: And we literally – we thought that it was – yes, because of our mum. But we thought it was like a Liverpool thing, but like it was just an our family thing.

HELEN: What are we having for breakfast? Fluffy ruffs.

JAMES: Fluffy ruffs, yeah.

RACHEL: Do you remember when we found cheese and chocolate?

HELEN: Cheese and chocolate?

RACHEL: We found if you eat cheese and then you eat chocolate, and you laugh, it gives you an intense pain here at the side. We used to have cheese and chocolate.

PETER: Oh, I'll try that.

CATHY: Hang on, fluffy ruffs. You said that comes from your mum. Not because that's what people said she was?

JAMES: No.

CATHY: Because that was her thing?

JAMES: That was her thing, yeah.

PETER: That was the name she'd invented for it, I suppose.

JAMES: Yeah, because we all kind of were great at making up words and silly phrases and whatever. And it's all because of me mum, isn't it?

PETER: Yeah.

JAMES: Because she's just – she does that all the time and, you know, we're just like – I can't remember what.... I'm trying to think of some things that she used to say. You know, like um –

HELEN: Reep Dopalaney!

JAMES: Reep Dopalaney! yeah of course, that's one. Yeah yeah yeah.

CATHY: What's that?

JAMES: Yeah yeah yeah, I don't know.

HELEN: She just made it up.

PETER: The little bits of sleep that you sometimes get in the corner of your eye she would call 'kick-ins'.

HELEN: 'Kick-ins'.

CATHY: Oh, that's brilliant.

PETER: I've passed that on now to my children.

HELEN: Oh have you?

PETER: Yeah.

JAMES: Fluffy ruffs, yeah, what else was there?

HELEN: Uh, caked it.

JAMES: Caked it, yes. Yeah yeah yeah.

PETER: Oh yeah.

CATHY: What's that?

HELEN: When someone's done a poo.

PETER: James did a poo in his nappy, that was it. Yes.

JAMES: And I still call it that.

[All laugh]

[Guitar and flute sounds]

This has been a Little Wander production. Local artwork from Cathy Mason. Voice from Melanie Walters. Music from Rhodri Viney. 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.