

I Wish I Was An Only Child – Jeremy and Rebecca Front

[Guitar and flute music]

[Waves crashing and seagull sounds]

CATHY MASON: How can you be cold? I'm boiling!

RACHEL MASON: Because I cycled here and now I'm freezing.

CATHY: Oh, you cycled here two and a half hours ago.

RACHEL: I know, but then you stop and then you get – it gets really –

CATHY: Oh my god. Today – no.

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: Oh, here we go! We have to start again. I – I need to see it.

RACHEL: That's it. Right, okay.

CATHY: Make it bigger. Make it bigger.

RACHEL: Okay.

CATHY: Not that big.

RACHEL: Okay, hang on. Notice Cath doesn't do anything. She just says, 'you make it bigger. You do this.' Uh...

CATHY: [laughs] Just make it bigger! Make that – but drag that out.

RACHEL: You know you said this week with the Fronts you weren't going to say, 'and that's me'.

CATHY: 'You're like me.' I've got to stop it.

RACHEL: You said it! In the first question.

CATHY: In the first question.

RACHEL: Did you notice that, Jo? First question, she went, 'oh! You're just like me with the anxiety!'

CATHY: I said – I promised. I promised. I wrote it down that I would not say that to anyone ever again.

RACHEL: Yeah, and you actually said it on the first question. What is wrong with you?

CATHY: I know! Rachel, come on. Jo's got to listen to this shit.

RACHEL: Welcome to I Wish I Was An Only Child. With Cathy –

CATHY: That's me.

RACHEL: And me, Rachel Mason. Where we speak to other siblings about the dynamic of their relationship so we can see where we're going wrong. Today we spoke to comedy writer and performer Rebecca Front and her brother Jeremy –

CATHY: Who is a writer.

RACHEL: It was the most polite podcast we've ever done. They're way more polite than us.

CATHY: I don't – I think there's always a load of shit under the surface. I don't believe anyone who's really polite. I'd go to a cabin for a week and I would find some terrible, dark, awful stuff.

RACHEL: I don't think they'd like that in the intro.

CATHY: Rachel's shitting herself because Rachel can't cope with anything that isn't...

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: You like polite.

RACHEL: I like polite, yeah. Comfortable with polite.

CATHY: Yeah, Rachel really likes polite. And I –

RACHEL: Polite means – polite means, uh, less tension.

CATHY: Polite makes me shit myself.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: We panic. And it's like a proper panic attack.

RACHEL: Yeah, yeah.

REBECCA FRONT: Oh really?

CATHY: Yeah. I'm sweating from just doing that.

REBECCA: Right.

CATHY: Rebecca, we are soul mates on the... all of that shit. Trust me.

RACHEL: So –

CATHY: Who's the funniest?

REBECCA: I think he is. I don't know –

JEREMY FRONT: [laughs] Really?

REBECCA: I don't know – I mean, you've now got to say it's me. But I do – I think in a room, like over Christmas or something, I think Jem would make people laugh more than I would.

JEREMY: Really?

REBECCA: Definitely. I would give you the script to make you laugh.

JEREMY: Yeah. Yeah.

REBECCA: You need the script. That's right. I could deliver it in a funny way. I think you – you riff in a very funny way. So, you know, Jem will – Jem will kind of pick up on a theme in a conversation and just go crazy with it. Go off in a weird direction. In a very writer-y way. So I – I would say you're the funnier of us.

JEREMY: Oh, well that's interesting. I – yeah – I mean, you certainly – well, you make me laugh. You've always made me laugh. But I think the weird – the funny thing about that is you were always the performer. You were always in that and I – I kept well away from that. So maybe in a room, you know, of nearest and dearest or close friends, that's maybe a thing. The idea of doing that in front of, you know, people – strangers or a big room full of people is – is – would be a totally different thing. But, uh –

REBECCA: Yes.

JEREMY: Well, maybe. I'll take that. Thank you. Well I think it makes – to me it makes perfect sense that I'm 99% the writer and I do some performing. But she always absolutely loved and lit up in front of a crowd. Uh, it started very young, didn't it? In a – in a room. But as soon as there was a chance, I would say she actually – and she looked completely at home. Whereas I – any opportunity, from certainly at school, if they said there's a Christmas play or something, I would be under the desk trying not to make eye contact.

REBECCA: What – I had these really strong memories of us being kids and say, you know, like going to Auntie Sadie's house or something. And my – the people who were funniest in that room would be our dad and Jem. And they could just play off each other and they pushed each other's buttons. And the jokes would just get madder and madder and more and more dark and extreme. And I'd sit there kind of helpless with laughter, but I didn't really join in very much. And I think that's probably why, for me being on a stage and having a character and having a script, that's where I thrive. Whereas for you, I – I do think you're naturally very funny.

JEREMY: We were probably working on something together, and you – you said, writing, you felt out of control. You – it was completely the opposite. And I felt that I could – I could make the character and the world and the story that I needed to. And if it went wrong, that's fine. It's supposed to go wrong. You tear it to pieces and you – and you start again. And you just don't give up until you've – until you've got something. Whereas you didn't like that I think, did you?

REBECCA: No, I agree. In fact, funnily enough I've just written – I've just finished this morning my first column that I've written for ages. I used to do regular newspaper columns. And, um, I said I'd do one. Just a sort of guest column for something. And immediately I got that tension again. That – like you were saying about the game earlier on. I get that knot in the stomach and that sort of... this is now... you know?

And so I started writing the thread of what I wanted to say. And obviously it's got to be funny, and it's got to be personal, but it's also got to work in 800 words and all that stuff. And immediately I thought, 'uh, this is now a set of problems that I have to solve and it's just bothering me.'

Whereas when I'm on stage – not even on stage, but in front of a camera, it's – I have a totally different feeling. Because of course it's – also, you could look at it as a set of problems, you know? I have – I have to remember my lines, I have to hit the mark, I have to, you know, uh, not pull focus from the other person. It's a whole load of – but I never see those as problems. I see those as kind of exciting tools and skills that I can play with. And I – I come alive in that environment. But writing – me and a computer, or even you, me, and a computer. It just feels like, 'oh god, now

we've got this to solve.' And I just – after a bit I just realised I didn't enjoy it very much.

CATHY: But I think that I've always – Rachel's partner's a writer. And I always think he likes having control of the – you know, you have complete control of the thing you're doing. And I know Rebecca – because you suffer from the same anxieties that I do, uh, you'd think that that would be something we would be drawn to. Because it's a form of control. So it's quite interesting that you haven't.

REBECCA: Yeah, I wonder if maybe it's just because I can't distract myself as well when I'm writing. When I'm acting, it's – and I've written about this in – in the past, ironically. I've written about this in the past. I'm never more relaxed, I think, than when I'm filming something. So I've had times in the past when I've been in a full-on panic about something or other. I mean like, haven't slept for three nights. Haven't been able to eat anything. You know? My heart's racing and I can't really make eye contact with people and like everything's kind of shutting down. And I go in front of a camera and I'm just fine.

CATHY: That's amazing.

REBECCA: I'm relaxed and nobody knows anything about it.

CATHY: Yeah.

REBECCA: And even before getting in front of the camera, actually, just – I go into makeup. And immediately I'm just like, 'hi! Hey everybody. Hey, good to see you.'

CATHY: Wow.

REBECCA: It just goes completely. So that's obviously my – that's the water I swim in, I think.

RACHEL: Yeah. Yeah.

CATHY: So when you were kids – was that dynamic happening when you were kids? Were you very anxious? And Jeremy, how were you dealing with that?

JEREMY: We actually – we wrote a short film together. We did for – for Sky, which was based on sort of Becca's – Becca's, uh, short period of – but I think it was sort of short period of, I would guess, of early anxiety, wouldn't you? I think it was –

REBECCA: Yeah, but I mean it was a proper – it was –

JEREMY: But it was –

RACHEL: Is this the school phobia?

JEREMY: Yes.

RACHEL: I've read about the school phobia, yeah. Yep.

JEREMY: Yeah, and – and Rebecca – whenever she's talked about it – in fact she – we had a brief chat about some stuff this morning. And she mentioned it again. And I was thinking... and she said, 'you know, I don't mind. I can talk about that, you know, if it – if it comes up.' Uh, and she said, 'you know, feel free to say what –' But I've – I remember it, but I think – I mean, it was actually very interesting working on the story and the script for this film. Because of course everyone comes with things from

their – they have their own memories. You have – and even though we're very close as a family and we're very close siblings, what I remember is – is probably quite different. I remember the events. And I remember some of the events. And I remember the – the kind of stress and the atmosphere it – it caused. But actually I think each day – we were both at school, and I think each day there would be this sort of weird thing in the morning where Rebecca would do her flip, basically, to – to not go. And I'd go to school. And I do not – I mean I wasn't – I didn't love school at all, but I don't remember being at school and sort of sitting there stewing and worrying. I think I was just – I was just in school.

RACHEL: Jeremy, you're four years older than Rebecca. Is that right?

JEREMY: Yeah, yeah. That's right, yeah. Yeah, yeah. If I was youngish in secondary school, that's roughly when Rebecca was having that – that period.

REBECCA: Yeah, because you would've been what, 14 I suppose. I was ten. I was eleven, wasn't I? So you were, yeah, 14/15.

JEREMY: Oh, that's right. Yes. Yeah.

REBECCA: And I think maybe that's partly why. Maybe if we'd been closer in age, it might've impacted you more.

JEREMY: Maybe.

REBECCA: I think it probably did impact you and maybe you weren't really aware of it. But I suspect also you were just at a different point in your life when you could actually just close the door and go off to school and get on with your day.

RACHEL: Because similarly Cath got school phobia.

CATHY: I had it. I had the same.

RACHEL: Which I never knew –

REBECCA: Did you?

RACHEL: Yes. We had –

CATHY: Very bad.

REBECCA: How old were you, Cath?

CATHY: I was about eleven when it kicked off. I had vomit phobia and school phobia so I just couldn't go to school.

RACHEL: Well, you were terrified of someone vomiting in assembly.

CATHY: Yeah, all of the anxieties that we have. And Rachel had to deal with that.

RACHEL: Yeah. So – and yeah. But similarly, I – but I definitely noticed it. It definitely impacted –

REBECCA: What's the gap between you two?

CATHY: 18 months.

RACHEL: 18 months and I'm younger.

JEREMY: Oh, much closer.

REBECCA: So maybe that is partly why.

RACHEL: Yeah.

REBECCA: Because you're much closer. And as you say, if you're younger as well, you're so influenced by the other – the older sibling.

RACHEL: And I just kind of sailed along, you know?

REBECCA: Right.

RACHEL: I don't know about you, Jeremy, but I didn't have – it was only later in life when I had anxiety or issues, I began to understand a bit of what Cath had been through. But at the time, it was quite alien to me.

JEREMY: Yeah.

[Flute sounds]

JEREMY: I would – I didn't like my, uh, secondary school at all. Really, I didn't particularly want to be there. I didn't particularly enjoy it. It wasn't a great place. Um, so I don't know how much Rebecca remembered. There were times when I would feel awful about going in, but I – it sounds awful because I'm going to say, 'well, get over yourself.'

CATHY: That's what Rachel would say.

JEREMY: As I recall, I just did it. I just – you know, I mean I would feel nauseous or something first thing in the morning, then kind of get over it and – and drag myself along there. And then it was a – you know, it wasn't – I tend to underplay these things I think. Uh, I tend to say, 'well, you know, what can you do? Lots of people don't like their school, so what? Get over it.' And I was bright and I was good at – at – well, some things more than others. But I was, you know, I think – I think I felt I shouldn't – it wasn't really where I should be, that particular school. But it's where I ended up being. Had to go and – and the minute I could leave and go to sixth form college I just went like a rocket. Just couldn't wait to get out.

CATHY: But you weren't troubled by – because I think Rachel was troubled by the fact that a lot of attention was on me.

RACHEL: Yeah.

JEREMY: I don't remember being bothered or anything. Or jealous, or sort of – I don't remember feeling that.

REBECCA: But of course I think also there's – I would've thought at that time, um, that you were probably sort of, you know, a little island of calm in the household. Because obviously what I – what was going on with me was impacting on everybody. And Jeremy was just kind of getting on with it. So in a sense, although it might appear that all the attention was on me, there's also an element of – Jem really had a place in that – in that little ecosystem. And his place was to just be stoical and get on with it. And that – and that had its value.

And maybe the fact that there's a big age gap between us meant that you were somehow able to understand that. It wasn't so

much that all the spotlight had turned on me, but it was just we had different roles to play. And my role was to go, 'ugh', and your role was to go, 'okay, I've got this.' You know. And that – and that kind of gave – you maintained status throughout that, do you know what I mean? It wasn't –

JEREMY: Quite possible, yeah.

REBECCA: I don't think intentionally, I just think –

JEREMY: No.

REBECCA: That gave you – you had a place. My um, my husband's sister has five children, who are now all grown up and have their own children. But she – when we had our kids, she said this brilliant thing about – she said when you have – as soon as you have more than one child, the one that comes along fills the gap that's been left by the previous one. And of course if you've got five kids like her, you see that happening time after time.

Weirdly, we found that. Even now getting a dog, is that – is that my son is one thing, my daughter is completely different. And then the gap between the two of them has been filled by the dog. There's only so much space in the family and it's being filled appropriately. It's being portioned. Or we take our portion of it. So that's why I wondered, Jem, if maybe the fact that I did have this kind of spectacular meltdown, meant that your portion of the pie was taken up by being, you know, stoical, getting on with it, and not making a fuss. And that – that period, that was kind of who you – who you were. And that was – and that made you vitally important in that ecosystem.

CATHY: Were you close as kids? Or were you fighty?

REBECCA: We were very, very close. But we – Jem used to tease me a lot. Which meant that of course we did fight. We bickered. We bickered more than fought, really. I don't – I mean, I remember one or two real kind of – I do remember once biting you, which I think I referenced and you didn't remember at all.

JEREMY: I don't remember, no.

REBECCA: And for that, I said – we talked about this not long ago.

JEREMY: Not traumatised.

REBECCA: I remember biting and really wanting to hurt. And you went, 'really? Did you?' And I was slightly offended that you didn't remember because it was such a big thing for me.

CATHY: Do you remember why?

JEREMY: Did you even have teeth at the time? Are you sure you had teeth at the time?

REBECCA: No, I was – I think I was about nine or something. I do remember why. I remember the trigger. Because it was quite rare for us to really get angry at each other. And I remember the trigger was that when – and this still happens now – when I get angry, I – my throat closes up and I sound like I'm crying. So when I get angry, I just sort of go like that. And I just – and you knew that. And I just remember Jeremy turning –

JEREMY: And it's not – and it's not funny.

REBECCA: There's nothing funny about it. And I remember Jem sort of turning around and going, 'alright, no need to cry about it.' And you knew I wasn't crying.

CATHY: Oh, that's awful.

REBECCA: That was the thing.

CATHY: Yeah yeah yeah.

REBECCA: And that was the only time I remember absolutely losing it with you. But you don't seem to remember it. I like to think because you're traumatised by it.

JEREMY: Nah, nah.

REBECCA: But I think it was probably like a mosquito, you know? Just like [buzzes] and you just going [pops], you know, batting it. I don't think it was a big deal for you at all.

JEREMY: Probably. You – you do – I don't know if you do it consciously, but you have a lot – you wear a lot of emotion closer to the surface than me, I think.

REBECCA: Oh definitely. Yeah.

JEREMY: And you're – I think generally you're more open about stuff. And I'm – I'm just very – I'm kind of – I'm not saying – I know you do treasure your private life, but I absolutely – it's nobody's business.

REBECCA: Yeah.

JEREMY: My life is my life. That's why social media can kind of – I go –

REBECCA: Yeah.

JEREMY: I was – I was going to develop an anti-social media network called, you know, just call it something like –

REBECCA: Bitter or something.

JEREMY: Yeah. What's it to you? What do you want to know for?

REBECCA: Yeah.

RACHEL: And that hasn't changed since you got older? Because in terms of performing, you said now you're performing and you don't care to the degree that you used to. I've become more open actually. I've sort of watched you. I don't know, I was so closed for so long and I think it's been quite nice. I see her release everything. She's exploding all the time, you know?

REBECCA: Right.

RACHEL: It all comes out. I've – a bit like – well, I'd like a bit of that sometimes, do you know what I mean? Just to have that release.

JEREMY: Yeah.

RACHEL: But no. Jeremy no.

JEREMY: Uh, not really. No. I think – I think some years ago – do you remember some years ago, a few years ago I – we had –

something, one of our projects and they wanted a photograph of us both.

REBECCA: Oh yeah, yeah.

JEREMY: And I went, 'oh god, are they really –' and I was really quite – I was going out of my way not to have my photo or my image on any of those sites. You know, Twitter, Facebook. I just thought, 'screw them. What's it going to – why should they?' And eventually [laughs] Rebecca said, 'you're mad! Why are you saying –' And I said, 'it's none of their business what I look like. I don't care what – what –' And uh, eventually we did. We allowed a photograph of the two of us in a playground, I think. I was about five or six –

REBECCA: Oh yeah.

JEREMY: And you were even, um, I think probably you were preschool, I think.

REBECCA: Yeah, I'm running up to meet you. I know the photo.

JEREMY: I think I was giving you a hug or something. And actually we did it and it's a very sweet photo. A sweet black and white photo. But do you know every now and then, because of course it's now – it's now out there, and every now and then I see it and I get a moment of resentment that it's in the world.

REBECCA: Wow, really? Really?

JEREMY: It still annoys me. Yeah, because it's mine. It's nothing to do with them.

REBECCA: Wow. Well, strictly speaking ours, actually, but –

JEREMY: Well, sorry. It's ours, it's ours. Yeah. It's a family thing. And I always think family is sacrosanct. And it's nothing to do with them. And them being the public.

CATHY: Oh no, you're doing a siblings podcast. Oh no! We can change the subject. [laughs]

REBECCA: That's because I'm a loudmouth. That's why.

JEREMY: Yeah, yeah.

REBECCA: That's very interesting. I didn't realise that still bothered you. That's really interesting.

JEREMY: Up to a point. I mean, you know, I don't lay awake. I'm too – I'm too laid back to lay awake worrying about it. But uh, every now and then. It's – I know there's a joke here that, you know, I kind of say, 'they've stolen a bit of my soul.' It's – but it's that.

REBECCA: You are kind of like one of those sort of obscure groups of people that you find somewhere, you know, that have never been touched by humanity.

JEREMY: Yeah. Yeah.

REBECCA: So – and I've come in bringing, you know, viral loads of things.

RACHEL: Exactly.

JEREMY: I know. You do.

[Flute sounds]

[Music playing, singing 'here to judge. Here to judge.']

PRIYA HALL: Hello! Here to Judge is a new weekly podcast from Little Wander where we dismantle the predicaments posted online.

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LEILA: And me, Leila Navabi. Subscribe to Here to Judge now on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.

[Music stops]

LEILA: I love this podcast so much.

[Flute sounds]

CATHY: I was very closed about everything that I was suffering from. And then when I started talking about it, it got better.

REBECCA: Yeah.

CATHY: So I think the more – Jeremy, you’re heading for a terrible future is what I’m saying.

REBECCA: Oh no! [laughs]

CATHY: No, just – for me it’s been incredibly helpful to be able to talk and be upfront about stuff, instead of – instead of hiding it.

REBECCA: Yeah.

CATHY: So –

REBECCA: No, it has – it has for me as well, mentally. And also I – I think it’s helpful for other people when you talk about stuff.

CATHY: Yeah, totally.

REBECCA: So that’s why – because I was very resistant at the beginning when I first started acting and obviously doing lots of interviews and stuff. And I used to be very, very private about, you know, I would’ve never talked about the school phobia or even claustrophobia or any of the other stuff. And then after a while I did think, ‘you know what? I think –’ Firstly, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. And secondly, I’ve had some therapy so I’ve – I’ve dealt with it. Um, but thirdly, actually it’s probably quite useful to talk about. And particularly the school phobia thing. I’ve had so much feedback from people because it’s so scary to go through that with your child.

CATHY: It really is.

REBECCA: And I think, you know, I've had lots and lots of messages from people saying, 'I was so relieved because my 12 year old daughter has just suddenly stopped going to school and I don't understand it. And now I feel like I've got a bit of insight into what's going through her head.' And it's so common, you know.

CATHY: It's so common.

REBECCA: It's really, really common. Teenage anxiety is very common.

CATHY: Yeah.

REBECCA: But still not talked about.

CATHY: I knew of nobody going through it.

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: Nobody.

RACHEL: Claustrophobic – claustrophobia for you. If we're on a train, I have to stand outside the toilet door while Cath goes to the loo.

CATHY: I've never locked a toilet door. I've never locked a toilet door in my life.

REBECCA: And I bet you share my thing about – you know on Virgin trains they have those automatic –

CATHY: Oh, I won't go on Virgin trains.

REBECCA: What a nightmare! They're awful! No, I didn't for a long time. And now I do. But I – my heart's in my mouth every time. Because they – Jem's looking at me like he doesn't know what we're talking about. [laughs] But they – it's like, you know when they introduced those horrible windowless concrete bunker loos in the West End in London?

CATHY: Yes! Yes.

REBECCA: And you – I just would never go in one of those in a million years. And then suddenly they brought them onto trains!

CATHY: Exactly. So Rachel has to hold the door.

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: Or my partner. And now my eight-year-old son has to stand holding the door.

RACHEL: So it's exhausting. It's exhausting, but there you go.

CATHY: Exactly.

RACHEL: So sorry, going back to childhood, then. You were obviously a close, happy family? Your parents, I read, are very creative.

REBECCA: Yeah, and they are, you know, genuinely brilliant people. Aren't they, Jem? I mean they're just –

JEREMY: Yeah, yeah.

REBECCA: Extraordinarily – thank god, still around. And we see them all the time because they live close to us. Um, and they are – yeah, it was a properly happy childhood, actually. Thank goodness.

JEREMY: Yeah.

REBECCA: I feel immensely – I think it was only sort of as I got older and went to university and started talking to other people and realised I – I thought, ‘that’s actually really unusual, what we had.’

CATHY: It is. Yeah.

RACHEL: How lovely.

JEREMY: We lived in a – in a North East London suburb, which was uh, not – it wasn’t a kind of uh, Hampstead-y, you know. It wasn’t a place full of bookshops or anything like that. But our house was. And our home was absolutely – was like a – you know, was like a gallery and a – and a library. And it was full of music. Uh, very eclectic. But, you know, a lot of classical music and jazz and all sorts of stuff. And pictures everywhere and colour everywhere and books everywhere. I mean, every room. So that – I attribute all of, you know, everything really came from them. And also the feeling that, um, really encouraging us even though – even though they knew how mad – how mad this kind of life could be. Uh, but nevertheless said, ‘no, you should do – don’t do – don’t go and do something and then think, “oh god, what if?”’

REBECCA: Yeah.

JEREMY: "What if I hadn't? What if –" You know. Don't look out of an office window one day and think, "uh, god, what am I doing? What I could've done with my life." And so they were brilliant. Are brilliant.

REBECCA: I mean, my sort of abiding memory, and I know this was the same with you, is that you'd come from school and you'd say – they'd say, you know, 'so, what did you do today?' And you'd go, 'um, oh we did a bit of poetry.' And they'd say, 'what?' And you'd say, 'oh, we read something by, I don't know, Tennyson.' And immediately both of them would go off to separate bookshelves in separate rooms and one would have a book on Tennyson and one would have a book of illustrations of Tennyson poetry. And they'd be like, 'oh, oh, I know what I should show you. Oh, do you know this bit of music? Because this is contemporaneous with –' You know. They'd just – they loved – they're both kind of – they both got an education but they're sort of autodidacts as well.

In that, you know, Dad left school relatively young and specialised and went to this specialist art school. So he's – but he's kind of shaped his own education beyond art ever since, you know. He did obviously do an Open University degree a few years ago. And um, Mum had – you know, had the equivalent of a degree and a teaching diploma and taught for years. But they just never – they've never got tired of learning. Which is a real, um, it's a real lesson. As they've got older, I think I've found that a real – something that I kind of aspire to. Just, you never stop. You never stop learning stuff.

JEREMY: Yeah. They actually – yeah, I mean, they – they always looked at the present. At contemporary – I mean, obviously they absorbed history and the past. But they were completely open to

new – new stuff and new things. And took us along to all sorts of things.

REBECCA: Yeah. That's right. Lots of concerts and theatre and whatever.

JEREMY: Yeah, and it's still like that.

REBECCA: And there wasn't a huge amount of money coming in, but it was just, you know, they would spend that money on taking us to the Purcell room or something to see a children's concert or –

CATHY: Did you feel different as a family?

JEREMY: Yeah.

REBECCA: Yeah.

CATHY: Did you keep to your own friends? Or did you have friends who came into the house? Or did you stick within your family unit?

JEREMY: I think – I bet we have probably similar but slightly different takes on it.

REBECCA: Yeah, go on.

JEREMY: You go first, Rebecca.

REBECCA: Well, I had a really close-knit group of friends both in primary school and then at secondary school. Sort of small-ish groups but very, very close. And my friends were always from very

different backgrounds. Uh, apart from I suppose one. One friend came from a slightly similar background. But most were from quite different backgrounds. Generally they came into the house and generally they – Mum and Dad were always really welcoming. Because I think it was just more people to share it with.

So then – then these conversations about, ‘what did you do at school today?’ would be expanded to my friends, which was really lovely. So they’d come home after school and my mum would be going, ‘you know, so what are you doing in geography at the moment?’ And my friend Christine would say, ‘well, I’ve just learned this.’ And she’d go, ‘right, I’ve got this thing here. Just wait there. I’ve got a book of maps.’ And it would – it would just sort of expand outwards, which was lovely. Is that the – is that your memories as well?

JEREMY: You probably brought friends – I did bring friends home a bit. But I think I – my feeling of school was I kind of wanted to leave it behind.

REBECCA: Right.

JEREMY: Most of the time. And that included a lot of the people... I had friends at school and I would hang out with them at school and a bit afterwards. But I didn’t – I wasn’t desperate to have friends over all of the time. And that kind of thing.

CATHY: So neither of you rebelled? You didn’t want to get away from this kind of magical house? No?

REBECCA: I – I didn’t at all. Because I felt like I’d done my rebellion when I was eleven.

RACHEL: Yeah.

REBECCA: So I think once I got over that, which took the best part of a year, I suppose, to properly come out of it, I didn't rebel. I didn't feel the need to rebel at all. Did you?

JEREMY: No.

REBECCA: You did slightly more – well, you didn't rebel. I mean, you were a bit – you sort of went through a few fashion phases, and –

JEREMY: It was –

RACHEL: But Rebecca, I read about you going through a phase of wearing a cape at 15. And I did want to hear about that.

REBECCA: Yes, there was the cape phase, yeah. Which wasn't – for me, wasn't a rebellion. I felt like everybody should be doing this. I couldn't understand why they weren't.

CATHY: No, that's weird.

JEREMY: I mean, just going back to thinking about the – what the house – the house looked like. The suburb had become, I mean, probably – probably post-war, had become a very, uh, Jewish – a lot of Jewish people had moved out of the East End and gone to various – various satellite suburbs around the central line or whatever. So there was – there was a very high proportion of, uh, of Jewish people in our – amongst –

REBECCA: Including us.

JEREMY: Including us. And – but also, just generally, it was either that or just pretty much WASPs, wasn't it? Very white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant. So it was that kind of mix. But the um – most houses would have fairly plain white walls and maybe a framed photo or something. Or a framed something. Someone's bar-mitzvah photo or wedding – in a gilt frame. You wouldn't see pictures, you wouldn't see books. And ours – there was – the colour of the room, apart from anything.

I remember neighbours sort of saying, 'oh, aren't you bold?' to my parents. It was a kind of sort of amazing plum colour room they could see into. But it was lined with books and paintings and there was a kind of cultural desert around us. And there was this house with us in. and it felt very – it just – it felt different. And I know everyone likes to think, you know, 'I'm not like everybody else.' You know. But you always think, 'I'm special, I'm different.' But actually, it did feel – it felt – I felt sort of outside of that.

RACHEL: Have you replicated that with your families now?

REBECCA: Uh, I think – I mean, we both – we live in a much more – we live sort of with more kind of like-minded people I suppose. Where we live more in a sort of, you know, 'ghetto' of middle class arts people and everyone works in telly. So it's – it feels quite different now, I think.

RACHEL: What traits do you think you've got from your parents?

REBECCA: I think – I think I'm kind of a mixture of both. But I think I'm emotionally very like Mum because Mum is a terrible worrier. And I'm a terrible worrier. So we will both always sort of leap to the worst possible conclusion about – you know, if – if an idea comes up, we'll both immediately think, 'yeah, but that could lead

to this, you know.’ Go down that path. Um, but I think I’ve also got elements of Dad in that Dad will sort of undercut everything by trying to make jokes. Actually, Mum does this to an extent as well. Trying to make jokes out of everything and not take things too seriously. And that’s a lot like me as well. I think – I think on balance you’re more like Dad than I am, and I’m more like Mum than you are, probably. Would you agree?

JEREMY: Maybe. Maybe. But I – I can see – I can see. [laughs] It’s a Gemini thing. I can see both sides. We share the same kind of sense of humour and there’s a lot of self-deprecatory. And there’s a lot of, um, there’s a very strong sense that we always had of people who we thought were pompous. Uh, and uh, puffed up. And we were always very at home. It was always a very strong sense of, you know, we wouldn’t say it to that person’s face, but putting people down for, ‘oh god, who do they think they are?’ I think we’re – but we equally apply it to ourselves. So of course you have to take what you do seriously, and I do take what I do extremely seriously. But I’ve – there’s always a bit of me that can kind of stand to one side and – and say, ‘oh god, get over yourself.’

REBECCA: Yeah.

[Flute sounds]

RACHEL: And how did you end up working together?

REBECCA: I think that started, uh, because Jem came and lived in Oxford during my second year. Uh, which I think was not unconnected with the fact that he started going out with one of my best friends, who – to whom he’s now married.

RACHEL: Ahh.

REBECCA: So – so you came – you moved up there for a couple of terms, didn't you? I don't know if it was a full year. And that's really when we started writing stuff together. Because I was at that point getting involved with the Oxford Review. And I was writing songs for it because that was my main contribution, was – I was in it, but I was also a songwriter. Um, and then you came and started writing sketches. Oh, but before that. That's right. My first year it must've been. Because you then wrote the review that we did at – at St. Hughes, which was my college. So we were already working together in my first year.

JEREMY: I can remember sitting actually at a desk at home with an old – really old, really, really old – my grandfather's typewriter. Fantastic imperial typewriter. Uh, hammering out sketches. I was learning – inventing sketches. I knew the stuff I liked. I knew other people's – you know, I mean, you know, but they're very – they were very – they were complete – they were like mini-plays. There were characters, you know. And just I remember sitting there, writing these things, and you saying – you had told me that a friend, who's still an old friend, had said she could get us money to put on a show.

REBECCA: That's right, yeah.

JEREMY: So there was this added thing that suddenly, not that it was – it wasn't going to pay us anything. But it meant we could stage a show. And I sat and just hammered out, uh, working on these things. And then that's when – it was the following spring, I think.

REBECCA: That you moved up there.

JEREMY: Uh, that's why I found a flat there. Was – was so that we could – because I directed it as well.

RACHEL: But that – so you moved – you moved to Oxford because you were –

JEREMY: To do – do to a show. It was all –

RACHEL: Yeah.

REBECCA: To do a show.

RACHEL: And because of love.

REBECCA: And also because you were going out with Kate.

JEREMY: Well that's –

RACHEL: We were going to ask if you get along with each other's partners, but clearly you do. So that's that one covered.

CATHY: What do you envy about each other?

REBECCA: Oh, gosh. That's a good one. Um, I don't know. I think – I don't know. That's stumped me. What do you think, Jem?

JEREMY: Well, I – I've heard you ask that question of other people. And I thought, 'god, I don't know what I'd say about that.' It's interesting that Becca feels the same way. I – the only thing I could think of professionally is not so much to do with you but to do with what you do. I love the idea that people just ask you do to things.

REBECCA: Right.

JEREMY: And you can go and do them.

REBECCA: Right, yeah.

RACHEL: But you also write together, don't you?

REBECCA: We – we did, up until a couple of years ago. And then a few years ago I had a really, really busy year. And Jem and I – at that point I think we had a TV pilot that I think we were – was in development. We had kind of two radio series that had to be delivered at a certain point. And I got two or three really good jobs, one of which involved me travelling overseas constantly. And I remember just thinking – it just felt to me like there were endless emails just backwards and forwards with me going, 'um, really sorry Jem. I can't do this and I can't do that.' And Jem going, 'okay, that's fine.' And I started to think, you know, 'he's doing everything. And I'm actually now holding him up.'

Um, so after a bit, when I came back from – at the end of that year, I just said, 'I – I think there's two factors here: firstly, I'm holding you back and you don't actually need me. Because he writes brilliantly without me. And secondly, I don't really like it, you know? I like being in a room with you because it's – because we're siblings and it's fun. And I like being in a room with my other co-writer, Morwenna Banks, because she's my mate and it's fun. But I don't actually like the writing bit, so can we just do the getting together and not do the writing? And now, actually, there's a real treat because we've just done, um, I think it's the – is it the final series of Incredible Women? But series nine. So that arrived during lockdown and we recorded it remotely. But the joy

for me is that now I – I barely even knew what we were going to be doing on that when – I mean, I know you sent me a couple of emails saying, you know, ‘it’s going to be this and it’s going to be that.’ And I sort of glanced through them and thought, ‘fine.’ But I hadn’t seen the scripts. It was just like doing a normal radio drama for me. It just arrived for me and I read it and I did it.

CATHY: But I’m jumping back to the envy. Because neither of you have jumped on that. So that’s interesting. Because obviously if somebody asked me and Rachel, we’d know the answer to that immediately.

RACHEL: We would, yeah.

CATHY: Of course!

REBECCA: Really? What would the answer be?

CATHY: Oh, I’m envious of everything Rachel’s got.

REBECCA: Really?

CATHY: Her hair, her confidence –

RACHEL: Really goes deep, yeah.

CATHY: Her ability to attract boys when she was younger. Oh, endless. And you two just very calmly sat there and said, ‘hm.’

RACHEL: But I think this is what we’re learning through this podcast. Is that our relationship is –

CATHY: Ludicrous.

RACHEL: Slightly dysfunctional. But – because also I think in terms of when you did work together. When we work together, we are so used to it, we take it for granted. We've worked together for years. But it is unusual, you know?

REBECCA: Yeah. I had a chat a while ago, actually, with um – I did a table read with, uh, Jamie Demetriou. And we were just very briefly, during a coffee break, had a chat about – because he said, 'of course, you're another brother and sister team.' And I said, 'do you know you guys are sort of the first others that I've met.' And now I've worked with Daisy as well. So obviously, you know, Daisy and Charlie.

RACHEL: Yeah.

REBECCA: But it's really unusual. And when we were starting out, because obviously we're older, um, I don't know any – were there any other brother and sister comedy people? I'm sure there were, but I couldn't think.

JEREMY: No.

REBECCA: I mean, there was Eric Sykes and Hattie Jacques. But they weren't a real brother and sister.

JEREMY: Got a feeling we were unusual. Yeah, yeah.

REBECCA: So yeah, I don't – I think at the time, we were always slightly surprised that more people didn't pick up on it being unusual.

CATHY: Yeah.

REBECCA: Because it was, you know, pretty unique.

CATHY: Excellent.

RACHEL: Who's the most likely to run a marathon?

REBECCA: Oh, him. I'm far too lazy for that.

JEREMY: I'm – I'm a runner. She's – and uh, she's – you hate running, don't you?

REBECCA: I hate running. I – I would – I mean, I exercise. And I like doing that. But I'm very much – my whole personality is sprint rather than marathon. And I think your whole personality is marathon rather than sprint.

CATHY: Are you completely honest with each other?

REBECCA: That's a really interesting one. Because I think – we did an interview a few years ago, and I used the phrase, 'we're very polite with each other now,' which got picked up. Which somebody interpreted as meaning we kind of – that's all we are. That we – that we basically hate each other but we, you know, we keep it polite. That is not the case. Um, but I do think – I think we are honest with each other, but we have a very unusual way of – of articulating it. So we would almost never go head to head in the way that we would have done when we were kids. We wouldn't just – we don't just kind of shout at each other. But I know if he's irritated with me about something. And I'm sure he knows if I'm irritated with him. We just – we go about it in a really sequitious way. And I don't know quite when that started, actually. Because that's – that's probably quite unusual for siblings.

RACHEL: Yes.

REBECCA: But we do tend to – we argue but very politely.

RACHEL: Oh really?

CATHY: You never have proper fiery bust-ups?

JEREMY: No.

REBECCA: We have – I can't remember the last time we did, can you?

JEREMY: I can't, no. I don't think ever, no.

REBECCA: I mean, we would've when we were younger. But I can't – like when I bit you. But –

JEREMY: Yeah, we probably did. I can remember being, you know, kind of annoyed. Like, 'oh god, why is she throwing – why is she stamping up the stairs because – because she's – what some boy did, bla bla bla.' You know, that kind of thing. But I don't remember – I honestly don't remember terrible, terrible things like that. And yet I know, uh, see I always find it very – I know people, some people who really, really thrive on that. I mean, I know people who almost proudly say, you know, 'my – my sister and I had these screaming rows about stuff.' God, I could do without that. No, no. Never want to do that.

REBECCA: I think it's not even about screaming rows. It's more just the – just the conflict thing. And I think we – we will disagree on things, and we'll make our opinions known. But we do tend to

do it in a very, um, we're very protective of each other's feelings. I think that's what it is. And I don't think that's a bad thing.

RACHEL: That's amazing.

JEREMY: We've both been in – we could both have – if we'd gone a different way, we both could've been in the diplomatic service, I think. Couldn't we?

CATHY: Yes, you could.

JEREMY: We could've easily, you know.

CATHY: So you don't repress stuff? And then go back to your partners and say, 'I hate –'?

REBECCA: No, but I think we – I think it takes me a – I mean, I'm very, uh, conflict adverse anyway. I just am in all areas, really. I don't like what my husband calls, 'asking the lady.' I don't like any kind of confrontation. I have to go and complain about anything, or – so that's – that's just me generally. I want everybody to like me and I'm – I hate anything where I have to kind of ring someone up and go, 'okay, you did say you were going to deliver this by – you know, and you haven't.' So, and I mean – and the weird thing is I'm even like that with – with Jem.

And to a lesser extent – funnily enough, to a lesser extent with Mum and Dad. I'm a bit more direct with Mum and Dad. But I think that's because I talk to them every single day, whereas I don't with you. So with Jem I will absolutely, if there's something that needs to be sorted out, I'll sort it out with him. But I'm definitely aware that I do it in quite a protective way. Because – and I think it's, uh, because we – I don't know. I just really value

you. The nice atmosphere between the two of us. And I don't want to blow that. I don't want to kind of go barging in and go, 'do you know what? You really pissed me off when you –', because it'll just spoil everything. And I feel like it'll be very hard to put it back.

CATHY: It's a bit like your childhood home. Yeah. It's a place to go.

REBECCA: Yeah, it's a nice atmosphere, exactly. And I don't want to screw that up. And also, as I say, it's not me to do that. I would never do that at work, either. If there's a problem, I'd always find a diplomatic way of handling it. I'll never just yell at somebody.

RACHEL: Are there any areas with each other that are off limits?

REBECCA: I don't know if we talk much about our relationships particularly, would we? I think – not because there's any great secrets.

JEREMY: No.

REBECCA: I just think we tend to – I think maybe because I'm very outspoken and open about stuff and I know you're very private, Jem wouldn't necessarily – wouldn't be the person that I would, you know, want to talk to about that kind of stuff. Because I just think – I just don't think you'd enjoy it very much. I think I – no, I could. But I'd probably be more likely to maybe talk to Kate than I would to you I think. But I don't know. I don't know if you feel like that.

JEREMY: Yeah. Uh, yeah. I think we agree on everything. I think I do. But I don't – I can't – I've got nothing to say. I've got nothing to share.

REBECCA: I sort of feel like it would be awkward if I went, 'Jem, I really need to talk to you about something to do with the relationship – a relationship thing.'

CATHY: Oh, really?

REBECCA: I feel like you, uh, you're just quite private about it. Whereas other things, any other problem, I mean I have – I do and would and have many times talked to you at enormous length about worries about, you know, money or career or agent or, you know. There's a whole lot of stuff where Jem would be the first person I'd talk to. But I think if it came to relationship stuff, I probably wouldn't. I'd probably go talk to a friend.

JEREMY: Oh yeah. And likewise. I would talk to you, and we do. And I've – I've bored you senseless talking about 'uh, what do you think I should do about', or, 'I've got to do this and I don't want to,' or whatever. That – that we'll talk about until the cows come home and until she's propping her eyelids up with matches.

REBECCA: So I'm more decisive, I think, than you. Again, it's the marathon sprint thing. So –

RACHEL: Yeah.

JEREMY: Yeah.

REBECCA: So we have these long conversations and then I'll kind of go, 'okay, so you need to do this.' And then you don't do it. You don't do it for another year or so. And I'm going to go – at that point, I'm going, 'yeah, we've done this. I've told you what I think.'

RACHEL: Is there anything that you've never said to each other that you'd politely like to say to each other?

REBECCA: [laughs] Politely like to. I like the –

JEREMY: Now we explode.

REBECCA: Yeah. I'll tell you what really pisses me off –

JEREMY: Remember that time in 1978? Do you remember that?
[laughs]

REBECCA: Yeah, that's right. No, I mean I think – I think if we, you know, if we had a real – if there was one area of our personalities where there is a bit of a clash, I think it is that I tend to be quite fast and decisive, and you tend to be quite indecisive. So I think that's probably the only area where we are more likely to get a little bit frosty. Um, which is my polite version of conflict. Because I will – I will –

JEREMY: Impulsive.

REBECCA: Yeah. I'm a bit more – well, wait. See, funnily enough, most people think I'm really not impulsive. But compared with you, I'm very impulsive. So I think that's the only area where I think there's – there's a real difference between us. And there are times when I just go, 'okay, I'm going to do this thing now.' And Jem's a bit like, 'hm, I don't know, we could –' And I remember, actually, the closest we came to having a proper argument some years ago was when the two of us went off to buy a camera for our mum. And we went to John Lewis together to buy this camera. And Jem had – Jem had said he knows about cameras

and I don't. So he said, 'oh, I'll research it a bit online, on Which or something.' So I knew he'd done about a good week or two weeks of research. And we drove into John Lewis and I parked the car for an hour or something, on a metre. And we went in and Jem sort of went – and I said, 'so what is it we're looking for?' And he said, 'oh, it's this. It's the Olympus bla bla bla.' So we walked up to it and I called the guy over and I said, 'oh, we're looking – we're interested in the Olympus.' And Jem went, 'although...' And at that point, we were then there for about an hour and half, and I – I was putting more money on the metre, and that was the only time I remember thinking, 'okay, just – I can't do this. I actually can't do this.'

JEREMY: Yeah.

REBECCA: So that's probably the only area where we're very – we actually would just outright just say, 'okay, I'm getting really cross now. This is pissing me off now. Yeah. I have to just leave, get a coffee, you deal with it.'

JEREMY: Yeah. I want to know I've got exactly the right thing.

REBECCA: Yeah, he really does.

JEREMY: Not just – not just – I'm not going to make do. It's going to be exactly the thing I wanted.

REBECCA: And in the right box. Because if that box is dented, we can't have that box. And it's all that sort of stuff.

JEREMY: I don't – that's been thrown! Some idiot's thrown that.

REBECCA: Exactly.

JEREMY: I'm not going to have that, no.

REBECCA: So we will occasionally be less than polite with each other. But it's rare, I think.

CATHY: Jeremy, anything to Rebecca?

RACHEL: Yeah.

CATHY: Anything to Rebecca?

REBECCA: 'Get off my back.'

[All laugh]

[Guitar and flute music]

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.

CATHY: Thanks for listening! See you next time.

RACHEL: Fucking hell, you spat on me.

