

## THE UNKNOWN / TRANSCRIPT

### FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

#### INTRO

**9 Year Old Girl:** We believe, or at least at my school we believe that God created us and then that leads to another question - where did God come from? I mean, I'm sure someone will figure it out. There will be signs that will tell you but I kind of - I just really want to know the answer to that question.

**Lily:** Yeah! Don't we all!

**Woman 1:** I imagine it with a capital U. Like I think I see the word written out and it's capitalised. There are certain things that are unknown but the unknown itself kind of has this entity like quality.

**Lily Narration:** The Unknown. You've probably heard of it. You've probably thought about it.

**Man 1:** The unknown. Huh. It's interesting because there's a lot of unknowns in the world, right?

**Lily Narration:** SO many unknowns. And even just waiting for something fun can be a stressor.

**9 Year Old Girl:** Like your birthday present, you don't know what you're gonna get because it's in a box.

**Lily:** With your birthday present, it's in the box, you don't know what it is, what do you feel while you're waiting?

**9 Year Old Girl:** I feel anxious and un-patient.

**Lily Narration:** Until she opens that box, it's Schrodinger's birthday present - all possibilities exist. She could find the very thing she hoped for. She could find something better than anything on her wish list. And she could be really disappointed.

**Man 2:** The unknown are those facets of life that you really don't know what to expect and it's a little scary sometimes. But that's what makes life exciting, you know? [laughing]

**Lily Narration:** In the last episode, we explored defense mechanisms - all the things we do to cope psychologically with various threats in our day to day lives. One of the biggest threats we find ourselves defending against as conscious beings is the unknown in its many forms. So in this episode we're gonna dig into all of that excitement - like, how we develop narratives and strategies to get through uncertainty. And what happens when life tears through those structures like an F-5 tornado.

I'm Lily Sloane and this is A Therapist Walks Into a Bar.

I can't think of a better way to dive into the unknown -

**Phoebe:** Ok, I'm recording.

**Lily Narration:** then to begin with a death.

**Phoebe:** My sister died two years ago, she was thirteen months younger than me. Chloe. And after she died, I was flying my mother to California, who was in a bad way, and it was one of those flights where you see people sometimes and you think they have this look on their face which is something terrible has happened. You can tell something terrible has happened. And that look was certainly on my mother's face.

But I remember looking out the window and it was this beautiful sky, and thinking to myself - I was thirty two years old and the host of a big podcast and everything else - and I remember thinking to myself "I wonder if Chloe's up there on that cloud" and it was the craziest thing for me to think because I was thinking about this child's idea we have of heaven and an angel and Chloe lounging on a cloud and I thought to myself "isn't that a wonderful idea, right now, in this one moment to believe that she's up there looking down, looking outside, saying hi mom, hi phoebe, good luck on your way to California."

So, do I believe that's true? I don't think I do, but the comfort that that brought in that one moment and that that's the thing that came into my head was very striking to me. And now, my seven year old niece, when it's beautiful outside, Madeline will turn to me and say "it's a Chloe Sky." So to me, whether that's spirituality or religion - who knows? - that's enough. That to me is enough.

I'm Phoebe Judge. I'm the host of Criminal.

**Lily Narration:** In case you haven't heard it, Criminal is a podcast where Phoebe and her co-producer Lauren Spohrer bring us really compelling stories about crime like the one about the guy who keeps getting in trouble for flipping off the cops or the legendary Carry Nation, who wielded a hatchet and busted up saloons for the temperance movement, or the one about how a botanist ended up helping solve crimes. To me, Criminal is really about the complexities of human nature and how we relate to the bounds and structures created for us. How rules get broken and how we try to make sense of what happened.

**Phoebe:** Well Crime stories are just fascinating. People say that sometimes, you do a show about crime, are you depressed all the time? And anyone who listens to criminal knows that there's just as many funny stories as there are sad stories.

**Lily Narration:** Phoebe's deep curiosity brought her to journalism. Before Criminal she worked in public radio covering big stuff like hurricanes and oil spills out of the gulf coast. But at this point, Phoebe just has more questions than answers.

**Phoebe:** I'm more confused about the human experience after starting Criminal than before. I think that nothing is black and white. Most of everything in this world is in that grey area.

**Lily Narration:** Phoebe's work means facing a lot of unknowns, like when she visited the body farm in Texas where bodies donated to forensic science are studied at varying levels of decomposition. You can imagine this would be a shocking experience.

[clip from Criminal episode "All The Time In The World"]

**Lily Narration:** But despite all the outlandish stories Phoebe investigates - stories of lawlessness, human desperation, or in this case staring the decay of our flesh right in the eye, in her day to day life, Phoebe is kind of...rigid...

**Phoebe:** I mean, living with someone who is as rigid as I am, if I weren't able to step away from it sometimes, I'd die alone. I'd die alone a miserable lonely death with no friends. Because who would want to be around someone as rigid a person as I can be.

**Lily Narration:** She's particular about when she eats her meals,

**Phoebe:** You know there are those people who say "Oh I'll eat a late lunch" or "I'll just snack on something". That's a word I don't understand - "snacking on something". I don't snack on things, I have my meal.

**Lily Narration:** or how many miles she's going to run,

**Phoebe:** I run fifty miles a month - that's another thing I do.

**Lily Narration:** or what time she's going to bed or getting up in the morning...

**Phoebe:** Staying up until two in the morning to me is about the most unappealing thing I've ever heard. I can't imagine wanting to stay up until two o'clock in the morning. But in the same way I couldn't imagine staying in bed until ten o'clock in the morning. I think you get up, you work hard, you keep your head down, and you can sleep soundly knowing that.

**Lily Narration:** Hearing about this, I find myself feeling a bit jealous. I can get into a routine for a bit and then I just lose it again and feel a bit chaotic...I'd be better if I was one of THOSE people!

**Phoebe:** Well yes, I live like a seventy five year old. Maybe you just want to be an elderly person.

**Lily Narration:** Yeah. Maybe. Except most 75 year olds aren't running 50 miles a month. But Phoebe says being this regimented person doesn't get in the way of having a full and exciting life. And yet, there are those places in her life where she plays it safe.

**Phoebe:** We live in a world where we have the opportunity to be disappointed at every turn. And I try to protect myself from disappointment as much as possible. I know that cutting my hair and giving myself bangs might be the greatest thing that ever happened to me but I think that possibility is about twenty percent. And I think the other eighty percent I can safely say- I'm not gonna set myself up for any more disappointing than I might find just walking around during my daily tasks. And so I'm gonna keep my hair long.

**Lily Narration:** Like the rest of us, Phoebe's negotiating, in her own way, when to take risks and when to step outside of the bounds she's constructed for herself - when so much really is unknowable. When so much is out of our control.

**Phoebe:** There are risks that we can take and we have to take to become evolved human beings and there are some things that we can just say "I'm gonna stay safe on this one." And maybe that will change. But for me there are constants in my life that if I lose them I feel like I might just become untethered like an astronaut in space. You know you see them and they're doing that space walk and they have that little tiny strap and if they let go they just float away forever and how would they ever get back.

**Lily Narration:** So when Phoebe's sister died, it wasn't like in the movies where this big thing happens and now the person is noticeably, drastically changed forever.

**Phoebe:** You know I was as nuts before Chloe died [laughing] as I am. No, nothing changed.

**Lily Narration:** It's more like - all the little things we do to stay sane, or all the ways we try to convince ourselves we have control do work on this kind of micro level but the don't really stop the world from crashing down around us when big things happen.

**Phoebe:** And so what you really get to see is that these little tricks that we've set up for ourselves really don't matter that much. They help us get through the stuff - but when the big stuff happens, it all flies out the window and you see that you are ok. You're ok. And I will tell you - I spent a couple of nights not having dinner at 7:30 and I was ok. So it's very interesting to see how you respond in all different types of circumstances. And to

also always know that you do not have it figured out. And that you are as clueless as the man sitting next to you on the bus and we're all just doing the same exact thing.

**Lily Narration:** So sometimes we go through stuff and everything falls apart for a bit and then we reintegrate and get back to life and all those defenses that were generally working ok. And it's not like we didn't take any lessons with us, it's just that the long term impact might be more subtle the further away from the event we get.

But sometimes a shock is so big or hits you at just the right moment and the unknown becomes a salient aspect of your day to day because a wrench could fly at your face at any moment.

This woman I met at the bar - she's 24 years old now - described who she thought she was at 16

**Woman 1:** I was very healthy my entire life, very athletic, whatever, didn't have any kind of medical issues, a very conventional middle classed privileged life.

**Lily Narration:** Given this identity as healthy, athletic, privileged, she never entertained the thought that these constants would come into question. But, they did. In a really big way.

**Woman 1:** I was sixteen years old, it was like the day before I was gonna take my driving test. And I was in my mom's car, we started going to the beach, I started to talk and I couldn't talk well. And I started fumbling my words and everything felt wrong and I couldn't understand and she was like honey are you ok, do we just need to go home? And I was like abedabudah. So we went home, pull in the garage -

**Lily Narration:** And this is when she blacks out. She's told she opened the car door and fell onto the garage floor.

**Woman 1:** My first memory is waking up on a stretcher to an EMT who was really cute.

**Lily Narration:** She asks this cute EMT

**Woman 1:** What happened, what happened, what happened?

**Lily Narration:** And he tells her - you had a seizure.

**Woman 1:** And the first thing out of my mouth was, "but I'm not the type of person that has seizures. Like, that doesn't happen to people like me. I can do anything, I can control my brain, I can control everything.

**Lily Narration:** For 16 years of her life, this is what she believed. That's not a simple thing to wrap your mind around.

**Woman 1:** Right from there it turned into a whole thing. Like Ok WHY?"

**Lily Narration:** So she sees a neurologist, who runs some tests, she gets an MRI. And over the phone, riding in the car with her dad on her way to get her senior picture taken, her Pediatric Neurologist gave her the news:

**Woman 1:** Dr. Mel I remember he was cool.

**Lily Narration:** She had a birth defect in her brain called a "heterotopia".

**Woman 1:** He told me about that and I was like "heterotopia, that sounds like a theme park for straight people! [laughing] that was my first thought!

**Lily Narration:** Isn't the whole world a theme park for straight people? But we digress.

**Woman 1:** So it's basically a clump of too many neurons in one spot. It's not like a tumor, it doesn't grow it doesn't change. And because seizures are caused by electrical activity in the brain, if there's too many neurons in one spot, it's more likely that there's gonna be too much electrical activity there.

**Lily Narration:** Too much electrical activity in the wrong part of her brain. Imagine being sixteen - forget that, imagine if this happened to you right now. A lot of us would probably go to lengths to make sense of it. When presented with gaps in information (like in her case, the WHY) how do we make space for new information that contradicts what we thought we knew? Often we make up narratives that serve us in one way - they attempt to provide answers - but they can also be really painful.

**Woman 1:** I started crying, like was it my fault? Is it my fault? And he was like no it's not your fault, it's not your fault. And I realized later on, reflecting on that, I would rather have been able to say it was my fault, like I did something wrong, I controlled what happened to me as opposed to just I couldn't control any of that.

**Lily Narration:** So she's worked through a lot of grief around losing aspects of her identity and rebuilding a life with the knowledge that she's not invincible and that she has some very real limitations (like she never did get to take that drivers' test).

**Woman 1:** I think learning that life shit can happen like that and you don't see it coming and you can't control it and you have to live with that all the time, it changes the way you live and approach stuff...

**Lily Narration:** One of the extraordinary things about human beings is that we're wired for meaning making. Maybe that's a survival thing, like how do you go on being conscious and not

feel a sense of purpose? What would be the point? And so we use religion, philosophy, science to try to get to help us build a narrative or get to the bottom of it. Somehow, eventually, it'll all make sense.

**Woman 1:** Something I struggle with in life a lot is the purpose of your life, is it to live for other people and try, almost like a utilitarian thing, like the largest benefit, however you manage that tangibly however you manage that for humanity or should you just like do what makes you individually happy? Because it's just so hard to measure that and everything is so confusing!

**Lily Narration:** Oh, it is very very confusing. And some of us...well we tend towards questioning and falling apart a little in the face of the unknown whether or not something shocking has happened in our lives. I remember standing on a step stool, staring into the mirror when I was about 5 or 6 years old, working myself up into tears trying to understand why I exist. And that certainly wasn't the last time.

Whether you believe the purpose of life is to find happiness or to do good or to transcend your corporeal form and reach Nirvana or to please God or even if you believe it's all biology and physics coming about through a series of random accidents, here you are. But to plan for the future, to understand traumas of the past, or to even open a mysterious birthday gift, you have to face vast amounts of uncertainty and your natural tendency will be to mitigate that.

**Lily:** Is there any special tricks that help you be more patient?

**9 Year Old Girl:** Like, maybe if I were to have a playdate with my best friend. That would usually keep my mind off of it. Because I will have such a good time with my friend that I will forget about it.

**Lily:** Good distraction.

**Lily Narration:** And the adults? Maybe we get better at distracting ourselves but the mysteries are always lurking.

**Man 1:** I try not to let it impact my life honestly. It's one of those questions you can't really answer so I just try to enjoy every day that I can and every moment

**Woman 2:** I do a lot of differing and postponing until possible action, lots of avoidance and anxiety.

**Man 2:** I like to go to the gym, I like to meditate, play a little guitar

**Woman 1:** Just fuck it, because who knows what's going on - like we're all just literally on this rock that's twirling around the sun. You know - that's the right...I was thinking it was the other way for a second and then I was like no we do go around the sun  
[laughing]

**Lily:** There was a lot of confusion about that for a long time though.

**Woman 1:** For a LONG TIME. But that was the unknown. They did not know!

**Woman 2:** Why wouldn't we be the center of the universe?

**Man 2:** Next you're gonna tell me the world isn't flat. [laughing]

**Lily:** We've got a flat eather here!

**Man 2:** Like look at it! Look at the ground beneath us??

**Lily:** [sarcastic] How come I'm not falling off?

**Man 2:** Sometimes I feel like I am falling off though.

**Lily Narration:** Whatever the truth is - and just to confirm, the Earth is not flat. I'm pretty sure - there's two equally important pieces to how we handle all of this. First, we need comfort. We need our caregivers to hold us and tell us everything is going to be ok. Yeah, it's kind of a lie. They can't promise that. But we need it and that's ok. Second, we need to build our tolerance for sitting with the discomfort of the unknown. A little bit at a time. Because we need that too. It's creative space. We won't discover anything new without facing it. And then what is the point? So comfort and discomfort. Both help us grow.

**Phoebe:** It's so interesting what brings us comfort. What brings us - and I'm sure it's something that comes from when we were young and what felt familiar and safe to us.

**Lily Narration:** That's Phoebe again - and outside of her routines that give her a sense of control over her life, she has other ways of feeling grounded when everything else is a bit up in the air.

**Phoebe:** I was thinking about this yesterday - i was driving in my car and the phone was ringing and it was coming through the car and I was having these big talks about stuff and then the phone call would end and Fred Astaire would come on and it was all ok driving down the road. And I don't know - I think it's those things that we all have that - those quiet things that make us able to get through - and not to - that sounds too grim "get through" - but just ground us and let us know we're gonna be ok.

**Lily Narration:** For Phoebe, it's Jazz standards that ground her. For me, watching reruns of Star Trek The Next Generation makes me feel safe and hopeful. Who knows what the future will look like? Who knows if my life will move towards or farther away from the stuff I've thought I always wanted? Who knows when I'll die? Or the people I love? It's kind of too much to spend much time thinking about. But I do. And now you can too. You're welcome.

The question becomes, when are you too stuck in comfort, when are you too stuck in chaos.

Phoebe has a goal of how many miles she has to run each month. She says in her mind, if she doesn't do it, her world will explode. I get that. I feel that way about getting this podcast out on my self-imposed deadline - in fact it helps me do it. It feels soooo real. But if we can't let in the

part of us, however small, that knows our rules are in many ways arbitrary constructs - then we're really in trouble.

**Phoebe:** I was in Paris at a cafe [laughing] that's how I'm starting the story which is why I'm hesitant to tell this story because I sound bad - but I was in Paris at a cafe and I thought "Oh I'm gonna have a cigarette". I thought if there's one time in the world that I'm gonna have a cigarette - and I remember thinking to myself if I have this cigarette, is that it? Are the floodgates open? And I smoked a cigarette and the cigarette was done and I thought to myself "ok, you're ok." And that was a great thing. You're ok. You can be a little risky. You can step out of these comfort zones for a minute and you'll come back. It's gonna be alright. The world will not end.

**Lily Narration:** It's gonna be alright. The world will not end. Of course, no one can promise that. But that's most likely the case. And if it does end, it almost certainly has nothing to do with you.

## CREDITS

This episode was produced by me, Lily Sloane and edited by Emily Shaw. Music and sound design also by me. Thank you Garrett Tiedemann of The White Whale podcast for helping me talk through some philosophy for this episode.

To learn more about Phoebe Judge and Criminal, visit [thisiscriminal.com](http://thisiscriminal.com) and her new show This Is Love at [thisislove.com](http://thisislove.com). And really, just subscribe to both of them if you haven't already. I don't miss a single episode.

As always, I am so appreciative of the strangers who got into the thick of such a tough topic with me at the bar. And I'm grateful for Arthur Macs Tap and Snack in Oakland, CA. That plum sour was pretty delicious.

And guess what?! Some of you have already joined the elite group of patrons making show happen. One such patron signed up for the WTF ARE YOU EVEN REAL tier so I'm gonna give a shout out right here for Bre Slimick. Thank you for helping make this show possible. I want more of you in on this so visit [patreon.com/atherapistwalksintoabar](https://patreon.com/atherapistwalksintoabar) to contributing any amount that works for you on a monthly basis and get your special insider rewards. Again, [p a t r e o n dot com slash a therapist walks into a bar](https://patreon.com/atherapistwalksintoabar).

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Thanks for listening.

**9 Year Old Girl:** Ummmm sometimes we pretend in the car that we're part of Harry Potter or something - that's my cousin, he's asking me what I'm doing -

**Lily:** Oh - she's on the radio right now!

**9 Year Old Girl:** Uh, there's spells that I know.

**Lily:** can you do a spell?

**9 Year Old Girl:** Um Sectumsempra! That one's where it tickles you basically to death.

**Lily:** I think I've been tickled almost to death before and I did not like it. Have you been tickled to death or almost to death?

**9 Year Old Girl:** Almost.