

## THE REAL QUESTION

## OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

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VOICEMAIL: Hi everyone at The Real Question Podcast. My name is Beth and I'm from Bristol in the UK. I saw you are looking for stories of giving away sentimental items or keeping them, etcetera. And I wanted to tell you a story about when my friends and I, about, uh, ten years ago now? Decided to get rid of all of our boyfriend – ex-boyfriend things over the years. So, you know, letters and pictures and random little trinkets. Um, and we kind of did this as ceremony almost. And we just basically talked through everything, put it in a big pile, and then the following day burnt it. And weirdly, for the rest of the week, all of these ex-boyfriends came out of the woodwork and started ringing or texting us, completely out of the blue, sort of you know, how are things? Ah, so we would like to think that that was some kind of weird magic going on. Um, yeah, so that's my weird story about getting rid of sentimental ex-boyfriend stuff.

[theme music begins]

VANESSA: I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

CASPER: And I'm Casper ter Kuile.

V: And we believe in ex-boyfriend magic on The Real Question.

C: A hundred percent.

[theme music continues, fades, ends]

C: Thanks to everyone who signed up for Patreon. A big props to Aversena H, Emily G, Erica A, Dee or Di X, and LD.

V: They're the semifinalists on American Idol this season, Casper. [Casper laughs] Who are you texting in to vote for?

C: I mean, I feel like Aversena H, I mean with that name, you know, I can't go wrong.

V: Yeah. They're definitely covering Celine Dion's It's All Coming Back To Me. So Casper, if I knew that what happened to Beth would happen to me, the stakes of this question would be very different. [Casper laughs] But what I'm talking about is like, virtual stuff, right like photos on your phone. So I don't feel like that has the same magical impact, right? There's nothing to burn.

C: I was gonna say, you don't wanna burn the phone, that would be a little extreme.

V: I know. Yeah, so I think that the stakes might be lower here, or different, not lower. Just different here. I, as you know Casper, dated a man for a couple of months. We'll call him Tom.

C: Mhmm.

V: Tom and I had a lot in common on paper, and I, like, looking back was like very clearly using Tom as a rebound. And at the end of two or three months, I not only realized that I was using him and that this

relationship wasn't gonna work out, I realized that I, like, profoundly disliked Tom. [Casper laughs] And the inciting incident for my breaking up with him was [laughing] that he said something negative about you, and I was like "Bye!" [both laughing] Like, "I choose Casper. You're never allowed to say a bad thing about him. Who the heck do you think you are?? Get out of my life." [both laugh again] So, Tom is like obviously like not like a bad guy, right?

C: Right.

V: Like, we just were in no way suited for one another. And I started to resent him in part because I felt guilty, right? I was like oh I let this go on. It clicked for me that I was using him as a rebound, and I was like I don't know how to get out of this. He's a nice man. And I've been bad, and then I -- of course I behaved worse, like, I let it drag on because I couldn't figure out how to end it nicely.

C: Mmm.

V: Right, and so there's just like a tremendous amount of shame about the way that I handled that relationship. However, to be honest, I go months and months without ever thinking about it.

C: Mmm.

V: I essentially forget that I have dated him. Peter and I were recently talking about my exes, and I was like "Oh, I think I just didn't date anyone [Casper laughs] for all these years." And Peter was like "What about Tom?" And I was like [snaps] "Right! Tom!" [Casper still laughing] "Tom!" And recently it was my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, and so I was making a photo montage for them. And so I was going through all my old google photos. And I found all these pictures of me and Tom. And I cannot tell you how much they stressed me out.

C: Hmm.

V: I was like "Eww, I behaved so badly!" It made me feel shame and guilt and embarrassment, like I don't

—

C: Hmm.

V: I wasn't proud of dating him — like it just made me feel every icky emotion.

C: Hmm.

V: And so I was struck by this moment of like, it would be two buttons to delete this forever.

C: Hmm.

V: And knowing me, I will now just not think about him. Right? Like, these moments where I come across the photos are one of the only moments that I remember this at all. And so like, should I? Should I push these two buttons, or not? That's my question. Ta-da!

C: Oh gosh. Well firstly, I remember that moment really well, um, so, affirming that it actually did happen. Those photos are not just a mirage. [Vanessa laughing]

V: I'm also gonna have to click two buttons on deleting your memory. [Casper laughing] "No it didn't!"

C: But I'm really struck – I mean you used a really big word to describe the feeling that it brought up, of shame. And I'm curious to understand more, is it that you feel like you did something bad to him? Like, are there things or ways maybe that you treated this person that you're embarrassed about, or that don't feel right? Or is it more about that you're embarrassed or ashamed in front of other people that you were ever with this person?

V: Both. Like, the latter, which makes me feel the former.

C: Hmm.

V: It's like a spiral. Like, I am embarrassed that I ever dated him, and that is a horrible horrible feeling!

C: Yeah.

V: Like, I—he's like a nice smart man, right? Like there's nothing objectively to be embarrassed about except that he and I were so ill suited to one another. But I am! Right? Like, we –

C: Hmm.

V: --dated in front of people who I respect and I – I am embarrassed that we dated. He could be socially awkward in a way that could end up really hurting people's feelings, and so there are some people whose feelings he hurt—

C: Hmm.

V: --and I'm embarrassed that he was associated with me for those months. I don't know! I'm embarrassed that I dated him, and I'm ashamed that I'm embarrassed that I dated him. I wanna be proud of every decision I've made like that.

C: Hm.

V: And then also, I'm ashamed for other things that I did to him. [pause] Breaking up with someone is horrible!

C: Yeah.

V: Just hurting anybody's feelings like that is a really horrible feeling. My other breakups have either [laughing] I've been the one who's been dumped, or it was early enough that I was like I don't really feel like I owe you much, right? Like –

C: Right.

V: This is the one big breakup where I was the break-er up-er, and I really hurt his feelings, and like that is not something I wanna like, spend any time reveling in.

C: And it feels like these photographs are a direct portal to that feeling, and it's just like maybe you just feel like I don't wanna see these photographs, like let's get rid of them.

V: Yeah, it's like photos with us with our heads, you know, up against each other, smiling. And I'm like "Ah!" [laughing] "I'm proud of none of this!"

C: [laughing] So why is there hesitancy? I mean, on the one hand this feels like, you know, icky memories, don't wanna think about it, delete!

V: It's a great question. I mean some of it is like, there's a picture of like -- this is how serious I was about him -- like of me and him and my brother and my sister-in-law. And so I would like also be deleting a picture of my brother and my sister-in-law. There are pictures of him and I at a wedding that I went to, right? So like—

C: Mmm.

V: I would be deleting these events that other people who I love are attached to. So that's part of it. The other thing is that like, to some extent I just believe in good record keeping. As – this is another story related to you—when you were searching for the afikomen with my stepdaughters for Passover this year, [Casper laughing] do you wanna tell everybody what you found?

C: Oh you should say [both laughing] –

V: You were so judgmental! You found right like, I have a box of like cards that I've received, and postcards and right like, and ticket stubs. Right?

C: It's not just a box! This thing was overflowing [Vanessa laughs] with every single receipt that Vanessa probably has ever used or found. It wasn't just the ones she's received, it's like other pieces of paper that may have crossed her path. [both laughing]

V: That is – so inaccurate it's amazing. It's also not everything I've ever gotten. Whatever. But it – it's like significant things in my life, right? If somebody sends me a lovely card or postcard -- honestly part of it is that I have a really hard time reading nice things that people write to me. And so, I often don't read them, and just put them in the box. Like, I read that the tone of it is very nice and complimentary and I'm like "Okay, I get it!" And I just put it in the box.

C: Huh.

V: And I, like, think maybe one day when I'm elderly [laughing] I'll have the strength to go read them.

C: Mmm.

V: I do believe in good record keeping. There have been moments in my life where those kinds of records have helped me put a timeline together for something that's really helpful or useful. And then – I don't know, maybe eighty-year-old Vanessa is gonna wanna turn to her grandchildren and be like "This is a man that I shouldn't have dated. [Casper laughs] And here's the lesson.

C: Yeah. This may be too much of a question, so tell me if that's the case, but – I'm wondering to what extent your family history is also a part of why records are so important, and holding on to memories are so important, because you know, members of your family had to leave very suddenly, couldn't take things with them, you know. Records are a luxury in some way, in some circumstances.

V: Yeah, I—it's so funny, you are so sweet, and you know me so well, but I actually think part of me is like the opposite. I'm like "Do you know who kept really good records? The Nazis." [Casper laughs] Like, why do I feel like [both laughing] I need to keep good records? Like, who cares? A life well lived is messy and like doesn't have good records. Right?

C: Yeah.

V: So, I don't know, I just think like there are arguments for either side.

C: Mmm.

V: And the other thing about keeping a good record is that it feels more honest to me.

C: Mmm.

V: Um, like as a reflection tool, as a "Look, this is who you really are. You really made this mistake. And like that is a thing that you did."

C: Hmm.

V: And maybe over time, I will not see it as a mistake, but see it as part of my path, or maybe it'll get me to treat someone better.

C: Mmm.

V: But it feels dishonest to just like delete my mistakes.

C: Yeah. [pause] It strikes me that you're thinking about these photographs as maybe not just for yourself, but that you would show younger people them, right? As you're getting older. I just wanna go back to the shame feeling that feels really at the heart of this question. Are there – are there particular individuals that you're thinking about – that you would want to tell this story to? Like, I'm just curious if these photographs are for a purpose of particular people. Or imaginary people. That there's some reason why you're keeping them because you might show them one day.

V: I spend a lot of my work time like talking to young women. And have other young women in my life, you and I share god-daughters, and I have my step daughters, and you know, I don't bring out photos and go like "This is Tom. Don't make the same mistake I made." [Casper laughs] But I feel like remembering Tom, you know, might help me to have more compassion as I sit with people as they try to make decisions, right? And –

C: Hmm.

V: My life and the lessons from it are one of the resources that I have to [pause] sit with people younger than I am.

C: Mmm.

V: And so I don't wanna only be informed by the good parts, like, it feels like it's a potential resource for me to say to someone on either side, right? Like, sometimes people who are otherwise good people can use you and like that does not make it okay.

C: Mmm.

V: Don't let yourself get used. Or, I understand that you're in pain and maybe taking advantage of a situation, and that's something that's gonna bother you in ten years. You know?

C: Hmm.

V: And so I like don't wanna lose sight of it. Not that I ever give like, that didactic of advice, or you know, but like these are lessons that are alive for me.

C: Yeah, it's like part of your story, and – and cutting it out would be an inaccurate retelling of it, in a way. Yeah.

V: Yeah, and you know, one of my other podcasts is Hot and Bothered, it's a romance podcast, so thinking about the role of romance, and like bad romance – like it's like really a part of my work and my career and you know? Like it's a part of what I do.

C: Yeah. Well let's look at your first text and see if it can offer us some guidance.

V: So [laughing] to make this as high stakes as possible, my first text is the movie Spotlight.

C: Whoa! [both laughing]

V: Which – is the 2015 film that – it's about the Spotlight team at the Boston Globe who begin investigating initially one priest who was moved around several times in different parishes around Boston because of sexual abuse and then it turns out that this team is the one who figured out that this was actually –

C: Mm.

V: --um, an epidemic amongst the Boston archdiocese of moving sexual abusers around. So, I'm gonna play you a little scene. This scene is three journalists talking, and one of them has just figured out that there are church directories that outline what priest is at which parish, when. And why they move.

CLIP:

[rustling]

Person 1: I can't read that. Look for it buried in there. 1991 is the year they pulled him out of Charleston.

Person 2: Bert, Liam – [papers rustling]

Person 3: Yeah.

Person 2: Sick leave. It's an official designation.

VANESSA: So the section I want us to think about is that "Sick Leave, it's an official designation."

CASPER: Hmm.

V: This is data that is tracked that is just logistical data, right? It's just this priest was moved from this parish to another. And then like, sick leave is also just like an official designation, right? And it turns out that it's a coded designation. But when the parishes were keeping these records, they didn't know why they were keeping these records, right? And it turns out that these records really exposed something vitally important later.

C: Mmm.

V: And [laughing] I don't know what in my life could ever warrant that. But I'll tell you a story about a moment that it felt really good that we kept good records. We got accused as a company of once changing our audio. That we released audio with one thing, and then somebody complained about it, and we rereleased an updated audio. And because we keep good records, we could confidently say "We didn't do that. Here's the evidence that we didn't do that. We've never done that." Right? And we invited the person to go back and re-listen, and it was really made clear, at least to us with integrity, that like this person misheard something we said and was misremembering what they heard, and it was a baseless accusation. And it's just how I feel in my life, that like I wanna be a person of integrity, I don't know why good records matter, but I wanna be able to say like "yes I delete photos, if I take five selfies and one of them is unflattering [laughing] I delete four of them" [Casper also laughing] Right? But like, I don't delete the record.

C: Mmm. I'm curious to think more about this relationship between integrity and shame, because it feels like –

V: Mhmm.

C: -- deleting the photos and the way you've told the story, it feels like in some way that you're inching towards a feeling of not being in integrity.

V: Mhmm.

C: is that fair?

V: Yeah. So my aunt is someone who spent a lot of my life interacting with me in a way that felt like gaslighting to me.

C: Mhmm.

V: And I believe her, once we were talking about something and we remembered a situation so differently, and she said "I just don't remember these things." And I remember thinking, I was like well of course you don't they're not like emotionally troubling to you [laughing] –

C: Hmm.

V: Like, you're being mean and abusive and so you don't remember them. Like, isn't that convenient? And also, like, if you remembered them, you would be ashamed of them. And it just created this like continuous loop of the same kind of mistake and abuse happening again and again, and her always being able to plead ignorance.

C: Hmm.

V: Of like "I said that? I don't remember that." And it's like, well six other people were there, I can like have them testify in an affidavit that like yes, you said that I look horrible in front of twenty people when I was nine years old, whatever it is.

C: Hmm.

V: And so I just like, I don't – I don't wanna do that. I don't wanna forget the horrible things I say. I don't wanna make the same mistakes twice.

C: Yeah.

V: And I make the same mistakes infinite times, right? But like, certainly if it's obvious to me that I've made a mistake, or somebody has told me I've hurt them, which Tom has told me many times that I hurt him, like –

C: Hmm.

V: I don't wanna keep making that mistake! And so it's like a talisman, right? Of like, okay, like I'm not gonna do that again. So it does, it feels like integrity to remember my shame.

C: Hmm.

V: But I don't recommend this! Right? Like [Casper laughs] I was talking about all these young women, if any of them came to me and were like, "this object makes me feel ashamed" I'd be like "Trash it!" [both laughing] Right? Like –

C: Yeah.

V: I am not a proponent of shame!

C: Right. Well that was what I wanted to ask you, is like, have you made the same mistake?

V: [laughing] Yeah, I've been insensitive to people. Right, like, and I've – but no, I haven't used anyone. And to be clear, when I started dating this guy, I did not realize I was using him, right? I wasn't like "I'm gonna date you in order to get over my ex!" Like, that wasn't like a conscious choice I made, but I just kept dating him for like – you know, just like a month after I realized. Whatever. I just didn't have the best intentions, or the most discernment in the world. But yes, I don't think it would bother me so much if I felt as though it wasn't a mistake that I was capable of making again.

C: Hmm.

V: I'm capable of being very insensitive. Of like, no longer caring about how the other person feels, being like "You've crossed a line, you've insulted my friend Casper, [Casper laughs] We're done, go away." Like, that is something I'm very capable of doing again. [Casper still laughing]

C: Vanessa, I do think there is a difference between what we've learned about your story and about your aunt's story. In that she never acknowledged any wrongdoing. And I – I do hear you say "Listen, we stayed together too long, you know, for whatever reason, maybe it was convenience, like, I didn't end it when I kind of knew that the relationship was gonna end." And I guess my question is, have you ever shared that with Tom? Cuz I think one of the differences between your aunt and you is that she has never acknowledged the truth of what happened. She may have acknowledged the pain she caused, but she's never said, "This is what happened to you."

V: Well, she hasn't even acknowledged the pain she caused. She was like "That sounds like you're being crazy." Like, she always vaguely accused me of making it up.

C: Well, she is then officially cancelled.

V: [laughing] She is cancelled. I don't speak to her. She is cancelled. I don't remember all of the things I said to Tom. I am sure that I apologized initially.



C: Hmm.

V: In the breakup process. And said, like “I didn’t handle this well.” Eventually I really, and maybe this is the thing I actually feel shame over, is he – for weeks after, kept wanting explanations and I really lost my patience with that.

C: Yeah.

V: And was just like, “I don’t owe you any more explanations, like, bye.” And I don’t think I was cruel, like I didn’t try to hurt him, but I no longer cared.

C: Yeah.

V: I’ve done this nicely, I did this kindly, and like I’m done. Stop. I don’t know, there’s another version where I like had more patience or was you know, I justified, not cruel to be kind, but like firmness as eventual kindness. And there was one time that he called me that he’d like me to come over to talk about it one more time, and I just was like “No, absolutely not.” And usually if someone tells me what they need from me, I believe people, and I try to give it to them.

C: Hmm.

V: And like, that runs across the board for me. Like, sometimes I will frame back to people, like, do you really need this from me, or do you only want this from me because that doesn’t feel easy for me to give right now.

C: Mhmm.

V: And people are usually really good about being like, “Do you know what, great point, I only want don’t need.” Or “Actually I need you.” And I – I really try to always say yes to that, and this is a time, Tom said, “I need you” and I just said “Nope.” I guess maybe that’s the thing I feel actual shame over.

C: Hmm.

V: And I’m not sure I would do it differently.

C: Well that’s what I’m hearing, is that maybe shame is not quite the right word. You know, it’s sad to disappoint people. But like, if the decisions you made then, which you know, sound painful but reasonable, I’m just curious if it’s less about integrity and it’s more about a time of just like, that really sucked. It wasn’t fun for him, it wasn’t fun for me. Yes, I may have made some mistakes but like, it’s just sad.

V: [pause] Yeah. And like, I was the [pause] bully, right? Like, I’m the bad guy.

C: But—but you weren’t a bully. Like, that’s so interesting to me that you’re using that language.

V: Yeah, and maybe -- and I love you so much, I so appreciate that you’re [laughing] like you cannot watch me feel ashamed, it’s like “No it’s not shame!” [both laughing] And I – I love you for that. The question is still, like, is there a lack of integrity in deleting this record?

C: Hmm.

V: Even if it doesn't have, as the language of the movie uses, like an official designation. I appreciate what you're pushing me towards, is saying you have this filed under shame and maybe the official designation is not shame—

C: Hmm.

V: --but it's sad, or icky, or [laughing] whatever else.

C: Hmm.

V: But regardless of what the official designation is, do I like, keep going around carrying it? And right, like these used to be, I think, somewhat easier decisions. You used to have to physically carry these things.

C: Right.

V: And so you're like "fuck it, I'm gonna trash this whole album. Like, why am I gonna move it?"

C: Right? Like Beth, burn it!

V: Yeah! Exactly! But it's just on my phone, like, it's not costing anyone anything.

C: Well let me ask you this question, which is that you have this box with all of these lovely notes where you have all of these beautiful things that are written in it that you sometimes haven't even read all of them of. What I love about that practice is that you have put a certain feeling in a place. And like, you know that if you want to feel that feeling, or if you want to connect with it, or if you want to be reminded of it, like you can go to that place. Scrolling through your phone is like being interrupted by a feeling. And I'm wondering, is there a way in which you can put – you don't wanna get rid of it, but you also don't wanna just encounter it and feel awful. Like, is there a place that you can put it that's separate?

V: The shame box?

C: The shame box! [both laughing] All the things I'm not proud of box! [both still laughing]

V: But there isn't a box big enough! [Sorry – I have no idea what Vanessa said here – she was laughing so hard!] I need a house!

C: It just has a little memory card with all the photos of the boys that were mistakes in our lives. [still laughing]

V: It's the box that I go to when I wanna feel bad about myself.

C: The humility box! Yeah.

V: I mean, I love that idea, right? Cuz that is what happened last week, is it felt [laughing still] like an assault. Like I was looking for cute photos of my parents visiting me for graduation [both still laughing] and like, I was like "Ah!"

C: Yeah.

V: Right, like? I was looking for me and my mom and my dad holding my puppy in front of a tree at my graduation.

C: Yeah.

V: And then I found me and Tom and I was like “Aw!”

C: Don’t ruin this moment! Yeah.

V: [still laughing] Yeah. God damn it, Tom! But that feels like part of the practice, right? Of like, yes, I was proudly graduating with my master’s degree but like at the same time, I was like being emotionally irresponsible to a man. So moving it feels like part of like bad integrity. Bad reporting to honestly.

C: Yeah. Vanessa, as I’m hearing you explore this question, it feels like we’ve spoken to this need for record keeping, or the desire for record keeping to be connected to the – commitment to integrity, right? Like, to wanting to tell the whole story about who we are, and wanting to feel good about the fullness of the story that we keep. It feels like the question at this point then, is how to encounter that story? Do we let the story still jump out at us? When we’re actually looking for that cute photo of graduation? Or is there a different way of keeping that story? Right? Either by putting it in a certain place, or frankly just deleting them. Sure, maybe day to day you’re gonna forget about this particular, you know, couple of months with Tom, or no doubt you’ll be reminded of like the topic of his PhD and be reminded of him. Um, so it’s not like you can put away the memory forever, like, you acknowledge the memory—

V: Right.

C: -- but it’s like – how much are you allowing it to intrude upon your day to day? Like, that feels like a real question that sits alive now.

V: It is the question that I hope my next source answers. [Casper gasps] So –

C: Look at that!

V: Why don’t we turn to my next source?

C: Okay, that sounds perfect.

[Short music interlude]

C: So Vanessa, what have you got for your second source?

V: I have one of the best sitcoms ever written. A deeply underappreciated television marvel, the former NBC show Mad About You.

C: Which I have never seen. Can you tell me about it?

V: Yes. So, Mad About You is after the happily ever after sitcom, so it starts six months after this couple has gotten married, and is like, what are these two kids gonna do? And it traces you just through the beginning of their marriage. It’s seven seasons, starring Hellen Hunt and Paul Reiser. It starts six months after their wedding and ends as their baby turns one. So it’s really just this like snapshot of the hijinks of the beginning of a marriage.

C: What a great premise! I need to watch this show!

V: So, I’m gonna play you the very beginning of an episode. You’re gonna hear our two main characters, Paul and Jamie, talking. They are in what is obviously funeral garb. And the only thing you need to know

is they're talking about her ex-boyfriend Alan. And there has been a previous episode where Alan and Jamie's relationship ended very poorly, so much so that Alan wrote a comic book [Casper gasps] with a woman who looks like Jamie as the villain. Right? Like, [Casper laughs] it ended horribly. [clip music begins] And here is the clip:

CLIP:

[background noise of footsteps and metal clinking, suggesting they just walked in the apartment, putting down keys and coats, etc]

JAMIE: He's dead.

PAUL: I know.

JAMIE: Alan's dead!

PAUL: I saw the whole thing, honey.

[audience laughter]

JAMIE: My ex-boyfriend is gone forever!

PAUL: Yes, but on the good side, husband still alive!

[audience laughter, plus Vanessa's and Casper's laughter]

C: First of all, I love Helen Hunt, and I had forgotten how much I love her. This is an amazing show. Okay, what – why did you choose this?

V: So the reason I picked this, is because, so, what ends up happening throughout the episode is that the ex-boyfriend leaves her with everything. [Casper gasps] And he makes this tape, like, speaking direct to camera, "You were the woman who got away. You are, you know – I leave you all the money in my bank account and all my trinkets and whatever." [Casper gasps again] And it really negatively impacts her marriage. It's a sitcom, so it obviously gets tied up with a button at the end, but they start fighting and it's a real problem in their marriage.

C: Hmm.

V: And I just love this moment, where she says, "My ex-boyfriend is gone forever!" And he answers "Yes, but on the good side, husband still alive!" [Casper laughs] And throughout this episode, she is spending a lot of time processing her old relationship, and she is not appreciating her husband and daughter, right? She's like –

C: Mmm.

V: --spending all this time thinking about the mistakes she made with Alan, and you know, all these other things. And she's missing out on like, the beautiful life she has right in front of her.

C: Huh.

V: So, what I'm using the ex-boyfriend's death, right, like, it's a moment where he pops back into her life.

C: Yeah.

V: Right? Just like, Tom pops back into my memory and life for any number of reasons, you know. We're both at the same event because we run in the same circle, or his photo pops up, or whatever it is. But yes, like, he's not dead, I hope he doesn't die for many many years. But one way that Jamie could handle this is by not going to the funeral, being like "Oh, that's really sad, but like he and I haven't been in each other's lives for years," and using it as a moment to reflect and burn a candle –

C: Yeah.

V: --and move on. But instead, she gets really emotionally involved in this. Right? So like, the question is, like, do we want our exes to claim space in our present, in our future?

C: Yeah, that's a really interesting angle and I feel like with Jamie and Alan, not only has Alan made a video directly to Jamie, but he's inserted himself even from beyond the grave by, like, leaving her all of this money. Like, he is actively entering her life later. Right? After the relationship. What feels different to me about Tom, is that that feeling of like, something jumping into your life, is really internal for you, right? Like, he's not reaching out to you, he's, so far as I know, not left you millions of dollars from a comic book that he's created. So—

V: [quiet voice] sucks. [Pause, Casper laughs] That would be an acceptable way for him to get in touch with me.

C: I – you know—

V: Just to be clear—

C: I don't wanna take it off the table, right?

V: Yeah.

C: Um, so I guess the question I have for you is like, when you do scroll through, and you do see that photo, or those photos show up, does something alive feel like it's jumping out at you? Or does something that's dead jump out at you? Like, are you looking at something that's complete and just, yeah, it's unpleasant, or is there something that's like, oh there's still something for me to do here.

V: So, [long groan]. I mean the question I guess is, do I feel at risk of making a similar mistake again? Right?

C: Hmm.

V: My relationship with him is, like, very over. I haven't heard from him in three years. Our paths don't cross. As much as, like, I feel guilty about some things, like, I don't feel [pause] like there's an email I should send that would apologize and like give it a healthier finality.

C: Yeah.

V: I don't feel as though there's a move in my arsenal that could make things better.

C: Yeah.

V: I guess I just don't wanna shut off the idea that there's, like, a lesson to be learned from it --

C: Hmm.

V: --that I haven't learned yet.

C: Hmm.

V: Right? Just like, things click into place for me, like, much later.

C: Hmm.

V: And so I like don't wanna, like, cut out the possibility that one day I'm gonna be like "Oh this is what that was about." Or "This is how I could have handled that better. This was the moment for me to be kind." And without coming across that photo, I'm just like, never gonna think about him.

C: Hmm. Knowing this isn't a final answer per se, like, if you were gonna think about what is a lesson that maybe you could still learn from that experience, what would it be?

V: I mean, I think one of the things that I let happen is I let him [pause] annoy me for a long time without my saying anything. And then like lost all my patience at once.

C: Hmm.

V: And like I think that's something that we all struggle with, of like, do you nitpick someone every time they annoy you? Of course not, right? Like, part of being a good friend and partner is like, ignoring [laughing] some of the things you hear and knowing that it's like, about you –

C: I have no idea what you're talking about! At all! [both laughing]

V: Right? Like, I – somebody just taught me this quote that Ruth Bader Ginsburg said about her marriage, like, "in a long marriage it helps to be a little deaf." [Casper laughs] Right? Like, it's just –

C: Yeah

V: Like, you know, you don't wanna be nitpicking at someone but also you don't wanna just like take something from someone until you can't even have, like, a common controlled conversation about it.

C: Yeah.

V: And I definitely was thinking for weeks and weeks about how -- the fact that we needed to break up before I let him in on that. And therefore, I came in – I don't even know if that's wrong – I came in very final about it, but I also think being wishy washy is bad. Like, that's the thing, is like I don't know yet.

C: Hmm.

V: And so, like, maybe later I'll have something wise that came out of this. Cuz otherwise, like, maybe nothing good came out of it.

C: What if that's true?

V: I mean [pause] that's fine, I guess.

C: I know that you said in kind of a throwaway comment that this show, Mad About You, that the episode is a sitcom, and so it kind of gets tied into a nice bow at the end. Can you tell us, like, what is that bow? Because it feels like maybe there's something there.

V: Yeah. The biggest contentious thing about this will is that the ex-boyfriend leaves her about forty thousand dollars. And she's like "Great, we can use that to pay for our daughter's college education."

C: Hmm.

V: Like, "we can start saving for that." And her husband is like, "I don't want [laughing] him paying for her partying and throwing up and going to school! I wanna be paying for that!" [Casper laughing] And it's what to do with this money.

C: Huh.

V: He – he is feeling threatened and she's feeling like, "you're being ridiculous, we have this money."

C: Yeah.

V: And what ends up happening is he ends up accidentally hitting someone in the face. [Casper laughs] And so they use the money to, like, pay this woman off so she won't sue them. And so, she ends up using the money to like, save him. Right?

C: Hmm.

V: She uses the boyfriend's money to save the husband.

C: Hmm.

V: Right? Like, I guess that would be the move, is like, how do I use this shame about Tom to like, be a better girlfriend to Peter?

C: Hmm. I mean, what I'm hearing you say Vanessa is that you wanna keep the photo.

V: I wanna be honest and I want [pause] to be a good person and I want to delete the photo. So what I want is for you to tell me that I will still be honest and good if I delete the photo.

C: Why would you not be honest and good if you deleted it?

V: So Nicole Perkins, a writer and podcaster who I love, said "Redacting your twitter every once in a while is an act of self-care. Going through and deleting your own tweets and like making yourself look better, is an act of self-care." And I completely agree with that. Twitter is not a public record of every thought you've ever had. I don't think you should be like, really gross when you've been accused of something, going and taking it down, but if you go back, and you're like "that joke I made three weeks ago wasn't actually that funny, and it only got three likes." Make your twitter like something you're proud of. That I'm fine with. But I think there's something about like being honest with myself.

C: Yeah.

V: I think it's fine if I go through and take down pictures of him on my Instagram, there never were any, but like, I don't think I need to advertise this mistake. But this – and like nor do I think I like need to keep the framed photo up on my wall. Right? Like --

C: Right.

V: But this permanent deletion is where it would begin to feel like the lie.

C: So, you're making a distinction here between things that are public and something that's private. Right? Photos on the wall and a twitter are public, but the saved photo scroll is private. I wanna come back to the shame box. Because, you can have digital folders in which you put things so that you don't encounter them on the scroll, but you still keep them. Would that feel like still having that kind of integrity of – of keeping the record?

V: Yeah. The thing I would be removing is the accidental reminder. The tripwire. And so, first of all, I think like I shouldn't name that folder, like, "Shame spiral." [Casper laughs] But like, reflection opportunities--

C: Learning –

V: --or something [both laughing]

C: Growth arena! Yeah! [both still laughing]

V: Yeah, the opportunities folder. Yeah, you know what I'm really thinking, Casper—

C: Yeah.

V: And I think that I – uh, this is maybe taking a 90-degree turn, but is – I just like need to create more opportunities to reflect in my life.

C: Hmm.

V: Because if I am counting on the accidental scroll –

C: Hm.

V: -- to be like the impetus for self-reflection, what I'm noticing is that I am relying on that –

C: Yeah.

V: --as like the tripwire to get me to think about being a good person. And like, that shouldn't be the way.

C: Yeah.

V: Right? Like, I don't have a prayer life. I used to journal a lot, and it just hasn't been a priority lately. I don't reflect in a way that is rigorous and that I feel like makes me proud. And so I've been holding on –

C: Hmm.

V: --to these photos as a like, well this is gonna force me to do it every once in a while. [Casper laughs] And I think what ends up happening, right, is like, I'm having a [laughing] really positive experience, like, reflecting on how much I love my parents, and it interrupts. Or, I'm looking for a picture of me and Peter and it interrupts, right? It's like, ex-boyfriend gone forever but good side, your parents have just been married for fifty years! Like, let's celebrate that.

C: Right.



V: And so I think what I feel like I need to do is just like, build in some active reflection times so I'm not relying on these moments of attack to do that work.

C: Yeah, it's like – create the space proactively rather than be interrupted with an unstructured and like, unthoughtful and like, not very pleasant forced reflection that actually you don't have time then to sit with and then it's just – shitty. Like, that's not even good reflection, it's just like, "Oh, now I'm suffering and I'm like, not happy." [Vanessa laughs] Nobody wins.

V: Oh my god, and this means – this means that I get to delete the photo.

C: I think it does. Once you've scheduled the reflection time.

V: Okay so I have like six photos, so each time I journal [Casper gasps] over the next month, I get to delete one photo?

C: I love this for you.

V: But like how am I gonna grow if I delete the photo? Help me get there. Like, if I journal about how bad I was with Tom, then the journal entry becomes the evidence, so I can delete the photo.

C: Well you tell me, I mean, is your brain gonna remind you of things when you're consciously reflecting of things that you could do better next time?

V: [quiet voice] Yes.

C: Then that's enough! You know? I – Like, that's what this is about in what I'm hearing you say. You don't wanna live in a world where you don't make mistakes, right, you don't wanna allow your brain to create a story of who you are as being perfect, because you know that's not true. Whether it's Tom or it's another moment where you're like you know what, I should have done that differently. I trust your brain and your heart to be good and have that integrity. You know, with that time for reflection like you're gonna know. It doesn't have to just be Tom every time, I mean, please God! You know, nobody needs that.

V: Yeah, I mean the other thing that I'm taking from this is, like, our lives are gonna be long and messy and we're not gonna be [laughing] able to keep a record of everything anyway, and so – as long as we're authentically trying to be better, we don't have to hold on to all the specifics of our shames.

C: Yeah.

V: I'm still mixed about the importance of records. I don't know, maybe it's just like, only in bad circumstances, but just records have come in handy so many times in my life.

C: Well, I'm noticing a really different way of thinking about those records at the end of this conversation compared to the beginning. Like, I feel like you've separated between "I want as much accuracy about what's happened" and "I don't wanna come across these things that make me feel bad." So like -- having a place where there's an accurate record doesn't mean you also have to have these things that make you feel bad come at you. Like, there's a way of putting them somewhere where it's like, I have them if I need them—

V: Yeah.

C: But I'm not gonna see them when I'm scrolling through my photos.

V: Absolutely. That does mean that it gets to move, not even to a folder called shame, but folder –

C: Yeah!

V: --called "All"

C: "2016" or whatever it was, you know.

V: Yeah. Like, all my photos can be in record but I can create a favorites folder of whatever it is. I love that. That, it's a record for its own sake, and reflection for its own sake, but I was combining the two and making –

C: Hmm.

V: --yeah, the record doesn't need to have feelings attached to it. It's a record for the sake of the record.

C: Yeah. I think that sounds right.

V: Well, Casper, I would like to thank you and the real Spotlight team at the Boston Globe for doing incredible journalism that changed the world. And Helen Hunt and Paul Reiser. The Bookmans.

C: [Laughs] Well, this week I wanna give a special shout-out to Brittany Rose in Kihikihi, New Zealand. And she has a wisdom saying which feels very appropriate, which is "That was then, and this is now."

V: Yes.

C: [laughs]

[theme music begins]

C: You've been listening to The Real Question. We can only make this show thanks to your support, so a big shout-out to all our Patrons. And if you have the means to help out, even just a dollar a month is a big contribution and you can join at [Patreon.com/realquestionpod](https://patreon.com/realquestionpod) And if you love the show, we love reading your reviews on Apple Podcasts and seeing your shares on Instagram and Facebook @realquestionpod and on Twitter @therealqpod We are a Not Sorry Production and our Executive Producer is Ariana Nedelman. We're edited by Malika Gumpankum. Our music is by Nick Bohl and we're distributed by Acast. Thanks to Beth for her fabulous voicemail, to Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Molly Bater, Laura Class, Emma Smith, AJ Yuramas, Stephanie Paulsell, and all of our fabulous Patrons. We'll be with you again soon.

V: Peace out, y'all.

[theme music continues, fades, ends]