

Transcript corrected Nov 9, 2022 by KJ

Roommates, The Real Question

Casper [00:00:00] I feel like I've been in the same conversation a hundred times with a hundred different friends, which goes approximately like this: "How can we find a way that we're not living in the same house but living right next door to each other, or in the same neighborhood where we can walk to each other, or in some sort of compound out in the mountains where we can churn butter and sing songs on the mountaintops. Essentially, like, how can we be in community in this digitally-enabled world, which means that like, yes, we're closely connected but not running into each other, and smelling each other's shoes, and, like, making each other dinner without having planned it? And that's a conversation that I think our guest Dani is in today as well.

Vanessa [00:00:46] Yeah, I feel like so many of our conversations end up being about the way that structures constrain us and trying to live within those structures. And I'm really excited to talk to Dani because I feel like she's another person who's, like, there are structures that don't work for me, and that doesn't mean that I should be denied all the benefits of those structures, and I feel like these are really live questions, like, for our generation and future generations that I'm really grateful to be a part of.

Casper [00:01:15] I'm Casper ter Kuile.

Vanessa [00:01:16] And I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

Casper [00:01:17] And this is *The Real Question*.

Vanessa [00:01:36] Today, we are lucky enough to be joined by Dani. Dani is a legal assistant who lives in the Pacific Northwest and self-identifies as a nerd and cat mom. Dani is also someone who I get to spend, like, two or three virtual hours with a month and is a joy in my life, and I am very excited that she is joining us on the show today. So, Dani, can you please tell us a little bit about what brought you here?

Dani [00:02:02] Yeah. So my question is, should I get a roommate? And this question, I think, at first blush, seems like a really simple yes/no question, but it actually has a lot of layers for me. So a little bit of background is that since high school, I've always wanted to live alone. It's been a goal of mine. So I moved out of my parents' place, I lived with roommates in undergrad, moved back in with my parents, moved into an apartment, had a roommate, and then at age 25, I achieved my goal. My roommate moved out of my current place, which I own, and I've been living alone since early 2019. Obviously, when I made that decision, I didn't know what was going to happen in 2020. So I feel like a lot of the reason this question's on my mind is that the pandemic really exacerbated some of the challenges of living alone because I was really on my own quite a lot for a couple of years. But I really like living alone, and I always wanted to because I really value my alone time. I'm an introvert. I like things just so. I really enjoy the experience of having my own space with all my own stuff—just the way I like it. So this question isn't one where I'm currently unhappy, and I need to make a change. It's more like: yeah, I'm pretty comfortable as I am, but do I want to close the door on ever making a change? Because yeah, I mean, I'm 28 years old now. I achieved this big life goal that I thought was going to take me much longer, and now I'm just kind of looking into the future and wondering what that's going to look like. So that's what's been on my mind kind of during the past couple of years.

Vanessa [00:03:34] What would be the benefits of having a roommate move in?

Dani [00:03:41] Well, I worry that I'm closing off some types of intimacy or closeness that I could have with friendships. You know, I lived with a roommate who was pretty much the ideal roommate. I mean, he was quiet and neat and understood my idiosyncrasies and all of that good stuff. And I still feel like I didn't really take advantage of it. You know, we'd have dinner a couple of times a week, and he always did the cooking, which was great. But, you know, we didn't we didn't necessarily, like, achieve some sort of level-up in friendship that I see other friends of mine have these roommates that they spend so much time with and they're really close to, and even roommates or even partners that just have that kind of closeness. And I worry sometimes that I'm just—because I'm comfortable as I am, I'm not stretching myself outside of my comfort zone to see if there's, like, gifts that I could be missing out on in my life. So, yeah.

Vanessa [00:04:32] Dani, I'm going to ask an obvious question and a very personal one, so feel free to be like, I don't want to talk about this, but you talk about a lot of your friends being partnered, but you're talking about wanting a roommate. So does this mean you're not looking for a partner? You're looking for, like, a buddy to live with?

Dani [00:04:51] I don't mind talking about it. Yeah. I mean, at the current moment in my life, I identify as asexual and aromantic, and I'm not expecting to have, like, a conventional sort of romantic partner or partners or kids. Like that's just not something I see on the horizon. But I also— I'm sensitive to the fact that those labels mean very different things to a lot of different people. And for me, I would say it's not a super important part of how I think about myself. It's more just sort of the default of not actively desiring those things at this point. I tell people like, you know, I tell my mom or people who are like, “but, are you sure? Don't you want that?” Like, I don't know. You know, maybe I'll turn 35 and I'll fall in love and then that'll be my life, and I just don't know it, but it's not something that I expect to happen. So I sort of think about my life planning in terms of, these are decisions I will be making on my own.

Casper [00:05:39] That makes so much sense to me. And you mentioned something I wanted to ask about, which is like what's happening around you, because I think these questions are so shaped by what we see the people we love doing. And I wonder if you could talk us through maybe some kind of, like, example housemate relationships that you're like, that seems really cool. Like, what does it look like? What do you see?

Dani [00:06:01] Oh, gosh. So, I mean, most of my friends are coupled off and married in the last couple of years. I've got like three sets of married friends who either just bought a house or are in the process of buying a house. So I have that sort of more conventional example in front of me. But I also have a friend of mine who used to live with me now lives with another friend of ours. And I don't know, they just — they hang out together all the time and they have that thing where they can hang out in a room together. And I think you call it parallel play in child development, right, where they're both doing their own thing, but they're in that space together and they have that comfort. I think they get along really well. And, you know, neither of them seem to have any complaints. And I just think it's a pretty sweet deal they've got going on. You know, this is where they're comfortable and happy. And I, in the abstract, I see that and I think, well, that sounds kind of nice. And then I think about it in the concrete and I go, But yeah, but then someone would be in my house all the time and I don't know, I don't know about that. [laughter]

Vanessa [00:06:53] So yeah, I guess my question for you is you said right now I'm comfortable, but is that enough? What's wrong with being comfortable?

Dani [00:07:02] Nothing. I think I was talking earlier about some of the reasons I wanted to live alone, is that I like my space to be just the way I like it. And I'm a very meticulous person. But, you know, I think there's perhaps an extreme to which a person might reach where, say, they make to-do lists to keep track of their to-do lists. And everything in their home has its perfect little spot. I worry about myself slipping into some sort of unhealthy rigidity, and I think the pandemic has exacerbated that because I already had anxiety about travel, for example, and sort of the unpredictability and, you know, kind of how you have to think on your feet no matter how well you plan. And now I'm like, I'm never leaving my neighborhood again. It sounds so scary getting on a plane. Why would anyone ever do that? And so things like that where I just worry that the more I let myself just be comfortable and I've set my routines and I never deviate from them, there could be stuff I'm missing out on that I'm just not contemplating because it sounds hard or stressful to make those changes.

Casper [00:07:58] Hmm.

Vanessa [00:07:59] So let me say back to you what I think I'm hearing. And you can be like, yes, this is it. You love living alone, but you're like, I don't necessarily love who I might become if I keep living alone.

Dani [00:08:12] Yeah, yeah, I think that's right. I worry about it and I joke that, you know, the line between staying home alone as an act of self-care and staying home alone because you're falling into a depressive spiral is but a gossamer thread, and sometimes you can't tell which side of that line you're on. And that's something that the pandemic really taught me about myself, where I'd be like, Why am I in the most horrible mood in the world? Oh, is it because I haven't spoken to another human being in person in 12 days? Yes. That's why. And that's the kind of thing I worry that I'll just start hermiting myself more and more because it's easy to do if you're on your own. It's easy to do if you come home at the end of the day and it's just me and the cat, and that's that forever, you know? So that's kind of what worries me a little bit.

Vanessa [00:08:56] Dani, is this also based – and I'm going to use an I-statement, right, like part of why it was important to me to be partnered was I'm like, the world is scary and like, what if I need someone to drive me to the emergency room? Or like I get laid off, like someone who would have to pay the bills. I happen to love my partner and I'm very lucky, but like it was important to me just because I think the world is scary. And so I'm just wondering if that's part of it. Sometimes it's tolerating the inconvenience, but for a sense of safety.

Dani [00:09:30] That is absolutely part of it. And I almost didn't bring it up because it feels so, like, self-centered. Like I want another person because I want there to be a person for whom I am the priority in their life decision-making, not in the sense of being partnered in that way, but because, both like you were saying in the financial sense and in the someone-needs-to-drive-me-to-the-hospital sense. But also in the, when I am at my most maudlin, if I am feeling down on myself, I'll sit there and go, everybody in the world is going to get married and have babies, and then where am I going to go on Christmas? Like that is where my mind goes and that sort of – you know, it's not it's not like that's on my mind, I'm not walking around all day feeling sad about that. But when I'm down for some other reason, that's the kind of thought that will pop into my head. So it's like, okay, if I had my

person who I lived with, I've got a date for Thanksgiving dinner, so to speak. So that's definitely a part of it too.

Casper [00:10:24] I'm really touched by that, partly because yeah, like I really get it. And it feels, Dani, like this is a question about a housemate and about living together, but it's in a way a deeper question about like, where do I fit in in structures of relationship, right? Like who are the people I'm going to celebrate Thanksgiving with? Like, who are the kids that other people might have that I can be an aunt to, or like a loving adult to, right, a loving, safe adult to? Who are the people in the structure of my belonging for the rest of my life? And that's a whole different thing than just a roommate. You know what I mean?

Dani [00:11:03] And to be clear, like I've got sisters who will definitely invite me to their house for Christmas. Like, I know that I'm not going to be forgotten about by everybody in my life, but it's just, that's the kind of thing of like, oh, I'm not going to have that. And I love kids, but I do not want to be a mother, you know, I want to be— I want to be there for other people's kids. So, yeah, that's definitely a really alive part of this question for me.

Casper [00:11:24] Yeah.

Vanessa [00:11:25] Dani, I just want to say, I do think it's time to turn to the text, but I do just want to say that this is like, so relatable to me and such a structural uphill battle. And I feel like part of the problem is that you would have to be, like, part of this forefront that I think exists in meaningful ways, of like—there are alternative ways to be other than finding a romantic life partner. And yeah, that's really hard and stupid that that's the only form of relationship that our government recognizes and that our social structures recognize. So why don't we now turn to your first text?

Dani [00:12:03] Yes, my first text is a song from the amazing show, Crazy Ex-Girlfriend. And this song is called—The Uncensored version of the song is called, “A Fuck Ton of Cats.”

Song [00:12:15] “A Fuckton of cats, a fuckton of cats. Way too many cats. When you're a permanent bachelorette, it's mandatory that you go out and get a fuckton of cats.”

Dani [00:12:24] And so for some context, this is Rebecca, our protagonist, and she's singing a song about how because she has all these unhealthy coping mechanisms in her dating life with men, she has decided to pivot and embrace being a spinster forever and ever because Rebecca tends to act in extreme. So she's not going to be boy crazy. She's going to swear off men forever. So the lines are, “I walk myself down to the lonely lady cat store. The smell is overwhelming inside. This is the future smell of my house. It's the smell of my dreams that have died.” And it goes on. And there's another line where it talks about the saleslady going home early to her sad walkup apartment that's filled with her own fuckton of cats that she got at a discount because she works at the cat store.

Song [00:13:11] Cause she works at the cat store. Meow, meow.

Dani [00:13:14] It's a very funny song. And the reason I'm drawn to it is because, I mean, the language is so—it's a lonely lady cat store. This is the smell of her dreams that have died. The walkup apartment is sad. Everything about this is the worst. My takeaway from this song is that for Rebecca, this is sort of a nightmare. This isn't what she wants. But the sort of dominant cultural narrative that it is sad and pitiable to be a single woman who lives alone with cats is one that I take umbrage with in a big way.

Casper [00:13:47] Do you find people projecting this kind of, like, negative stereotype on you? Like, are there little remarks that people make? Or how does it show up?

Dani [00:13:56] Yeah, family... I don't want to say my parents because like I said, my parents are wonderful and like my mom and I have had many conversations about this because we're very close. And, you know, for her she said this, like, I would have been very lonely had I not met your dad. And they've been happily married for over 30 years. And the life that I contemplate for myself is one that would have made her feel very bad. And so she has had a hard time not projecting that on me and being like, but I worry, I don't want you to have this bad experience, because for me it would have been. But yeah, I have like more distant relatives have said things, you know, in the past when I said I'm not going to have kids, they say, "Oh, well, you'll change your mind" and I'm not ever going to get married. "Oh, well, you'll feel differently when you're a little older," that kind of thing. And also, I think I approach conversations about this with preemptive defensiveness. So even if people aren't giving me that pity or condescension, I think I projected on them, because I'm aware that the goal of, like, being happy is supposed to be, I'm using air quotes which podcasts listeners can't see, but.

Vanessa [00:14:58] In your voice, you're doing an excellent air quote voice.

Dani [00:15:00] Thank you. The goal, you know, the goal is supposed to be that you find a partner and that you have kids. And I think obviously even within that, there's a lot of malleability. Like I think now we have more conversations about, maybe you have more than one partner and different sort of lifestyles that are a little less rigid and heteronormative and all of that. But even so, the goal is supposed to be romance and often children. And then you will have achieved, sort of – you'll have unlocked that life achievement and then people won't feel sorry for you. But if you don't do that, even if people aren't rude to you about it, there's this sense that they're like, Oh, well, you failed in the way that people are taught that they must succeed for happiness, and you're doing so well despite that. You know, and that's kind of the attitude that I worry that I would get from people, I guess.

Vanessa [00:15:49] Yeah. It's like when I leave the room. What are they saying?

Dani [00:15:52] Yeah.

Casper [00:15:53] One of the things that really strikes me about the relationship between, or even the kind of mythic relationship between a woman who is not partnered and the cats that she loves is, there is a relationship of care. And I'm curious, where do you receive care and where do you get to give care in your day-to-day life?

Dani [00:16:15] Yeah. Well, first of all, I have the cuddly cat in the universe, so that is very nice. She's very sweet. She's sleeping back there. So I do feel very loved by my cat. You know, it's again, like I try to push back against my instinctive defensiveness, like, that sounds so stupid, like, it's just a cat. But also, I'm really close. My sisters are just slightly less than two years younger than me, and they're twins. And the three of us are very close. I talk to one of my sisters on the phone all the time, the one who lives a little further away. And I feel like we have the kind of relationship that's the closest to that parallel play thing I was talking about earlier, where we can just kind of talk about nothing or whatever or just sit around and not have anything to say to each other but still be connected. So yeah, and I'm really close to my parents and I have, like, kind of a core group of friends

from undergrad and we do movie nights and we play D&D, and I feel like we've all gotten better since undergrad at being friends and about being honest about how we feel. And I will say this group of friends is one where I felt comfortable telling them, you know, hey, you all live with someone, your spouse or your roommate. And I don't. And so I need you to keep inviting me to stuff. I need you to keep telling me, "you're always welcome at my thing," even if I say no to you over and over. Because sometimes I do, because I want to be alone – Just keep asking. And like I do feel like I have friendships where I'm comfortable expressing that to them, which has been a really good thing.

Casper [00:17:41] It strikes me so much that in this text, "it's the smell of my dreams that have died" is like the exact opposite of what you have described. Like you dreamed of living alone. Now you live alone. You have loving relationships with your sisters and your parents and this incredible group of friends where you can be very honest about, this is what I need from you to, you know, feel really included and cared for. I love this text, but it also feels like it's something that's being put on you by society, which is so unrepresentative of what your actual experience is.

Dani [00:18:14] Yeah, yeah. I think that's a big part of the whole thing for me, is that in my day to day, just walking around doing my thing, I'm like, Yep, pretty great, pretty happy, pretty normal. And then I have a flash where I think about, what about 20 years from now and oh no, if I don't have kids, who's putting me in the nursing home when I can't make decisions for myself? And then I'm, like, angry that the systems that exist only accommodate for that one sort of path. But given that that's the reality of the dominant sort of cultural narrative, I'm still left feeling like I have to replace it with something. And that's like the thing that's stressful.

Vanessa [00:18:54] I mean, it's just so interesting, right? Because the dominant cultural narrative is, like, you have to be in a romantic partnership and have kids. And yet we know statistically that like, those things fail at least as often as they succeed. And like, not all kids care about taking good care of their parents when they're elderly. And like, what we actually need is a better pension system and Social Security system for elderly people. It shouldn't be on kids who are trying to pay off their student loans to get right. Like, these are systemic problems and yet these fears are so real. Part of me, just as someone who cares about you, is like, No, I want someone who checks in on you because what if you break your leg? What if you slip on the bathroom floor and break your leg and you're too far from your phone? Right?

Dani [00:19:44] Yeah, absolutely, you and my mother both. And my mom is that person for me right now. Right? Like I have a really close relationship with my mom and we talk all the time and I am over at her house, my parents' house, multiple times a week. And I just walk right in, I have the key, you know, that's that's the situation. And I'm so glad I have that. And like I was talking earlier about the, sort, of when I'm down, I suddenly I'm like, I'll be alone at Christmas. I'm also like, Oh my God, someday they will die. Mortality will screw me over, and then I'll be well into middle age by then, you know, fingers crossed. But even so, then I'm like, but then I can't call my mom and then I won't have the spouse that's supposed to be that fill-in. But I think something that's occurring to me that I didn't really think about before coming into this is that I feel really selfish in the way I think about and frame these conversations because it's all about, I need to have a person in case I need them and I'm not really thinking about what I might offer somebody in any sort of partnership, whether that be, you know, romantic or just like a platonic sort of roommate situation. I'm framing it around, like, if I am in dire straits, I want someone who's checking

in on me, and I haven't spent a lot of time contemplating like the reverse of having that care, I guess.

Casper [00:20:59] And that's a really annoying thing sometimes, right. Like, to be needed is one of the things that gives our life the most meaning, but it is also an inconvenience to the plans that we have. And so I really love that that's a door that's opening in this conversation because I think you are clearly someone who has their life together, who is extremely thoughtful, caring, competent, like, all of these things.

Vanessa [00:21:27] [who] has amazing hobbies and friends and communicates with their friends about what they need.

Casper [00:21:33] Seriously. A healthy relationship with parents, a loving cat, you know, all of these things. And living with people or having that kind of more interrupting, integrated relationship in your home especially would interrupt a lot of that. And so, yeah, I'm curious how willing are you to be needed by more people in an everyday kind of experience?

Dani [00:21:57] Yeah, I think whenever I play the imagination game like, "could I live with this friend, could I live with that friend," you know, can't live with my sister because she's a slob and we would fight all the time and you know, can't, you know, love ya. But I tend to sort of think about it in terms of how to minimize all the inconveniences. And I just like—I genuinely really like that I can walk around my house and go where I want and talk to myself out loud like a crazy person and like, no one's around to bother and decide what time of day I'm going to eat my meals and not worry about, you know, someone judging me for taking too long to cook in the kitchen because I'm really bad at cooking and it takes me twice as long as the recipe says it's going to take. And like all these little things that I feel like someone else being there would just— would be a frustration. But, I also feel like — maybe part of this is that I've never really given it a fair shake. Like, the roommate that I had after college, after I moved back in with my parents briefly, we had about as ideal of a roommate situation as I can imagine in terms of, He was quiet, He didn't have like people over all the time, He was communicative with me about when people would be over or where he was going to be. There's literally—I can't think of things I would have needed to change seriously about, like having him as a roommate. And even so, I was like, Yeah, but when I get home, he's always sitting in the living room and I never have the living room to myself. And like, I found things...not even to be annoyed about, but to view as the un-ideal situation. And that was at the time when the goal was still I desired to live alone. And then I did that and I'm like, okay, but did I ever really give it? Did I give it a fair shake? Did I try just going and sitting on the couch and doing that, reading my book while he's on his computer saying, did I try like being at that point in our life, like, life partners in a way more than just roommates and like really making decisions together and making plans together and, and like seeing what that would feel like. I don't feel like I gave it a fair shake and I almost feel like that was my best opportunity to do so. And I said, No, I'm just going to hide up in my room because I don't feel like being around another human. And, you know, it didn't feel the way that I think, like, the ideal roommate situation should feel, if that's what I want. And yet I don't know how conditions could have been better for that. So I don't know.

Casper [00:24:11] Something that's coming up for me, Dani, as I hear you talk, is this theme of commitment. And I'm like really passionate about commitment. I think commitment equals freedom, right? When we make choices, new depth is able to be discovered because we're present long enough to, like, see something new. And I hear in what you're saying, actually, a desire not for a traditional marriage commitment and not for the kind of like prepackaged options that don't work for so many people for so many

different reasons. But there is a sense of like, I want to know what I can expect or what I'm responsible for. And one way of making that commitment real is by having a human be in your house, right? 'Cause it's like, well, you live here. So if I fall, obviously you're here to help. And one way in which we can make commitment visible, or unspoken things be spoken is through—surprise, surprise—rituals. And I'm wondering, like, to what extent like, imagine if you gathered the people who love you and who you love... I'm just curious, like, what kind of ritual could you imagine making overt the kind of implicit commitments that clearly exist all around you from all of these people who love you? I'm just wondering if there's something in there for you.

Dani [00:25:34] Yeah. I mean, when you talk about ritual, the place my brain immediately goes is that I have a lot of commitments that I've made to myself about personal, like daily things I need to do or weekly goals. You know, I have, like, pages that I must read per day and words that I must write per day goal. I've got, you know, my cat gets her bath once a week on the same day. Like I said, I'm very meticulous and I have all these rules and these promises that I keep to myself and I have far less that I am keeping or making with other people that are as specific and as consciously repeated. Like I have a friend who we really only connect once every couple of months and we have a Zoom call and it kind of just happens. Whenever one of us happens to think of the other person, we send a text, but maybe next time I should be like, okay, let's put something on the calendar literally for three months from today and say, we're keeping that date. Because it feels like the kind of friendship where some day one of us is not going to think about the other person for a little bit longer, and then that friendship's just going to kind of float away. So that kind of thing of just making firmer check-in dates with people maybe.

Vanessa [00:26:42] Well, maybe now is the time to move on to the second text, because I feel like we've landed somewhere exciting about these, you know, making some commitments to round out your life. But I'm interested to see where our second text takes us.

Casper [00:27:20] Dani, I feel like you should win some sort of prize for incredible text selection. We've had Crazy Ex-Girlfriend. Where are we going with our second text?

Dani [00:27:28] Okay, the second text is from the sitcom Friends.

[Friends theme plays, "I'll be there for you / 'cause you're there for me too"]

I felt actually a little bit self-conscious when I was picking my texts because I wanted to sound so intellectual. And then I picked two TV show comedies, and I'm like a really well-read person. I was going to bring some, like, classic work of literature. But I think the reason why, when I was contemplating this question, I kept going back to these shows that are both— they're both comedies, they're both comedies dealing with relationships, specifically, both romantic and otherwise. And they're both hang-out shows where it's like a group of friends hang out with each other and talk about the things going on in their lives. And that's kind of what this question is about for me, of like, who am I hanging out with? Who am I spending all the moments of my life, just the in-between the big things in between career and everything else. It's like, What am I, what am I doing? So that's kind of why I think I, I gravitated towards friends because that's the ultimate hang-out comedy, right? It's just this, six people and they sit around and they talk to each other and that's the show. So the specific moment that I take from friends is from the season six episode six ,, the episodes called The One on the Last Night. And it is an episode where Rachel is getting ready to move out of Monica's apartment because Monica's moving in with her

boyfriend and they're getting into this fight and sniping at each other. And Phoebe says, I don't want to live with Rachel anymore because you two are being so mean to each other. And I don't want living with my friend to ruin that. And Monica pivots as an effort to pawn Rachel off on Phoebe and starts listing all of the nice things about being her roommate.

[Excerpt from Friends] [00:29:09]

Monica When I take a shower, she leaves me little notes on the mirror.

Rachel: Yeah, I do. I do. Do do that.

Phoebe: That's nice. I like having things to read in the bathroom.

Monica: When I fall asleep on the couch after reading, she covers me over with the blanket.

Rachel: Well, you know what? I don't want you to be cold.

Monica: And when I told her that I was going to be moving in with Chandler, she was really supportive. It was so great. You made it so easy. And now you have to leave. And I have to live with a boy!

Dani [00:29:59] If the crazy ex-girlfriend text was about, This is what my life is and I want to be defiant and celebratory of it, the Friends text is like, This is what I worry I miss out on by not making a change.

Vanessa [00:30:11] Dani, What's so interesting about the text you brought is that it's about the end of their moment. Right? The last line of the text you brought, and I can hear Monica saying it, is "and now I have to live with a boy." Right? And she's, like, so nervous about it and upset and scared. And so, yes, like Monica and Rachel had this beautiful thing where it's so intimate, right? When I take a shower, she leaves me little notes in the mirror, which implies that she goes into the bathroom while Monica is showering and steaming up the bathroom, right, like it implies such intimacy. And yet you picked this moment where it's ending. And I'm wondering how that complicates things for you or if it doesn't.

Dani [00:31:02] Yeah, I guess I hadn't, really, thought about how – Yeah. Because I was thinking of it in terms of, this is a list of examples of those little intimacies of having this loving roommate. And I wasn't thinking about, like, how this is their goodbye to that, so much when I picked the text. But it's actually making me realize like – so me and all my friends, we're all in our late twenties, early thirties. And like I was saying earlier, a lot of my friends have gotten married and are getting houses. I have at least two sets of couple friends who are actively talking about how they're going to have kids soon. And so it does feel like part of my worry or stress about this question is like, how will I fit into that new version of what my life is going to look like with these people who are currently my support system? Because, like, Friends ends when Monica and Chandler move into the suburbs to raise their family, and there's sort of this splintering that happens that is, that feels like, again, going back to that dominant cultural narrative, the expected and inevitable end to these, you know, hang-out comedy, to the sort of friendship where you just walk into each other's houses and pull stuff out of the fridge without asking and like have that casual intimacy. Well, then everyone's going to partner up and have kids and then you stop doing that. And I don't like that. I don't want that to end. And I also want, like, the vibe of the sitcom, the vibe of, like, living on a college campus where you are all living in close quarters. That is a vibe I don't know that I've ever fully appreciated when I've had it and I kind of want to have it again, I guess.

Casper [00:32:39] This whole conversation, Dani, is reminding me of one of my favorite graduation addresses, which is the novelist Barbara Kingsolver. I think it's in 2008 at Duke University, but she has this incredible image that she describes where she essentially asks

the graduating class to remember what they loved most about their experience in college. And she says community, you know, she has a phrase something like, you couldn't help but fall over each other's problems on your way out to class because you are in constant, continuous contact. And she paints this picture of what happens in that kind of dominant cultural narrative, is that we are on an escalator to isolation. Right? Moving to the suburbs, exactly like you were saying, with Monica and Chandler. Bigger car, bigger house, right. And by no means does this happen for everyone, right. But it is a story that we are supposed to aspire to. And what I hear you saying is a rejection of that and looking for what is—you know, there may still be some sort of escalator, right. Like we are moving through time. But what is it that you're moving toward? And, I mean, I'm hearing in what you're saying, pretty clear that maybe I actually don't want to live with someone, but that you want some form of close continuous contact to continue in your life. And so I wonder if – what can we look to in what happens in Friends? Like, what do they do together? Like, is it getting together every Friday night and having a meal? Is it a trip every year with the same group of friends for a week that everyone commits to? Is it being a godparent for the children of your friends and taking them on a trip every year or being there at every birthday party? Or, like, what's in your imagination as you think about those other forms of close continuous contact that might feel right for you?

Dani [00:34:29] Yeah, I think being an aunt to my friends' kids is a big one. I've said this to my girlfriends who are contemplating starting families. I'm like, I mean it. I will babysit for free. Like I wanna, I want these kids to know who I am for real. That's a big one. And then, yeah, I guess if I spin out the ideal, I guess what this question is leading me to is just the yearning for the walkable community that doesn't really exist in most people's lives anymore. Of the idea of, I could take a stroll down the street and know my neighbors and have maybe the people that – maybe it doesn't have to be people who are like, my one person who for whom I am their priority, but just, people casually and persistently present in my life, who know who I am and what I'm up to and vice versa, and that we can be an integrated system of support for each other. It just, yeah, it does feel like there's a lot of isolation. It's really hard to achieve that, given the way that the world is structured.

Casper [00:35:26] 100%. Okay, I have two follow-ups. Do you live in a freestanding house or are you in an apartment building?

Dani [00:35:33] I'm in a condo, so I share walls with people, you know, like a row.

Casper [00:35:37] Okay. Do you know who they are?

Dani [00:35:40] I know the names of the neighbors on either side of me and enough to say hi if we see each other outside. But I'm not, like, friends with them.

Casper [00:35:47] Right. Which is already a major improvement on nearly everyone. Most people don't know their neighbors at all, right. So that's one line of ideating that I think is worth exploring, only because even just like being a little more involved in each other's lives, of like, is there a mini street party, or like, is there a barbecue or something just with those two neighbors? Like, it doesn't have to be the whole neighborhood. So that's one avenue of creativity. But then the other one is, would you be willing to move to live next to one of these friends?

Dani [00:36:22] Yeah. So to point number one, actually, the two people who live on either side of me are also single women who live by themselves. And so I really do feel like there could be a vibe there. One of them's a little older and one of them's closer to my age and I

know their names. I have one of their phone numbers. Maybe I can be the slightly... slightly-aggressively pursue becoming at least acquaintances with them a little bit more. Feels super awkward to do, but maybe I should take that plunge to be like "hey, person whose car is parked next to mine literally every day, I should have your phone number." So I really, I do like that idea. It makes me nervous to talk to basically strangers, but maybe that's a good idea. And in terms of moving, absolutely, I would. Although a lot of my friends want to live in the city and I'm allergic to the thought of living in the city. I like being up here farther away from Seattle. So yes, in abstract I would totally live, you know, near to my friends, I make that choice on purpose. I think one thing that hasn't been brought up in this conversation yet is that where I live right now, I own this, it's a townhouse that I own. And I will probably move several years from now. But less than a decade from now, I will probably move into a nicer place. And that feels like a really big decision that might dictate a lot of things and so thinking about where my friends are settling and do I want to make decisions based on that is tied up in this question for me a little bit.

Vanessa [00:37:51] Dani, just one thing I want to point out from both of these texts is that both of them are about transitions or transitional moments. And what I hear you saying is sort of like, I want to set up a life that is reliable. And we all have that desire. And I just want to point out that these two texts are about moments where things change, and no matter what, things are going to change, you're going to live three houses over from your dear friend Casper, and he's going to know where your key is, and you're going to love it when he's just in your apartment when you come home, and then he's going to abandon you and move to New York. Right? And then you're going to have to come up with new traditions like every-other-year trips. And so I just want to say that I feel like you actually are so well equipped for these transitions and for certain commitments, and they'll work really well for five years and for ten years. And those transitional moments are so hard. They're so hard. But I think that the thing I want to say most to you and I don't know if this lands and so like please feel free to ignore it is, you're in a really good place right now and a transition is going to come where you move and you can maybe decide based on where a friend is. Like where you are right now, dig into, and you have these two next door neighbors and invest in that. And just know no matter what it is, it is sadly super-not forever. Like Chandler and Monica are going to move away and people are going to proclaim their love to Rebecca. And that's going to mess with her. Right? Like it looks solid from the outside, but it's full of that for everyone.

Dani [00:39:46] That is super helpful because I think part of my reason why I'm asking about, should I make a change, is that I worry that the inertia of life will just make everything the same forever, and that I will be making a choice by not making a choice. And the fact that external factors will force me into making decisions that will change my life, for better or for worse, is helpful to think about because I am the kind of person who will just entrench myself and go, okay, well, I figured it out. I will just stay this way forever because change is scary. And I think you are right to point out that I don't really have a choice about whether or not I'm going to deal with change. Like that's just going to be the case.

Vanessa [00:40:24] Right? And some of it's going to be really bad change. Right? Like your parents are going to pass away, God willing, before you. I do wonder if you want to lean into a couple of brave changes. Right. You said that you're worried you're not going to travel anymore, that's one of the things I heard. And I wonder if you want to pick one friend to go on one trip with that's not scary. You and one friend decide to go to Portland, Oregon for a weekend. I think that there are little ways that you can make sure that you're not becoming what your worst fear social-normy brain is saying without being, like, gotta get a

roommate. Right, which is like so big—And so I just wonder if there are little slightly brave but slightly safe ways that you can prove to yourself that you're not stagnant, while also just being like, the world is going to change.

Dani [00:41:20] Yeah, I really like that. I think the neighbors thing is resonating for me of trying to know them a little bit better, and making plans with people, whether it be travel or not, just like that, are specific and looking forward into the future. I think those are two things I can do. I think you're right that, like, getting a roommate feels like the drastic end of the options of how to avoid what I worry about. So there's definitely intermediary things that I could do in the meantime.

Casper [00:41:49] Hmm. Dani As we come to a close in this conversation, there's the kind of practical element, right? These small actions that you can take. I'm wondering if there's, like, an orientation of your heart that you want to remember from this conversation. Not even a specific action, but just a kind of emotional direction that you want to lean into as you hold this intention for the future.

Dani [00:42:16] I think this conversation made me feel better about not having to force myself to change anything on a specific timetable for a specific reason. That like, this isn't going to be forever because nothing is. And I don't have to be as proactive as I was sort of imagining I had to be about avoiding certain fates I want to avoid. Like I can just – I'm not unhappy and I'm not in any sort of distress right now. And so I can maybe just let myself float on that and not be so worried about what a decade from now looks like.

Casper [00:42:57] I love that you're asking this. I think so many of us are trying to figure out different ways to live, different ways to be in community, different ways to be in loving, committed relationship. And I really hope that everything that is right for you comes to pass.

Dani [00:43:12] Thank you very much.

Vanessa [00:43:17] Dani, thank you so much. And we would also like to thank Cecilia [Cava] for this great quote from Virginia Woolf, which says, "One cannot think well, love well or sleep well until one has dined well." Amen.

Casper [00:43:34] Amen, indeed.

Vanessa [00:43:36] Yummy, yummy.

Casper [00:43:38] You've been listening to The Real Question. Please check out our patron at patreon.com/realquestionpod if you enjoy the show. We support entirely on your donations, so thank you for being part of that. And if you love the show, you can leave us a review on Apple Podcasts and follow us on Instagram and Facebook at Real Question Pod and on Twitter at The Real Q Pod. Big shout out to our PFF Tier patrons. Amanda Schramm, Eva Howe. Ashley Mayo. Louise Fairing. Mary Margaret. Stephanie Featherweights, Jenny Crews, Kristen Hall, Becky Boo, and Ari.

Vanessa [00:44:11] We are Not Sorry Production. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman and we were produced today by the great A.J. Yaramaz. We are mixed by Erica Huang and our music is by Nick Bohl. We are distributed by Acast. We would like to offer a big, big, big thanks to Dani for joining us. Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Lara Glass, Gaby Iori, and Stephanie Paulsell. Thanks, everyone, and we'll talk to you in two weeks.

Casper [00:44:34] Bye.