**RQ\_True Crime\_final\_03.11.2021.mp3**

**Vanessa** [00:00:00] Before we start today's episode, I want to offer a content warning I talk about sexual assault, both in terms of the Dylan Farrow case and in terms of all of our lives. So, if you want to skip this episode, we understand. Hi Vanessa and Casper, my name is Chloe, and I just started my second semester of college for a lot of reasons. This is not how I thought my freshman year was going to go. Online classes are hard and self-motivated with depression when your living space is also your working space, feels like an insurmountable task most days. That's why I started Buffy the Vampire Slayer in January and let myself get hooked on the show. I knew I shouldn't be streaming from Amazon Prime in this tense moment for work or unionizing. And I knew about Joss Whedon's racism, but I felt that I had earned a moment of engaging with media and its creators uncritically over the course of the pandemic. Plus, Buffy felt like the perfect show for this incredibly stressful moment. It's about coming of age and uniquely teenage struggles, but it's campy and just staged enough, especially in the earlier seasons that I could put it on and turn off my brain. As the seasons went on, it became an obsession even when things got darker and scenes like the infamous one Seeing Red that portrays sexual assault in a way that was unheard of for television at the time of its airing, but was also incredibly triggering came up. I kept bingeing it at record speed until Charisma Carpenter made her statement. I stopped watching it immediately with only one season to go. I still think about it all the time. Question whether I should just watch the last season for the satisfaction of closure, and if I do that, maybe I should just watch Angel too so I can understand the crossover episodes, but I'm not going to do either of those things. I don't think it would be right and really, I think the right thing would have been to not start watching it in the first place. I can't go back and change that, but I could let my Buffy experience consciously inform my immediate decisions going forward, and maybe I can also save up for a nice vintage leather jacket. Maybe that'll be closure enough.

**Casper** [00:01:57] I'm Casper ter Kuile.

**Vanessa** [00:01:59] And I'm Vanessa Zoltan, and

**Casper** [00:02:01] this is the real question. Yes, to the leather jacket, Chloe. Absolutely, because then you're starring in your own gosh, darned movie set scenario story every day. I love it. I love that for you.

**Vanessa** [00:03:20] Yeah, I think that this voicemail sets up today's episode and the question that I'm bringing so perfectly cause my question is also about being obsessed with a piece of media that I feel icky about being obsessed with.

**Casper** [00:03:35] Oh, can you tell us a little bit more about it?

**Vanessa** [00:03:38] Yes. So, something that people should know about me. Although, Caspar, I'm a thousand percent sure you do know this about me is that I become obsessed with things. [Uh huh..] So like, I picked a period of time of yours and my friendship, Casper. So you and I met in 2013. Here are some of the things I have been obsessed with since you and I met - Julie Andrews. Read both of her memoirs. Watched all of her movies. Listen to recordings of her singing from the 1960s, looked at photos of her in the dress she made herself for the Academy Awards. Watched the Carol Burnett special. Right? Like, full on. Julia Quinn's romance novels. Read all 27 of them in under three months.

**Casper** [00:04:27] I remember I hardly saw you those three months like you were just like walking with your nose in the novel or with your headphones on. [Yeah.]

**Vanessa** [00:04:30] So like sometimes I think that these obsessions are either, like, obviously benign, or I think that they're like productive forms of self-care. They're joyful. They like, speak to a curiosity in me that I think is a good thing. But then, sometimes they are really bleak and like, quite tragic things. And again, like, these are all ones that you've known me through. So, I became obsessed with the story of Elizabeth Smart, the young woman who was kidnaped in Utah, or the Chibok girls who were kidnaped by the Boko Haram in 2014. I like became obsessed with that story. And also in 2014, I became obsessed with the story of Dylan Farrow. [Mm-Hmm.] Dylan Farrow, for those of you who don't know, is the daughter of Mia Farrow, and the obsession started for me during the 2014 Golden Globes, where Woody Allen was given a lifetime achievement honors. And Dylan Farrow, his daughter, wrote an op ed in The New York Times about a time that he sexually assaulted her when she was seven years old, which I believe in its entirety. And I knew every single moment on the timeline. Like I knew that the affair with Soon-Yi was exposed to Mia Farrow four days before Dylan accused Woody of the assault, and that that looked bad in a certain light because x, y and Z, right? Like, I was obsessed with following it. Even though I knew how I felt, I knew that I believed Dylan. And I just always have this question about my obsessions, which is there are some that are like so clearly to me at worst, annoying, right? Like when I play the Moana soundtrack on repeat, when you, Ariana and I are in the car for 10 days and it's like all I want to listen to, that is annoying, but like, that is not unethical. [Right.] But I'm sitting with this question right now because there's this new documentary out about this case, and I know that if I start watching the documentary, I will become obsessed again. I will go down this rabbit hole *all* over again. And we know that over the last 10 to 20 years, there's been a BIG rise in the popularity of true crime as a genre. And we also know that the primary consumers of true crime narratives are women, and there are lots of articles about that and judging the women for their obsession with true crime. And a lot of that critique is completely valid. Especially the fact that most of the true crime stories that actually get told are about young, blond, white, wealthy women. When we know that those are not the most likely victims of violent crime. But also, any time something that women like to consume is being criticized, I don't want to be super curious about that and be like, Wait, why are women into this? And so my question today is, is there something virtuous? Is there something good in being obsessed with these true crime stories? And for the sake of this episode, we'll use with my obsession with the Dylan Farrow story specifically. Is there something good about it, or is it treating people's lives or news like entertainment? Am I just absorbing this the same way I absorbed Julia Quinn romance novels?

**Casper** [00:07:24] That's such an interesting way to think about it. Like that actual news stories of people's lives kind of provide entertainment to be dissected and discussed kind of in a gossipy way. It sounds like that's part of what you're not comfortable with is you're involved in someone's life without any sort of relationship to them.

**Vanessa** [00:07:44] Right. And there's, there's a virtue associated with following the news. It means that you can advocate for certain things. It means that you know whether or not your water is potable. Whether or not the CDC recommends that you can see your parents. Keeping up on the news is a civic responsibility that we see real virtue in. And I'm wondering if being obsessed with stories like Elizabeth Smart or The Chibok Girls or Dylan Farrow that I am telling myself, I'm reading the news; when really what I'm doing is objectifying horror?

**Casper** [00:08:24] Yeah, it's a little bit like a metaphorical version of driving past the car wreck and spending, you know more time than one needs to looking at this horrible image. But it's it draws us. It captivates us in this way that is kind of beyond our control. And I hear you asking that question of like, should I allow that to make choices for me about what kind of media I consume?

**Vanessa** [00:08:47] I'm so grateful for that example, Casper, because you know, there are studies that show that car accidents cause more car accidents because we look. And so I am very committed to never looking at what happens at a car accident site. I'm like, Nope, it is dangerous for me to look. Somebody is probably having one of the worst days of their life. I'm going to give them a sense of privacy, and no matter how much I want to look, I don't look. And so that is a moment where I'm like, OK, this is clear to me. That would just be voyeurism. And these other stories that I'm telling you about it feels like there's somewhere in between. Car accidents super clear. Don't look. Julie Andrews, super clear. She wrote a memoir, look. Dylan Farrow…ehh. Right, like she participated in the documentary, I can justify it. And the question to me is whether or not anything productive comes out of it like again, there are certain kinds of news that I can really draw a straight line to why it's important that I know these things. And I feel like the line between being obsessed with the Dylan Farrow story and like ethics and productivity, is much fuzzier or more crooked. It's drawn in much lighter ink, and it's squiggly.

**Casper** [00:10:05] in how you're describing this at the moment, Vanessa, it feels like you feel quite negatively about it, like this is something you're resisting you don't want to do, but it's also something that's been important to you. And I wonder if there's anything that we should mention about how it has served you. Are there times when you've really appreciated going down this rabbit hole that you've learned something new or it's helped you understand something in a different way?

**Vanessa** [00:10:29] Yeah, for sure, I think that, you know, whenever anybody offers me too rosy a view of the world, I'm like, Well, there are women and basements, right? Like those women in basements to me are a symbol of all the people whose suffering is not accounted for. [Hmm.] Something I think I would feel positive about it is if it was like being a surgeon that like it's kind of gross that people are willing to stab each other and take out each other's insides. But it's a virtue that some people are into that. And so like, great, you like to stab people and like, do weird things to their livers. Thank God. And so I would love to tell myself a story like that. Like, Yes, I'm obsessed with these stories, but like, what a great public service that you're obsessed with these stories. Except that a lot of women are obsessed with true crime. There's a demand for these stories. And I worry about the way that those get exploited. So it's not like surgeons. There are a lot of people who like to do this.

**Casper** [00:11:32] And frankly, a lot of people who make money off the interest, [right] into these stories because it's not just fiction, it's not just interesting, you know, horror stories that are told for fun. You know, these are real people's lives that I dissected and raked over. And whether it's in serial podcast form or in, you know, or in the news headlines, [right?] That's a powerful question. And it's one I really appreciate Vanessa, because I'm someone who usually looks at the like, happy smiley like positives, and honestly turn away from the things that are hard. And it's one of the things I most respect about you is that not only can you stand to look at it, but you bring it into conversations where it's not present.

**Vanessa** [00:12:12] I ruin a good time.

**Casper** [00:12:14] I didn't put it like that, and nor do I agree with that framing. But, like, you will always point a conversation to the reality of the world, in both its beauty and its pain. And that's something I really appreciate about you. So I love this question, and I'm really glad I don't have to answer it because just as in every episode the person who is bringing the questions is also bringing two texts which will help us find new angles into what this means and how it can matter in our lives. So, Vanessa, I'm curious, what did you bring to help us explore this question?

**Vanessa** [00:12:45] Yes. OK, so the first text I'm bringing is called the Art of Cruelty, which is a book that was written in 2011 by Maggie Nelson. Maggie Nelson is this great writer who I really just like respect and hate cause she's so brilliant. She's like a MacArthur Genius Grant winner. She has her PhD in literature. She's a professor right now at USC. She's written like the Argonauts and the red parts two text that have, like, deeply impacted me. [Mmmm] and she's very much someone who is willing to look at difficult things, hence this book, The Art of Cruelty. So, I'm looking at one chapter in particular, called Great to Watch, in which Nelson walks us through the ethic of watching. And she starts with the story that there's this idea that if execution was made public, it would stop that if we saw how horrifying execution was, we wouldn't do it anymore. And Nelson is like, That is nonsense. Public executions were a thing. Lynching is a thing. We love looking at horrible things. Like, and then she takes us through reality TV, the show cops where we love watching horrible things happen to people, right? Like you said, our noses are drawn to the car accident on the side of the road. And she talked specifically about this website essentially, called Blue Servo, which is a series of cameras at the border that are “high risk areas at the border” where people could be crossing from Mexico into the United States. [Wow.] And at the time of her writing the chapter, you could just go on this website and watch the border as if you were Border Patrol. And then you could call in and report people if you saw something that you, as a complete untrained civilian, saw that you deem suspicious. And there is a woman in Rochester, New York, who was interviewed by the New York Times and started watching up to four hours a day of Blue Servo. And Nelson says that with Blue Servo being a spectator is recast as a form of empowerment. [Mm-Hmm.] And that is exactly what I'm worried I'm doing. I'm like looking at this horrible thing, these horrible incidents of abuse and recasting it as a form of empowerment. I'm out there telling women stories and I'm looking at the difficult things, right? I judge this woman, that she is using as entertainment, ruining other people's lives. But like, I am not totally sure where the difference is between me and her and the quote from Nelson's chapter that I want us to look really closely at is this – “knowing the truth does not come with redemption as a guarantee. Nor, does a feeling of redemption guarantee an end to a cycle of wrongdoing.” And specifically, I'm going to change it a little bit. So half the sentence works as a sentence, but “a feeling of redemption does not guarantee an end to a cycle of wrongdoing.” [Hmm.] And I brought this quote for a couple of reasons. One is that sometimes people feel as though just watching the news or learning about something difficult counts as their virtuous act. And they feel redeemed like, look, I did my good deed and I would argue, you did the homework you have to do in order to do your good deed. But that doesn't actually end the cycle of wrongdoing. You've watched a documentary about climate change. You haven't put solar panels on your roof. And so, first of all, I just want to be wary of that within myself. And then my other fear that this sentence wraps up is, let's say, I found the smoking gun that everyone has been looking for all these years on the Woody Allen / Dylan Farrow case. Let's say I found footage of the assault because I paid such close attention and I solved it. Let's say that. I would feel redeemed. I would be like, Ha ha, I figured it out. But it wouldn't end the cycle of wrongdoing in the world. No fewer people would be assaulted the next day because I solved this one thing that happened 30 years ago. So that is why I brought this quote. That is what is at risk to me.

**Casper** [00:17:15] First of all, I've never even heard of this blue savo thing, and that is absolutely just despicable. Honestly, it, I don't even want to talk about it. It's it's horrific, and I do see the connection that you're making, which is like. Just knowing more about this, you know, can actually do more damage like it certainly doesn't necessarily solve anything. And then turning to the specific quote that you took that a feeling of redemption does not guarantee an end to the cycle of wrongdoing - in that I'm also hearing that sometimes there's a feeling of redemption in kind of participating or reading or learning or watching about these stories that you feel. Does that translate? Or is that not true?

**Vanessa** [00:17:57] So like, that's the thing, right? I'm trying to suss out whether that is true. [Yeah] because I think that this is like arguably more OK, if I stay in the discomfort of it. [Mhmm.] And I wonder if to some extent, that is why I am more obsessed with the Woody Allen / Ronan Farrow story than, like the Bill Cosby story. The Bill Cosby story - There's 60 women who have come forward and said the same thing every single time. He was found guilty in a court of law. And like, I'm not obsessed with it. It is like a super clear cut case. Whereas the Dylan Farrow story feels more important for me to, like, get my head around and advocate around. Because Diane Keaton stood up at the Golden Globes and talked about what a wonderful man Woody Allen was, and a court of law found Woody Allen innocent. And that's an authentic draw. Like, I am much more drawn to one story over another. And maybe it's because I don't want to feel redemption. I don't want to feel like, well, Bill Cosby's in jail. And so rape is over now. [Right.] Because like, that's not how that works. Right? [right.] And so as soon as the story becomes simple, I become less interested in it, I think.

**Casper** [00:19:13] Well, and that feels really important in what you're saying, Vanessa, which is that in the stories that captivate you, justice is not done. I see that kind of tugging at your passion and your attention because if we stop paying attention, then justice will never be done.

**Vanessa** [00:19:30] That's a really generous way to think about it.

**Casper** [00:19:33] Can I ask you a kind of random question? [Yes.] Do you think as long as humanity exists, there will be wrongdoing? Or do you think that as human beings, we're capable of living in a world of right doing? Can we become different than how we are?

**Vanessa** [00:19:53] I absolutely think we can become different from how we are. One of my favorite quotes is from a movie that maybe I'll bring to this podcast one day called Walking the Dead. But it's, it's something along the lines of like, “I am only slowly crawling toward paradise, but I can't imagine a better way to spend my time on Earth.” [Hmm.] I absolutely believe that, like human beings are capable of change, and that we can make this world better and better. And, I know that Martin Luther King gets misquoted on the actual meaning around this. I don't believe that the natural arc of the universe bends towards justice, but I think that we can bend it toward justice. And so, yes, I like I profoundly believe in the human capacity for change. [Mm-Hmm.]

**Casper** [00:20:38] I think that's important as we're looking at this quote, because if you didn't believe in that, I think that the looking at the wrongdoing and the, just the horrors of life would be static and would feel like they could swallow us in some way. But with the orientation that you're sharing here at one reading could be, is that you're looking at it to fuel that bending of the arc, right? Of that impulse towards justice, however imperfect. So I'm wondering if that resonates, if those two things connect for you?

**Vanessa** [00:21:10] Yeah, but shouldn't I say “what's going to help me bend the world toward justice” and then look for the art or like things in my life that do that, rather than be like, Oh, I really like Julie Andrews! Don't worry, I'm sure it's helping us bend toward justice.

**Casper** [00:21:31] Well, I think that's where the difference for me is, at least in how you've shared it between Julie Andrews and between the Farrow case, for example, is that like, I mean, at least in my experience, the things that pull on our hearts. You know, the pain that we feel in the world is also often the gift that we have to give, because it's this kind of fuel for what we know needs to change. Is our own experiences, as our own hurt and how we how we can listen to the hurt of other people. You know, that shapes what we're able to then do in the world because we can't we can't do everything. And it feels like there's something really important about why these stories capture you. Even if they make you uncomfortable because they connect, I think to some of the gifts that you have to give.

**Vanessa** [00:22:13] But isn't some voyeurism bad? Like you would be judging me if I was like watching my neighbor through a window? And I was like, No, no, Caspar, it's making me a better person because looking at the lives of others is a window into the soul of humanity.

**Casper** [00:22:30] Listen, if some hot, shirtless guy in the building opposite wants to do his chores at home with his curtains open, I'm not complaining. But I think what we're pointing to is, I think that what voyeurism is helpful, actually, because what that word really is about is about me getting pleasure from seeing something. And I think that's different from what we've talked about of like getting close to these stories as fuel for making the world different and making it more just. And I'm wondering if that's maybe a line to explore is like, are these things pleasure giving or are they fueling justice?

**Vanessa** [00:23:06] I mean, they're not pleasure giving in like a whipped cream way, right?

**Casper** [00:23:10] Well, I mean, nothing can.

**Vanessa** [00:23:11] Except maybe chocolate flavored whipped cream. [Oh Boy] like, they're not pleasure giving in an obvious way, but like they are obviously some sort of like any neurologist. Listening could probably tell me more about this, but like, there's obviously some sort of dopamine rush or like addiction to it. Again, like same as this like looky loo on the highway thing, right? I don't feel any sense of schadenfreude. I'm not taking pleasure in their pain, but it doesn't feel like a choice born out of a good intention.

**Casper** [00:23:42] That's really clarifying for me, and I know we're going to look at a second text. But based on this conversation, to me, the fact that you're not watching this new documentary is actually a really good example of landing in the place that you just did because you like, this documentary is not going to actually help me fuel that passion for justice more. It's more that, entertainment, like whipped cream style, pleasure seeking and getting more into the exact details. Like I know the story well enough to know what is right and wrong so that feels like a helpful distinction, at least at this stage in the conversation.

**Vanessa** [00:24:16] I feel like we're not coming down hard enough on voyeurism.

**Casper** [00:24:20] Well, maybe we will after you tell us this about this second text.

**Vanessa** [00:24:46] So I am going to tell you about a little show called Veronica Mars. It is a television show starring Kristen Bell that started in 2004. The original run lasted three seasons. There has since been a movie and an updated series, et cetera, et cetera. But I'm only going to talk about the first couple episodes of Veronica Mars, so I'm not going to spoil anything for anyone. So, Veronica Mars is a pretty quintessential, like private investigator show except, twist! The private investigator is a high school girl. And the back story to Veronica is that her best friend, Lily, has recently been murdered, and her father was the officer on the case. And Veronica's father accused Lily's father of the murder. [Oh no.] And in the middle of Veronica's father investigating Lily's father, somebody came forward and confessed. And yet Veronica's father still thought Lily's father did it. Because of that, Veronica's father lost his job, and he and Veronica have become pariahs in the town, like he is persona non grata. Why are you accusing this grieving father of murdering his daughter. [right?] Like somebody else confessed. Why are you doing this? And so when he's an outcast, he starts his own private investigative firm and Veronica becomes his assistant and ends up basically being a even better P.I. than her dad. But Veronica is understandably obsessed with the death of her best friend, Lily, and doesn't know whether the man who confessed really did it. And even though she has chosen her dad publicly, she's not sure that he was right to continually go after Lily's dad. So throughout the first season of Veronica Mars, she is obsessively researching her best friend's case. And so this clip that we're about to play is just from episode two of Veronica Mars. So I'm not spoiling who did it at all. And it's between Veronica and her father.

Scene:

**Veronica** [00:26:51] Dad, [Yeah honey.] What made you go after Jake Cain? [What makes you ask?] Other than that question defines our very existence? I think if I knew more about the case and the evidence…

**Dad** [00:27:10] Honey it’s ugly. I want thoughts of Lily's death out of your head, I don't want to pour more into it. [I can handle it.]

**Vanessa** [00:27:18] So again, the line that I want to look at is what Veronica said in this clip, “that question defines our very existence. I think if I knew more about the case and the evidence. Dot dot dot” she doesn't finish it. And that's really what I want to focus on is right, like I think if I knew more about the case and the evidence.. and it's so interesting to me as watching it for this research and I was like, what? What Veronica? Like, hoping she would give me the thesis. Like, why? Why do we want to know more? And she couldn't finish the sentence.

**Casper** [00:27:56] Yeah, I mean, even that first part of the quote, “that question defines our very existence.” I mean, for Veronica. I mean, that's really true, right? Her father has been nearly run out of town, as you said. Of course, she is impacted by his reputation. I'm curious if it feels like your life is defined by these cases in some way.

**Vanessa** [00:28:18] That's the question. And like Veronica's, life is defined by this case, literally. And so the question is like, maybe mine is because certainly my identity as a woman, and like as the CEO of a feminist organization, right like. You and I both, but like I lived with students for eight years and used to teach high school. So like young women's bodies, are something that, like, define my existence. I have two stepdaughters, right? Like I, I worry about women's bodies, but am I choosing for those to define my existence? Veronica didn't have a choice. Like this, her best friend was murdered and her dad was run out of town. This happened to her. Like, these cases aren't happening to me. I'm opting into them. So they might define my existence because I've chosen for them to. But is this really what I want to define my existence?

**Casper** [00:29:17] Yeah, I'm really struck by that difference that you're pointing us to the way in which this is happening to Veronica and her life, and that you are choosing to some extent to read and to learn about these cases. Even though they're at some distance. And I'm curious if that makes it somehow safer? Because these people are not your friends and family. Like you're reading them through a newspaper, or through a book, or learning about them from a podcast. Is it important to have that bit of distance in order to look closely at it? Because sometimes the things that are very closest to us, it's even harder to look at them with that same attention and longevity because it's so much more painful.

**Vanessa** [00:29:57] I don't think so, right? Because I have a lot of friends who have been sexually assaulted, and I've had a lot of students come to me after assaults and I feel no voyeuristic instinct there. I don't want more information, but I don't shy away from the information. And part of that, I think, is my training, right? Like I was a mandated reporter for a period of time in certain settings. So like, I've literally been trained also as a chaplain, how to like, receive that information? [Yeah.] But I also just think as a woman, you get trained in how to receive that information, like an overarching story of my childhood was that there was a movie theater around the corner from where I grew up. And like, it was like a mini mall, right? So like, it had a target. It had all these like very functional things, a vaughns. And like, we weren't allowed to go to it, because one of my mom's friends had been raped and murdered in the parking lot. [Wow.] Like, these stories had a material geographical impact on my life, my whole life. [Yeah.] And I used to get really frustrated with my mom because her friend died in the 60s and I was like, It's the 90s. Like, Can we please go see my best friend's wedding at this theater? It's the best time for when we want to go.

**Casper** [00:31:17] And I love Rupert Everett.

**Vanessa** [00:31:19] Yeah! Mom! [yeah.] But it doesn't feel voyeuristic with my friends, right? Like, I know all of my friends stories. Why do I need to also know that Dylan Farrow story? Like Veronica has to know who killed her best friend. [Yeah.] Would she care about like Dylan Farrow other than in an abstract that was horrible, way.

**Casper** [00:31:42] Yeah, I think this is really important. I see in Veronica Mars’ situation, like there's an agency about discovering what happened. And so often when we're with someone whom we love who's been assaulted, we can feel so helpless because there's nothing we can do to undo it. Or, you know, and I'm suddenly seeing maybe there's some longing of like if I knew more like in this case, I can, I can do something about it, you know? And that's her trailing off. Like, I I think if I knew more about the case and the evidence dot dot dot. Right? Like there’s this longing to set things right to make amends, to obviously save her father from the situation he finds himself in. But I don't know. There's something there in this conversation that's important.

**Vanessa** [00:32:31] I think the other thing might be, that part of why I'm like boning up on these stories so I can say, like, No, that's not how it happens. It's almost always someone, you know. Just like with Dylan Farrow, it was her father, and you don't have to be alone in the house. People can be right downstairs. And yes, your mom can still talk to her ex after he assaults his daughter, right? Like, these things are complicated, and because I don't want to like name the names of my friends, I want to like completely bone up on evidence outside of my immediate circle so that I can talk about my friends without talking about my friends, right? And like, I'm not harming Dylan Farrow by asking all these questions. Where if I like sat down, one of my friends who was assaulted and was like, “Tell me everything. Where were you? What happened? Who else was in the house”, right? There can't be these ulterior motives. So I wonder if part of what's going on, it's like, I want to completely understand. Over here, in order to use the information, fill in the dots over there.

**Casper** [00:33:38] that feels like such a beautiful addition to what we pointed to before that like, is this motivation one of kind of entertainment and pleasure? Is it driven by a search for justice? And what I'm hearing you saying now is that like in a way, it's driven by a love and a caretaking instinct of like, yeah, you can't necessarily do this with people that are in your life because it would be super retraumatizing and inappropriate unless they're asking for that kind of conversation. But it comes from this place of protection and love, which feels, I don't want to say beautiful, because it's sad, but there is an instinct which I think is really trustworthy in why these things are so captivating.

**Vanessa** [00:34:20] I really love that as an offer that I've never read about why women are obsessed with true crime. And I think it could be because we all know people who it's happened to. And it's there's like a catharsis of figuring out who did it and seeing a simple version of it with someone who you don't know. [Yeah.] Whereas in our personal relationships, like we know something horrible happened to our mom or grandma or aunt or cousin. But like, you never ask the whole story and you never know everything. [Yeah.] And we don't want to retraumatize each other. And so we don't want to interview one another. Like in a documentary style of “Where were you? Who was in the house? Who did it to you? How well did you know them?” But it feels important to know the facts, and in order to make the world better, right? Like in order to have productive conversations about how to end sexual assault, to destabilize the myth of like stranger rape and right like to do all of that important work. And because we don't want to hurt each other in acquiring that information. We watch stories where A - there's a clear conclusion, which we certainly don't have with the people in our lives and B - where we can learn without hurting the people we love.

**Casper** [00:35:52] So, Vanessa, inspired by this tradition of Flora Légere, bringing two snippets of text together to form a new whole in which we might find new meaning or insight. I want to invite you to read the two quotes just back to back and see if there's something new that emerges to help us with this question.

**Vanessa** [00:36:10] “Feeling of redemption does not guarantee an end to a cycle of wrongdoing. That question defines our very existence. I think if I knew more about the case and the evidence…” I mean, this makes it sound like that feeling of redemption. Doesn't end the cycle of wrongdoing, but it might make us feel better. And is feeling better, [Hmm.] What we want to define our existence? Right? Like I think this is maybe where I'm ending like this makes me feel better, but it doesn't actually end the cycle of wrongdoing. [Yeah.]

**Casper** [00:36:51] Now, I'm curious, when do you notice yourself turning to these stories? because that might help us understand that as well.

**Vanessa** [00:36:57] Oh, that's interesting. I'd like to think that it's when certain things just crossed my path, right? Like, I have a pretty standard liberal media diet, right? Like once it makes it to like the New York Times and New York magazine and like certain podcasts, right? Like I become interested. I'm not investigating the history of laws on sexual assault, like the media is telling me what to find interesting.

**Casper** [00:37:29] How do you feel about that?

**Vanessa** [00:37:31] I mean, I definitely reject certain stories or like, will learn just enough to know that I don't want to learn more, right? Like, I feel like that Michael Jackson documentary came out a few years ago. I did not watch that documentary. I don't judge anybody who did. But really, what happened was I was tempted to watch it at the gym, right? It was like on my watch list on HBO, like on my tablet, and I was like, Oh, this is on my watch list. And then I was like, No, this is not entertainment like. And so I just decided not to watch it. [Yeah.] And so I feel mixed, no matter what I do about that, like media that's being served up to me, right? Like sometimes on like, thank you, Vanity Fair for giving me the first interview with Soon-Yi. I've been waiting for this for 20 years. [Yeah.] I'm going to read every last word and other times I'm like, no, media diet, right? Like, I was going to eat you at the wrong time. And I don't think even though I could justify this as bearing witness to something that people want me to bear witness to. It doesn't feel right to me right now, so I'm not going to.

**Casper** [00:38:38] I think you just said something really important. Like that image of you on the treadmill, witnessing someone's horrific experiences and being like, this is not OK. Is like such a testament to your own navigation of like, is this entertainment or is this something deeper? Because I don't know if you remember where you read that 10,000 thousand word essay in Vanity Fair, but it wasn't on the treadmill, and I don't think you were walking around campus listening to it being read out loud. I can imagine that you were sitting really closely and with your full attention taking in this testimony. And so I feel like there's something about the quality of how you are showing up when you're listening or reading about this. That actually points us directly to this difference that we've been navigating of, like, is this entertainment or is this actually cultivating something important about justice and love? I think it's really a key difference.

**Vanessa** [00:39:36] Yeah, so I get obsessed with Julia Quinn and I get obsessed with Ronan Farrow. But yes, I think you're right that I get obsessed with them differently. I like listen to every Julia Quinn novel, even when I do the dishes, whereas I'm not… I don't have the documentary on in the background while I'm doing the dishes.

**Casper** [00:39:53] And it's not just that you listen to them differently, like we should listen to them differently. I mean, that's what I'm hearing. And what you're saying, is that there's a quality of honoring and respecting someone's witness and their testimony by us, just like sitting down and paying attention. Versus like, Oh, I'm also doing the hoovering. You know, that's what I do when I'm listening to it like a football podcast. [right.]

**Vanessa** [00:40:17] I love that because I think because I become so obsessive, I only have time for one obsession at a time. But that doesn't mean that all of my obsessions are of the same type, right? Like they are taking up the same leisure space of time. But that doesn't mean that they are the same.

**Casper** [00:40:36] I mean, part of me wonders if there's even something in the in the ellipses of the Veronica Mars quote in here, because if we're, you know, if we're doing the dishes or whatever else, at the same time, there isn't space for that silence at the end of that quote that you gave us. And when we're when we're sitting there, when we're listening, that's when there is space for that unknown that that wondering, that pain and sadness that might not always have words.

**Vanessa** [00:41:03] That's so interesting that you're saying that because one of the things that Maggie Nelson also wants us to do is to embrace more silence in the face of the like miasma of media that gets thrown at us. Right? [Huh.] She also, one of her answers is silence.

**Casper** [00:41:23] I'm curious, Vanessa, now that we've looked at these two quotes together, if is there something that you feel more clear about or an, something that you maybe want to do differently about this question that you brought us about how to how to engage these kind of obsessions that come now and then?

**Vanessa** [00:41:40] I mean, I'm definitely thinking that my instincts of like, let's treat these two obsessions differently, need to be honed more. Like, I think my instincts are right because I think you're right. Like, I read these articles at my computer, like no music playing, but like, there isn't any intention set around that. I just want to set a little bit more intention around when I am engaging in these stories. You know, this is, this is sort of embarrassing because I'm an atheist, but whenever I pass a car wreck, it's so interesting that you brought this up. I say a prayer. [Yeah.] Instead of looking, and I in part, say a prayer in order to distract myself from looking. And so I'll just say what I hope for that, for what's happened, right? Because like you sort of see out of the corner of your eye. So I'll say something like. I hope that the paramedics are able to do everything that they can to help these people, right? And if someone is in the car with me, I will say it out loud to them. I will be like, Well, hopefully the paramedics are going to be able to get them somewhere really quickly. Or hopefully that will be moved to the shoulder of the road really quickly so that they're safer and like, I will express that out loud. And so I'm wondering if I want to just like, start doing that when I'm reading these articles or watching these documentaries of like saying, a hope out loud or writing down, a hope. And if I can't come up with a hope, not read it. If it's not like, I hope that this documentary shows me new information about X, Y and Z, right? Like that, I'm like, OK, there's nothing specific. This was just going to be entertainment. And decide not to watch or read or listen.

**Casper** [00:43:27] I think that's beautiful, and I love, especially when the hope is for the person about whom it is, I think that's what, right we’re shifting the lens to what you're hoping for them rather than the entertainment or whatever thing that could be felt if it was just aimed at you. That's beautiful, Vanessa.

**Vanessa** [00:43:46] Thank you, Casper.

**Casper** [00:43:47] Thank you, Vanessa, and thank you for this really beautiful and important question. I think it's definitely, you're leaving me with things to think about in terms of like how I read and how I engage stories that are of interest to me. And I really love that kind of intentionality that you'll be bringing to these questions in the future. Thank you for sharing with us.

**Vanessa** [00:44:08] Well, thank you and thank you, of course, to Maggie Nelson and to all my fellow marshmallows, which is what Veronica Mars fans are called.

**Casper** [00:44:20] You've been listening to the real question. We can only make the show with your support. So thank you so much to everyone who's already a patreon supporter. And if you'd like to join the community of supporters, please go to Patreon.com/realquestionpod. If you love the show, we're always thrilled to read reviews on iTunes, and you can follow us on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook all at Real Question Pod.

**Vanessa** [00:44:42] We are not sorry production. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman and our music is by Nick Bohl and we are distributed by a cast. We want to thank the whole not sorry team Julia Argy Nicki Zoltan, Megan Kelly, Molly Baxter, everyone who sent in a voicemail and a special thanks to Chloe, whose voicemail we used at the top of this episode and is going to look amazing in a leather jacket, and everyone who included the word trooper in their reviews. Leaf Mama, Gabriella, and the token girl. And I'm sure a few more are going to come in next week. Thanks so much, everyone. Talk to you next week.