**TRQ\_Maternity Leave.mp3**

**Casper** [00:01:03] Before I was born, and my three younger sisters arrived. My mum had set up a floristry business. My parents were living in America at the time, and she would dress up as like a Dutch milkmaid and like flirt with doormen and had a little cart with like Dutch flowers before that became a thing. So just before we were born, she ended up having like three stores in New York. She brought Dutch friends over to staff them like it was all happening. There was an investor. My, my mum even kept the business going even when I was born. She was like pumping to prepare for a 36 hour round trip to go to New York and like manage whatever. And like, she realized that, ‘oh, I can't do both of these things.’ And she shut down the business. And I saw her a few months ago and I said, like, do you regret or like, do you miss that life? You know, because it was such a big thing and, two things were true, I think she said essentially like, I'm glad I chose the decision I did. I'm really glad that we had a family in the four of you. But I could see, and she acknowledged that, like, there was a deep sadness that that wasn't something that had been part of her life, because she's an incredible businesswoman and like would have been an amazing global florist. And I just think, especially for me as a man, like realizing that choices, especially mothers make, parents make generally like there's something really big about them and hard. And that's something we're going to talk about today with our guest, Anna. And I'm really looking forward to hearing how she's navigating the, the questions she's brought to us.

**Vanessa** [00:02:39] Just one warning before we get into today's episode, Anna is going to be talking about having a baby and being pregnant. And we know that some of you might not want to hear a conversation about that right now. And so, we just want to warn you so that you can take care of yourself in whatever way makes sense for you.

**Casper** [00:02:58] I'm Casper ter Kuile.

**Vanessa** [00:02:59] And I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

**Casper** [00:03:01] And this is the real question. Today, we're joined by Anna Wellfield. Anna is studying theology and training to be a vicar in Nottingham in England and writes poetry in her free time. And we're so glad to welcome to the show today. Welcome, Anna.

**Anna** [00:03:32] Hi. Thanks for having me.

**Casper** [00:03:34] I feel like we're having tea and we're surrounded by, like, poetry books and, you know, literature. And maybe there's scones. At least that's the fantasy I'm living in today.

**Anna** [00:03:45] I wish they were scones.

**Vanessa** [00:03:50] Anna, can you please tell us a little bit about what brought you here today?

**Anna** [00:03:53] Yeah, of course. To give you some context. My daughter was born in February of 2021, at which point the UK was in one of its many lockdowns due to COVID and it was one of the more extreme lockdowns. So we weren't allowed to see anyone at all. And I think at that point it was like you can go out once a day for exercise. My husband, though, was still going to work because he was a key worker and so it was just me and my daughter at home for most of the time. And we just got really in the habit of being at home alone. Like we, I say we, I learned how to be a parent at home, all day. And even when I was allowed to take her out to parks and meet people, that always felt like a huge amount of effort. And I didn't really know how to do it and it was just easier to be at home. And so, I think for the seven months of my maternity leave, we were pretty isolated, and I got really depressed, honestly. And I remember it was we had probably had about two months left in maternity leave, and I was already very much counting down the days and just thinking, ‘I just have to get through this.’ People would suggest things of how to help and I'd just be like, ‘Nope, I just need to survive it. I need to keep doing things the way I'm doing them, and we'll get through the days.’ And then in September, I started my course, my daughter started nursery. She loved it there and I loved it, my course. It was like a veil lifted; everything felt better I felt like me again. I felt alive. I felt, yeah, like I had purpose again. And it was like night and day. Whatever depression I was experiencing completely lifted almost within, like, a week. Cut to now, however many months later. And we're expecting our next baby. Yay, in October. And the way my course works is I can have no time off at all or a whole academic year. And so understandably, I'm taking that year, very gratefully. I know that I’m to be looking at is maternity leave, especially talking to a lot of people who might be listening from the US is a huge amount of time and I'm very lucky. But having had that first experience, I'm just feeling really fearful about it being isolating again. But more than isolating, I think I'm feeling fearful about this, just feeling of like, what am I doing on maternity leave? Who am I when I'm on maternity leave? And this feeling of guilt of really wanting to get back to work but knowing how lucky I am to have the time off. So, my, my question is, how can I hope that this time will be different but still be realistic about the fact that it's probably going to be hard?

**Casper** [00:06:42] Yeah. And I'm so struck by the way that you said, like once you found a way to like make it through those days, like even offers of help were kind of like a disruption of that because you're like, Oh, I know how I can do a day at a time and I've got 60 left and I'm like, Yeah, you know, I can, I can just so get into that headspace of understanding you found the thing you can do and actually help is harder than just repeating the thing, even if you know the thing itself is not that great. And I'm really struck by how you said like there was something like not feeling like yourself during the first maternity leave. And I'm curious, I mean, I can imagine, like, I'm not a mom, obviously, but I'm like, I don't want to not feel like myself. I'm really resistant to that. And so, I'm like, I'm curious like, who are you when you're not yourself? Or Who were you when you didn't feel yourself last time?

**Anna** [00:07:35] Yeah, I think it's a feeling that a lot of moms have the, they don't feel like themselves for a while after their children have come into their lives in whatever way their children arrive. Right.

**Casper** Mhm.

**Anna** Yeah. I think it's this thing of your whole world, becomes about caregiving. And if that wasn't true of you before, it's really hard to kind of fight to remember the things that were key to your identity.

**Casper** Mm hmm.

**Anna** And also, there's just the whole other aspect of, I guess it's a really hard thing to explain, but you just feel very like. A more like primal version of yourself. Like you feel like you're just you're very focused on the, like, keeping alive job of looking after this child and that gradually dissipates. But it's yeah, it's hard to feel like a rational human being for a while.

**Casper** [00:08:28] Yeah. That's such a good way of describing that. That sense of like focus, like at the other things have to fade into the background because there's so much specificity that's demanded of you, and it's all caregiving.

**Anna** Yeah

**Casper** Like that's the fullness of the focus. I mean, we don't know each other yet. Would you tell me a little bit about like, what are the other bits that had to fall out of focus? Like, obviously, your degree, your training, your kind of professional work as well. What were some of the pieces also that had to kind of melt into the background?

**Vanessa** [00:09:00] Can I add to that question a little bit of what are the things that you usually like about yourself? That it's the same question that Casper's asking, right? Like,

**Anna** Yeah

**Vanessa** What are the things that you're usually like, ‘This is me’ that couldn't come out while you were in this caretaking mode?

**Anna** [00:09:17] Yeah, I think it's a few things. My, like, friendships and like my deep, close friendships that I can really, I'm someone who gives a lot of time to listening to their friends and supporting them. And it's yeah, it felt like that couldn't just practically happen as much. I mean, that partly was COVID, but partly I think, you know, my daughter would be crying or need a feed and, you know, everything would have to be interrupted all the time. Even when I did have a phone call or zoom people.

**Casper** Yeah.

**Anna** I spent a lot of time thinking and reading and, you know, cooking and having time to kind of reflect on what happened in the day and make connections between things that, you know, something I've read or a podcast I've listened to and what's happening in my life. And it just feels it felt like that part of my brain didn't have room during that time, which is odd because there was a lot of time, you know, with a newborn. They're sleeping a lot. And, you know, I spent enough time watching TV, but I think there's something about being totally on your own compared to even being with a newborn or with a small child. That just is really different, especially if that, you know, child in the car also comes with it, like a huge feeling of responsibility. It's, it's really hard to kind of. Just, like, concentrate on something else.

**Vanessa** [00:10:41] You mean you weren't able to write a dissertation?

**Anna** [00:10:44] Yeah, exactly.

**Vanessa** [00:10:45] Keeping a helpless child alive. Well, you should be ashamed of yourself.

**Anna** [00:10:48] No. I mean, people do people write books and all sorts.

**Vanessa** [00:10:53] Do they?

**Casper** Do they?

**Anna** [00:10:54] I don’t know.

**Vanessa** [00:10:55] Who are these people?

**Casper** [00:10:57] I don't believe a word.

**Vanessa** [00:10:58] Full time help write like.

**Anna** Presumably.

**Casper** [00:11:04] So it's like this haunting from last time that's already kind of casting a shadow on what's coming up now. And am I right in thinking that you're like, ‘yes, I know the context is different, but like, is this actually going to kind of be a similar experience? And I don't want that again.’

**Anna** [00:11:22] Yeah, I think. People keep saying it won't be the same again. It's not COVID, but there's just this big part of me that doesn't believe them.

**Vanessa** [00:11:31] Yeah, I love that you have friends that, like, want to take care of you, but that sounds so annoying. I'd be like, you don't friggin know. You cannot cut out with the scalpel. What was COVID and what was maternity leave. Also, we're not totally out of COVID. Babies still can't be vaccinated. Right, like, that's so nice that people want to encourage you. But if I were you, I would find that very frustrating that other people are trying to predict for you how this is going to go.

**Anna** [00:12:00] Absolutely.

**Vanessa** [00:12:02] I'm wondering, I don't I don't mean this, but I'm going to say it just to see how you react. Like check in with yourself, how this emotionally feels. What if I were to say to you, look Anna, you have no idea how it's going to go. Try not to worry about it and see.

**Anna** Mmmh

**Vanessa** Is your reaction to that? Like, fuck you, I know my body. This is going to go badly.

**Anna** [00:12:25] Yes, but it's also like is that feeling of if I let myself just experience it. I feel like I'll be, you know how many months in before I realize it's going badly and then it'll be too late to do anything about it.

**Casper** [00:12:43] Mmmh

**Vanessa** [00:12:44] Yeah, like. I will have given up by then.

**Anna** [00:12:45] Yeah, the roller coaster will have happened, and I will just be waiting to get off the ride.

**Casper** [00:12:51] That's actually interesting, though Anna. You mentioned, like, okay, I've watched a lot of TV or look, which in itself is fine, but were there markers for you that if you look back at that experience now, that you're like, ‘Oh, if I'm doing that, that probably means I'm not in a good place.’

**Anna** [00:13:09] Maybe. I think the TV thing. I mean, I do love watching TV. I think it's like, what TV am I watching and how

**Casper** That's interesting.

**Anna** Like and how often am I taking breaks from that to do other things? Like, how much is Netflix just, you know, displaying that message? It sometimes displays of are you sure you want to continue watching?

**Vanessa** [00:13:28] I find that message so judgmental.

**Anna** [00:13:30] Oh, absolutely.

**Vanessa** [00:13:33] I'm curious if you can dissect this. Probably not. It's not a fair question. Again, I'm here with all the unfair questions. How much better would your experience be if you took away the guilt and shame?

**Anna** Hmm.

**Vanessa** And just we're like, yeah, I'm part cow right now because I'm breastfeeding this child and I'm sloppy and gross and watching a lot of TV and rock on. Like, is it the behaviors or is it the guilt and shame about the behaviors?

**Casper** [00:14:04] Mm hmm.

**Anna** [00:14:06] Mmmh I mean, guilt and shame never helps.

**Vanessa** Yeah.

**Anna** But I think it's more than just the guilt and shame, because I think, you know, the guilt and shame of how things had been. You know, I'd get to, you know, the weekend and I'd still be kind of behaving in the same way, but I'd have company and it would be so much better. Yeah. You know.

**Vanessa** [00:14:28] Yeah.That makes sense to me, right. Because sometimes, sometimes I'm doing something that I know I find joyful. I just feel guilty about it and that ruins it. And other times I'm like, I should actually shower. It would actually physically, literally make me feel better to shower. I don't feel guilty about being gross. I feel gross. But like, right. Like, sometimes it's the guilt about feeling gross, not the feeling of gross.

**Anna** [00:14:48] Absolutely. I think the guilt the way the guilt made things worse was when I was connecting with other people on maternity leave. And I'd want to be real about how I felt. And I'd be like, ‘oh, isn't I like, really a bitch? Yea’ And they'd be like, ‘Oh, I'm loving maternity leave. I'm so enjoying bonding with my child.’ And then I'd feel like a tiny, awful speck of a person. That's, that's when the guilt and shame was awful.

**Vanessa** [00:15:17] Those people sound like they're on Zoloft.

**Anna** [00:15:19] Yeah. I mean, I don't know what that is. It sounds like an American drug, but yes.

**Vanessa** [00:15:24] Those people sound like they're on a serotonin reuptake inhibitor or annoying. The other word for those people is annoying, I just want to reflect something back to you and I'm wondering how this makes you feel. It sounds like part of you really resents not being able to live a life of the mind, and that you, for a year of your life are just focused on keeping this this helpless creature alive who isn't contributing anything to society. And you just have to keep it alive. It's a very needy plant. But then when we asked you what you value in your life outside of motherhood, you said like, I'm a really good listener, right? That you like listening to your friends. And these are both caretaking roles. And I'm wondering, one fills you up and the other feels like a drain and a sacrifice. And again, I keep asking you to try to delineate things that I know aren't quite delineate-able, but I'm wondering if you can parse that out a little bit for us.

**Anna** [00:16:32] I mean, it's probably the lack of like, I mean, she, she's an amazing communicator. She has lots of words now, but she, takes a while for babies to learn to talk back and.

**Vanessa** [00:16:46] Yeah, so not intellectually stimulating for a little bit.

**Anna** [00:16:48] But yeah, I mean, her favorite word at the moment is socks. It's, it's a great word, but

**Vanessa** It's such a good word.

**Casper** [00:16:55] It's so cute.

**Anna** [00:16:57] I think when you're sat with a friend and you're listening to them, you can be really present in that moment. But it's a moment or, you know, it's 20 minutes, it's half an hour, and the conversation will move on and it'll ebb and it’ll flow. That person's still like a separate person. And there's a way in which your baby *is* a separate person, but that also sort of this appendage now, that's like part of you.

**Casper** Yeah.

**Anna** And so it's, is both the fact that, that she wasn't able to communicate with me. In that way. It wasn't stimulating in the same way, but it's also partly, that thing of I can't separate myself out from you and listen to you kind of reflexively. It's like we are one for a while.

**Vanessa** [00:17:48] Totally. And so I'm wondering if there was this system where, like, you know, you were an 18th century duchess and you could hand your child over for three years and see it, you know, have the child be seen but not heard. Like, would that be ideal? What would an ideal system be for you?

**Anna** [00:18:09] That definitely wouldn't be ideal.

**Vanessa** [00:18:12] Great. You don't want to be a 17th century duchess.

**Anna** [00:18:14] No. I mean, my daughter goes to nursery three days a week and that, like, I miss her. You know, I think what's so hard about this is that I feel so many contradictory things.

**Vanessa** Yeah.

**Anna** Like all of the time. And I genuinely don't know what a perfect system would be because I..

**Vanessa** [00:18:32] Loving her less.

**Anna** [00:18:33] Yeah, probably.

**Vanessa** [00:18:35] Yeah, that'd be nice.

**Anna** [00:18:38] Mm hmm. You know, I want to see everything. I don't want to miss things, but equally maybe it's just I need like Bernard's watch. Did you. Maybe that's too UK a reference but. Well, you can just like pause time for a while and so she stops like growing and I just go and have like a day of, like, sleep and, like, reading. And then I come back, and I haven't missed anything at all.

**Vanessa** [00:19:03] I feel like I see this with every question, but this is about grief. We only have one life to live. And you want to be in charge of prayer at your church and in school and mentally stimulated and playing with socks, and..

**Anna** [00:19:20] Yeah

**Vanessa** [00:19:22] It turns out we can't do all those things at once. So is it fair to say so your question is so, ‘what's the balance that I can best live with? There's going to be pain and grief no matter what. Yeah. So what can I do to make it the one that stinks the least?’

**Anna** [00:19:41] Yeah, I think so. I think it's about balance. So how do I find spaces to have time being away and being me? And how do I be so completely focused on her and how do I balance those things? But whether that's my question or I don't know, because I don't even know if I practically can have time away from her really. Even though it's not COVID, my parents don't live close. Phil's parents don't live close. We have friends, but they're, you know, friends in their twenties with jobs. They're not going to be able to be childcare, so.

**Casper** [00:20:16] That's what really strikes me Anna, is like what I hear and what you're sharing is also a kind of a knowing that it's not going to be that different because some of those fundamentals in terms of, yeah, that like systems of care like Vanessa was talking about and like you've just said, it is going to be you actually, most of the time and it is going to mostly be you at home alone. And sure, your oldest child will be at nursery a couple of days a week. Like, like I feel like I hear you be quite clear, right, about what you're preparing for. And so I'm wondering if there's something about preparing for an endurance test that you've done before and you didn't enjoy that much and you kind of know it's coming again. Yeah, that's what I'm hearing.

**Anna** [00:21:02] Yeah, I think that's how it feels. When I look at this time. I'm not optimistic that it's going to be amazing. Yeah, I'm like, looking at it like, how do I make it better? Yeah, but even saying that does make me feel guilty because I have this thing of like, why would it not be amazing watching the first year of my child's life?

**Casper** [00:21:22] Well, that's I think this is really important because there's one thing which is like accepting what it is. And then there's the comparison, which, of course, is the killer of all joy. And I wonder if our first text actually might be really helpful to tease out these two things if the experience itself and the expectations of it. So Anna, would you tell us about your first text? What is it and why did you bring it?

**Anna** [00:21:46] Yeah, it's a poem called The Bright Field by Iris Thomas. It's been one of my top favorite poems for a while. Yes. I'm the kind of person who has a list of top favorite poems. And it for me, it just it really speaks about not missing the beauty of the moment right in front of you.

**Casper** [00:22:09] Would you read it to us?

**Anna** [00:22:11] I have seen the sun break through to illuminate a small field for a while and go my way and forgotten it. But that was the pearl of great price, the one field that had treasure in it. I realize now that I must give all that I have to possess it. Life is not hurrying on to a receding future, nor hankering after an imagined past is the turning of sight like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush, to a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once. But is the eternity that awaits you.

**Casper** [00:22:47] Mm. Was there some snippet or like a key idea in this text that really spoke to you as you were thinking about what to choose?

**Anna** [00:22:56] I think it was ‘that life is not hurrying on to a receding future nor hankering after an imagined past’ bit. I think we all find it really hard to live in the present, but that's definitely something that's been true of me for a long time. I am, I spend a lot of my time not in the present and in both the future in the past. And so, I think the feeling of like, can I just see the beauty in what's right now in front of me rather than wishing it away or wishing the next thing here, or looking back to things that were that feels like a challenge for me, but something that could be really beautiful.

**Casper** [00:23:36] So and I'm thinking about that relationship between the thing itself, right? The upcoming maternity leave and then the just the feelings about the thing itself, right? The way other people expect things to be and therefore the way we expect things to be. And the piece that you pulled out was about being present and not looking forward or not kind of getting stuck in in memory. And I'm curious if that theme of presence or, I don't know, being here in what is rather than wanting it to be the future or being stuck in the past. Is there a relationship between those two things that we've drawn out from how you're looking at this upcoming season of maternity leave?

**Anna** [00:24:16] I think to see the present moment and to see the beauty in front of you, you have to kind of, there's like a theme of acceptance there of you have to kind of let go of the things that aren't right in front of you, let go of kind of wishing things were different, but also wishing that I was different. You know, there's not really a space for comparison in it about how I am because. I'm the one standing in front of that small field. It's both about, like seeing the opportunity in the moments of, of time, there are beautiful moments and celebrating those, but also seeing, like clearly what it means for me to be me being a mom of a small child. Like, see what that really looks like and the fact that it's not maybe how it looks for other people, but just accepting that and being like and ,and, I'm a great mom, you know, and I'm, Anna as mom is something beautiful and to be celebrated.

**Casper** [00:25:18] Yes.

**Anna** [00:25:19] How I do that when I'm, you know, actually in the day to day moments and I'm covered in sick and breast milk and etc., etc., I'm not so sure.

**Vanessa** [00:25:27] But so I hate this poem.

**Anna** [00:25:32] Great.

**Vanessa** [00:25:34] Or do you know I don't hate the poem? I think it is an unfair comparison that you are putting yourself in. A sun breaking through, illuminating a small field is an uncomplicated, beautiful thing. Right.

**Anna** Yeah.

**Vanessa** And so calling ourselves to better appreciate and delight in beautiful small fields, like uncomplicated things, seems like a really lovely call. That is not what being a mom is. Yeah, right. It's certainly not how you experience being a mom. It's not a small, uncomplicated thing. It's not a moment where you're walking by and the sun breaks through. Right. It is being covered in sick and breastmilk and your child learning words and smiling for the first time and connecting with you and delighting. Right. I feel like this poem is calling us to appreciate moments of beauty when they appear to us. It is not saying love the sacrifice and love the hard things. And so what if I said to you, it's fine to hate parts of it? Right. Like, what role could anger or resentment play? I don't want you to be sad or depressed. Right? Like, I don't want you to be angry or resentful either. Right? Like being happy and joyful is more fun. But this is just frickin hard. It's hard. It's not a small field.

**Anna** Yeah.

**Vanessa** So. Yeah, I'm just wondering if there are other feelings. Like, what if you just let yourself resent moments of it and say to this baby while it's pooped on you, I love you, but this is disgusting.

**Anna** [00:27:15] I think it's that feeling of resentment is, a really great feeling to let yourself feel but it feels best when you have a cathartic outlet. And I, definitely, there were times when I wanted that, but I felt like yelling at my baby is not an appropriate cathartic outlet. And I didn't. I yeah. I couldn't feel like I knew what one would be. Yeah. So maybe it's about finding the right catharsis.

**Casper** [00:27:47] Hmm.

**Vanessa** [00:27:49] I mean, it's definitely not about making yourself feel bad for not seeing the beauty in, you know, diaper blowouts.

**Anna** [00:27:58] Yeah, that's true. Yeah.

**Casper** [00:28:00] One, also, when you said, like, when I did connect with other moms, everyone was like, everyone was maybe doing this thing of like, ‘Oh, the fields and the love, and love it. It’s great’ right. And like.

**Anna** [00:28:11] I don't want to contribute to that, do I?

**Casper** [00:28:13] Right, yeah, exactly. And like, maybe, you know what? And maybe it was true for them in that moment and God bless them. But that feels like the whole added second layer that we were talking about before. If like in those moments you were trying to do what we're talking about here, which is like tell the truth.

**Anna** Yeah.

**Casper** And you were met by people who, for whatever reason at least didn't either experienced the same truth or were not telling it. And I am betting most of my coins on that second option. But so I'm wondering, like, I'm curious, do you have relationships with other probably mothers? Like, is there anyone who you can say absolutely anything to or like, I just want you to have a place where you where you don't have to pretend to, you know what I mean?

**Anna** [00:28:56] Yeah.

**Vanessa** [00:28:56] It can also be like a song you play loud on your headphones and angry dance to or, hello, you scream into.

**Anna** [00:29:06] Mhm I think. I mean, I have lots of like genuine connections with people, but it takes a while for me to be the one who opens up. I think. You know, as I said earlier, that what feels like me is listening to other people. I tend not to do a huge amount of talking about me, especially if there's not like a happy or at least a hopeful end to the narrative, its back to guilt. I feel guilt if I give people a story that's all sad, and I'm still in that moment because I feel like I don't want you to try and help me. But you're going to feel pressured to try and help me. I think what I'm coming down to is I really do want more friends who are going through the same thing, because I think when you're going through the same thing, neither of you tries to fix the problem because you know it can't be fixed.

**Casper** [00:29:58] Yes.

**Anna** [00:29:59] And you can just talk about it. And due to, just circumstance of being the first in our friendship group who have started having kids. That's not something I have at the moment. And it's so I need to you know, there's an element of I need to try and find that.

**Vanessa** [00:30:15] It's just amazing how company can make you feel better is what we always say about literature, right? Like if you read a book and someone 200 years ago was like, Motherhood frickin sucks. You're like, Oh my God, even 200 years ago, they felt this way and they're talking right to me, right?

**Anna** [00:30:33] So that feeling seen thing.

**Vanessa** [00:30:34] Yeah, one of my best friends has a baby who just turned one, and she has gotten super into angry mom Instagram. And it is just Instagram accounts that are only about when you are on the road, and you've used all the diapers and like what do you do. Yeah, right, right. And she's just like, I never thought that Instagram would be, like, the most important part of motherhood for me, but just feeling accompanied, right?

**Anna** Hmm.

**Vanessa** And the way our current systems are set up, it's like, actually, when you have a kid is when you move into the house with a private yard, or you actually isolate more and more when you need that connection more and more.

**Anna** [00:31:18] Yeah.

**Vanessa** [00:31:19] And so I think what I don't want about this poem is its focus on the personal responsibility of it all. You know, the like. It's on me to see the beauty in the field. It's on you to do whatever you can to not be depressed this time. But it's not on you to just, like, see the beauty.

**Casper** [00:31:39] Yeah. No, I. And I feel like I fell into that trap of reading the poem, actually, in that way of looking for beauty. So I really appreciate where this conversation has taken us, which is like the experience is one thing and that's like, let's be honest, it's just going to be really hard. And so there's this second layer that we can think about, which is the guilt or the judgment or that, you know, all this stuff that's wrapped around the experience itself. And I'm really excited for you Anna, I feel like you're coming into it this time. I don't know. You're like a seasoned jewel thief. You're like, look, the heist is not easy and it's not going to be easier this time. But I know my crew now and like, I'm not going to be betrayed by the Spanish codebreaker because I'm like, you're just like coming in at a level of awareness and the element of like expertise of understanding that you're coming into the experience with this time, which feels which feels different to me. And if there is a beautiful field in those 12 months of maternity leave, fabulous. But like, we're not going to go in expecting a field every day, right? Like

**Anna** Yeah

**Casper** I don't know what I'm going to take away from Iris Thomas, just like the harshness of the landscape. But you know where you're walking now. Do you know what I mean? Like, I don't know.

**Anna** Yeah

**Casper** There's a there's an understanding of the reality that you're bringing now that feels really powerful.

**Anna** [00:33:04] Maybe it's not the noticing, the beauty that I need to work on. It's like noticing the opportunities to nap that I need to work on.

**Casper** [00:33:11] Hello? Say more. Yes.

**Anna** [00:33:14] I think the first time around I was like I was still very in that productivity brain, of like work ethic and that kind of thing. And so if she was, like, asleep, I would be like, okay, what can I do in this time to make my environment cleaner or like, life better or, you know, what can I achieve in this time?

**Casper** Mm hmm.

**Anna** And I could have napped a lot more, and that would have been better.

**Vanessa** [00:33:45] Well, luckily, I think our second text is called Nap More, and if it’s not I think it'll still help us. So why don't we move on to our next text? Ana, what is your second text?

**Anna** [00:34:21] So it's an extract from a book called A Line of the Sky by Helen Mort. And she is a poet and an amateur climber and a mother in Sheffield. And she her whole book is about motherhood and sacrifice and the joy of mountaineering and about risk and about the way society views mothers who choose to keep pursuing that risk.

**Casper** [00:34:54] Hmm. Hmm.

**Vanessa** [00:34:55] Great. What is the text?

**Anna** [00:34:59] With him. I am an animal, fierce and proud. I hold him to my belly at night and I nose him. I sniff him, let him paw at me. But when I can't sleep, I long to take off into the night and flatten myself against moll and peat, roll in Heather. Taste the ground alone and without him. I imagined creeping back in by morning, bringing him the smell of ferns, the taste of feathers, the roughness of Greystone my eyes glittering with the small light the stars have granted me.

**Vanessa** [00:35:34] What is it about this text?

**Anna** [00:35:37] It's that bit about longing to take off into the night, to be alone and without your child. But then what you can like, what beautiful things you can bring back the next day when you come back. Like I, there was this sense that. The me that Elena was getting was a me that was diminished. And if I could have if I could have snuck out and, you know, rolled around in moll and peat, that's not my version of what I would have done. But, you know, if I could have gone and done something, I would have been able to bring her back so much more than what I was giving her.

**Casper** [00:36:22] What would be your moll and peat?

**Anna** [00:36:25] Like a really good cup of tea and cake in a cafe with a good book. And trees and sky and, you know, the outside, too. But I think, like just time. Unplanned, unstructured time when no one needs me.

**Casper** [00:36:44] Mm hmm.

**Anna** Yeah.

**Vanessa** [00:36:48] Can you structure some unstructured time into your life? Is that a possible thing? Yes. Starting week one, you have one friend who's willing to come for 3 hours on Tuesdays.

**Anna** [00:37:01] Mm hmm. Yeah, probably. Certainly. I could be more like I could choose that time more when it files around the weekends. I think it's back to that theme of guilt. You knew this was all about guilt, but I think last time I felt this sense of, this is our time all together. I have to be here. But I could definitely do a lot more leaving when he is there. Yeah.

**Casper** [00:37:31] And I sense some hesitation what's already noticing.

**Anna** [00:37:38] So I, Phill is an incredibly engaged father, and he's actually really I like, day one was amazingly competent with babies. I don't, it's like a natural skill set, but he's much less good at dealing with sleep deprivation than I am. And I so I think there was, there was like a practical sense of if I can let him nap, our lives will be better because he'll be less grumpy. But yeah, I think there's a mixture of both. I think it's more about rather than kind of just like letting ourselves, like we can make decisions in the moment. We could plan for both of those things to happen. You know, he can have a nap at some point and I can go out. That's achievable.

**Casper** [00:38:22] And there'll be some weekends when it isn't. You know, like I said, don't want to fall into a trap now of setting up expectations that end up being too hard to keep as well.

**Vanessa** [00:38:32] Or pretending that practical solutions are solving what's actually happening.

**Casper** [00:38:37] Right. But, I mean, you just radiate so much care, like the fact that you're like, well, I want Phill to have sleep and I can take it, you know, like that. It's such a generous orientation, maybe to a fault.

**Anna** [00:38:53] Yeah.

**Casper** [00:38:55] Like everything that you've said is clearly coming from a place of wanting, wanting to support the people you love. And it’s just that is beautiful. I don't want to negate that. And no one Phill, kids, us, everyone, like no one wants to see you back in back in the hold that you ended up in. And so it probably will take a little bit of discomfort to set a different pattern, I think.

**Anna** [00:39:19] Hmm. Yeah. I'm wondering whether I need, like, like like a little, like, song or like a mantra or something that I can, like say to myself when that feeling of, like, am I allowed to do this comes like this weekend I was away on a retreat that was compulsory. I didn't choose to do it, but I felt so guilty about how my daughter reacted when I left and so guilty when I came back about how clingy she was. And I yeah, I feel like I maybe I just need something I like to say to myself in those moments of.

**Casper** [00:39:51] Like, what do you wish someone else would say to you in those moments?

**Vanessa** [00:39:54] Hmm?

**Anna** [00:39:57] I think it's partly about permission, like you're allowed to do this, but it's also partly that thing of like, ‘it's better for everyone in the long run.’

**Casper** [00:40:05] There is. I'm allowed to do this. It's better for everyone that I do this.

**Vanessa** [00:40:16] Also I just would like to say using one of my sacred texts. Sinjin in Jane Eyre says a very important line at one point he says, ‘I want it.’ And like that makes him feel entitled to it. And I would just like to say, on behalf of mothers everywhere ‘I want it.’ is sometimes just enough of a reason.

**Anna** [00:40:41] Yeah, absolutely.

**Vanessa** [00:40:42] You can just be like, I want it.

**Anna** [00:40:45] Yeah. And I, I want to get to a place where ‘I want it’ convinces me.

**Casper** Mhm.

**Anna** Absolutely.

**Vanessa** [00:40:53] You have a daughter. Right, showing her. That it's okay to just do things you want, right. Like, that's an important thing to show her. You're allowed to want things and you have to teach her that you're going to be frustrated sometimes, right? But like for the sake of your daughter. Show her women are allowed to want things and then get them.

**Anna** [00:41:15] Yeah.

**Casper** Mm hmm

**Vanessa** [00:41:16] And on behalf of the other moms and the other women in your life, and everyone who feels dispossessed in any way, right. I want it. That's. Do it. Yeah. And bring back Feather's great. Like, just go. Anna I'm just so grateful to you for your courage in talking about this. Eleanor is such a lucky kid to have you as her mom and this, this upcoming baby will be as well. And please let us know what angry practices you come up with. Rage dancing, screaming into a pillow, destroying plants, throwing plates, whatever it is. And I just hope that you get to go to cafes and eat scones just because you want a scone. And that that is sometimes just enough of a reason to eat a scone.

**Anna** [00:42:13] Yeah.

**Casper** [00:42:14] It's so great to be with you, Anna and seriously, good luck this year.

**Anna** [00:42:18] Thank you. This has been so great.

**Vanessa** [00:42:24] We have an amazing maxim from Jesse this week, which is nobody is really anywhere. We're all just on our way.

**Casper** [00:42:34] Hmm Thanks, Jesse. You've been listening to The Real Question. Love the show? Please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to the show. And you can also follow us on Instagram and Facebook at realquestion and on Twitter at therealqpod, a big shout out to our BFF tier patrons Laura Lorber, Amanda Schram, Effie Howe, Ashley Mayo, Elouise Fairing, Mary Margaret, Ari, Bitty, Becky Boo, Kristen Hall, Jenny Cruz, and Stephanie Fetowish. Thank you so much, everyone.

**Vanessa** [00:43:03] We're a Not Sorry Production. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman. We are mixed by Erica Huang and our music is by Nick Bohl and we are distributed by Acast. Special thanks this week to the wonderful, wonderful Anna and thanks as always to Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Lara Glass, A.J., Jeremias, Gaby Lori, and Stephanie Paulsell. Thanks, everyone. And we'll talk to you in two weeks.

**Casper** [00:43:23] Thank you.