

## The Real Question – Episode 1

### The Tooth Fairy

\*intro music plays\*

Vanessa: I'm Vanessa Zoltan –

Casper: - and I'm Casper ter Kuile –

Vanessa: - and this is the first episode of The Real Question.

\*intro music continues\*

\*voicemail\* Danie: Hi, Vanessa and Casper. It's Danie. I have a Tooth Fairy story for you which is that I swallowed the first 2 teeth that I lost. The first one happened when I was in kindergarten and I remember that when I realized the tooth was gone, the entire class stopped whatever we were doing and we all moved furniture out of the way and searched the whole classroom looking for my missing tooth. It was never found. We then assumed that I had swallowed it and not realized it. So, since I couldn't leave my tooth under my pillow, I had to draw a picture and write a little note to the Tooth Fairy explaining the situation so that she would give me money. I was a very practical, not very creative child, so I drew a very quick pencil sketch and spent most of the paper just writing a detailed note explaining the situation and how sorry I was to have deprived her of her necessary building materials. And then I'm pretty sure- I'll have to ask my mother to confirm this- I'm pretty sure I also swallowed the second tooth I lost and had to write another note, but eventually, I figured out the tooth thing and stopped eating them, so it all worked out well in the end.

Vanessa: Casper, Danie did such a good job of setting up the theme for today. We're going to be talking about the Tooth Fairy, and we're going to be talking the fact that it's awesome and weird.

Casper: I love that Danie was really starting a correspondence. It wasn't just a note asking for money. It was like, "I ate my tooth, I'm so sorry. I did it again! I'm really, really sorry!" \*Casper laughing\*

Vanessa: "Here is a picture of what the tooth looked like."

Casper: Especially because then you can just keep doing it and conning the Tooth Fairy for money \*Vanessa laughing\* so she was playing the long game.

Vanessa: \*sing-song\* Sma-art!

Casper: Vanessa, you and I have been friends for nearly a decade after we met in divinity school, even though you're a fierce atheist and I'm a something that I still don't know the right word for, and what I love about our conversations is that we'll often bring big questions to each other about ethics, about how to live, about what's the right thing to do, about how to navigate difficult emotions, and this podcast is all about having those conversations but with a little bit of help from 2 texts that we're familiar with and we think that could help us figure out this question.

Vanessa: Yeah, and I think we're in a particular moment, and I am aware that probably everybody throughout history has felt that way, but it feels like the stakes are so high right now in terms of our political situation, in terms of living through a pandemic, in terms of reckoning with what it means to live in a climate-changed world, in terms of receiving the wisdom of the Me Too and Black Lives Matter

movements, and it's constantly making both of us want to think about should we be living differently. What are the inherited truths that we want to really hold close and keep going with, and which ones no longer are suited for this time and are actually really detrimental to living in the world that we want to live in? The question that we are going to ask today is whether or not I should perpetuate the story of the Tooth Fairy with my 2 step-daughters, but that's a question that's about so much more than just the Tooth Fairy, even though it is, it's a very low-stakes question, right? Like, the Me Too movement isn't necessarily greatly moved forward by whether or not I give a dollar in exchange for a tooth for my step-daughters, but I do think that if we practice looking closely at how we behave and think, "This is an opportunity to be thoughtful. This is an opportunity to be intentional," then we can use that when big moments of crisis also happen.

Casper: Exactly. So some of the questions we'll be bringing will be big and some of the questions will be small, but often it is those smaller questions that give us a kind of pathway into some of these big themes that we want to discuss together, and the way we're going to do this is one of us will bring a question that simmers underneath the kind of everyday currents of our lives and to help us think about it, we'll bring 2 different pieces of text. It might be a scene from a movie or a poem or an essay that we've read or any source of kind of cultural text that resonates with us on this question and then it's the other's job to help the questioner see new levels of insight into the issue that we're exploring. So, Vanessa, what are the 2 texts that resonated for you as you were thinking about this question?

Vanessa: I brought an article about the Marquis de Sade and Jeffrey Epstein and the song "Super Trooper" from *Mamma Mia!*

Casper: \*laughing\* Wow, the Marquis de Sade and *Mamma Mia!* I'm not sure these 2 texts have ever been put together, so I'm excited to see what we find.

Vanessa: They are natural companions. They are peanut butter and chocolate.

Casper: And the reason that we want to draw on these texts is that so often when we look at a question head on, we'll see one set of answers but when we look at it refracted through a piece of art or through a story or maybe we're coming at the question sideways, there'll be new depths or insights that we get to glean from it which help us totally understand the question more richly or more deeply.

Vanessa: Yeah, and the other thing is we're going to bring sustained attention to, like, small snippets of text and we're going to look really closely at very few words at a time, and there's an idea from a French philosopher Simone Weil that attention is love, and that by practicing paying attention to, you know, she would say geometry or Greek that we practice attention on these texts and then we can practice attention on the people in our lives, and I don't want to talk about \*laughs\* geometry or Greek, so we are going to practice sustained attention with this question about the Tooth Fairy.

Casper: Well, let's dive right in to that, Vanessa. Tell us, why did you bring this question?

Vanessa: So, as you know Casper, I am lucky enough to be the step-mother to a beautiful 12-year-old who I will call Emma for the sake of this podcast and a beautiful 8-year-old who we'll call Amy for the sake of this podcast, and they are just, like, an absolute delight to my life and even though they've been in my life for a while now, this past summer was actually the first time that I had them alone. Dad was out of town and, like, I took them from mom for special time with me. And, anyone who will know me will not be surprised about how much preparation I put into this time with them. There was like a

packing list of, like, bring your goggles and your swimsuits, right? Like, I made a playlist for music to listen to while we cooked. I was very prepared. Except the one thing I was not prepared for was the fact that one of the kids would lose a tooth while on my watch. Now, I have been with them while teeth have been lost before but I have never been “The Tooth Fairy.” My partner Peter has always been there and he, as the biological father, has ponied up the dough. \*Casper laughing\* I have not had to actually engage with the financial transaction. And to be honest, I was, like, nothing but excited that this happened. It felt like I get to fully step into my step-mom-ness. I was, like, “Yeah! Tooth Fairy! This is like a thing moms do and I’m, like, stopping in to this!” and I was super excited, and I tucked the kids in, stayed awake so that I would wait til they were in their REM cycle to go be the Tooth Fairy, typed up my Tooth Fairy note on my computer and then, like, handwrote in teeny, tiny, what I thought to be Tooth Fairy font \*Casper laughing\* on like a teeny, tiny piece of paper like what I thought the Tooth Fairy would say. I said something along the lines of, “Emma, thank you so much for your contribution to the infrastructure of the Tooth Fairy kingdom. This tooth looks like the exact right size for a bridge that we need to re-build. Best wishes, The Tooth Fairy” and, like, consulted with mom and dad for the right amount of money to paperclip to the note and gave a dollar, snuck out. And I was like on high. I was like, “This is awesome. I. Am. Step-mom. I am winning!” Except that, like, as I was sneaking out of the room with a human tooth in my hand, I suddenly was just struck with this like feeling of, “Is this still an appropriate thing to be doing? Is it appropriate that I just went into 2 little girls’ rooms and gave cash money in exchange for their body part? And is like this really a narrative that I want to be part of, as much fun as I had doing it?” And so that’s the question that I’m bringing today is, “Should we retire the Tooth Fairy’s fairy shoes? Should she hang up her wings?”

Casper: Yeah! I had never seen those complexities within it, right? To me, it has always seemed this like lovely, innocent way of giving kids a small amount of money and not making losing a part of your body in your mouth a terrifying experience but instead something of like, “Yay! I get a dollar!” But you’re right! Like, that has super sinister undertones. I totally get why you’re bringing this question. Wow.

Vanessa: And I’ve been trying to figure out, like, what the stakes of this question are to me because obviously, Emma was not traumatized by the Tooth Fairy coming and exchanging a tooth for a dollar. So, I could absolutely walk away and be like, “No harm, no foul. This is super cute and joyful.” And like, all of my neuroses about this should just like take a back seat and I should just bring my chill, which we all know I have in abundance. \*Casper laughing\*

Casper: Well, Vanessa, let’s really dig in to what happened here and why it brought up these icky feelings for you. Can you tell me more about when it felt weird? Like, when did you question it? Was it when you were literally exchanging the tooth with the note and the dollar? Was it afterwards? Like, when did you start to feel icky about it?

Vanessa: It was when I was getting away with it.

Casper: Aaaaaah.

Vanessa: First of all, it felt like a gross lie because you spend so much time with little kids being like, “No, there are no monsters under your bed.” You know, the kids will sometimes have anxieties to whether they’re safe at home and so, like, we go and like lock the door in front of them and we spend so much energy trying to be like, “While you are asleep, you are safe. The house is safe. There are no

boogeymen, there are no monsters.” And then I’m like, “But doesn’t this prove to them that like something could come into their bedroom at night and like do things and they would never know?”

Casper: Mm-hmm.

Vanessa: Isn’t this actually making the world scary for them again?

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: I know that this is so dramatic, everyone. I just want you to know I know. But I was like, “Oh, these are like 2 drugged girls that you can like do anything to their body and they like won’t know.”

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: They in the morning would not be able to tell you what happened in their bedroom to their bodies. And so, it was the getting away with it. I was proud of myself. I was like, “HaHA! I did it. I did the mom trick!” and then it was also this just like, “Oh my God! These little sleeping girls slept through me doing this thing!”

Casper: It feels really important what you were saying about contradicting things that are important to you and to them. What other contradictions emerged for you?

Vanessa: Yeah, I mean it’s also because I’m the step-mom... the other role that I play in kids’ lives is like a god mom or an auntie, and I love it because you just get to be silly...

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: ... and I’m not the “sugar the kids up and return them to their parents” type, but I’m a little bit the “sugar them up and return them to the parents” type. \*Casper chuckling\* I like sort of being the Tooth Fairy. I love, like, fluttering in and like creating a little bit of magic and leaving.

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: And as a step-mom, I know my job is a little bit different than that. I think that if I were just an auntie, this would feel simpler to me, but because I am going to be in a sustained conversation with these 2 kids, hopefully, right, like the rest of my life, I want to create magic in their lives but I also like never want to lie to them. I want them to be able to completely trust me.

Casper: You know, I’m thinking first of all how beautiful it is that you’re taking this so seriously and I hear so clearly in what you’re saying that this is about safety. I think the difference between being a godparent or even an aunt and this role as step-parent is a real responsibility for them, so I wonder if we should start looking at our texts and see if they can help us reveal another piece of what’s going on here, because I feel like we’ve taken one step into this question but I think there’s more to do.

Vanessa: Yes. I’m very excited to dive into texts.

\*Sacred Text music plays\*

Casper: So the way we’re going to do this is you have brought 2 texts and what I mean by text is not just like a book or a poem, like things that are written down, but really kind of cultural objects that we can study, that we can closely interrogate. So it might be a movie or a song or it might be a beautiful piece of

visual art or it really can be all sorts of things that we bring that somehow resonate with this question. So can you remind us what is the first text that we're turning to today?

Vanessa: Yeah. The first text is this article in the *New York Review of Books* by Mitchell Abidor called "Reading Sade in the Age of Epstein." And I just want to offer a trigger warning here because I'm going to be talking about the Marquis de Sade and Jeffrey Epstein, both of whom were serial predators. I'm going to try to keep my language away from the specifics of the crimes that they have committed, but that is the topic, and that is what is at stake for me, right? Like, there was that moment you graciously asked me, like, "When was the moment that it turned sour for you?" and it was moment where I suddenly was like, "GASP! I am not a predator but I *could* be a predator." Right? Like, I could be talking about fairies and fairy tales. I was like, am I the wolf in the grandma's clothes, right?

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: And like, really, there was no guilt. Like, I don't think I was the wolf, but I was suddenly afraid of all the wolves that could get into their room one day.

Casper: Mmmm.

Vanessa: And so the article is asking this question of whether we should still be reading the Marquis de Sade given where we are in conversations about the Me Too Movement, specifically around Jeffrey Epstein and the crimes he committed, and the Marquis de Sade, for those of you who don't know, was a French "philosopher" and novelist. He lived from 1740 to 1814, and he's like gone in and out of favor a lot as far as being read since his death over 200 years ago. Basically, he was all but forgotten for 100 years and then the early 20<sup>th</sup> century he like had this moment, and there's an argument to be said that he is having another moment now. In the last couple of years, one of his books got re-translated into English and the last one of his untranslated novels got translated into English just in 2020, and so the Marquis de Sade is the person who like gives us the word "sadism."

Casper: Oh.

Vanessa: Like, that word "sadistic," "sadist" is based on his last name, and he was a sexual predator and a regular sexual assaulter that the system would protect again and again. He kept getting released from prison, and so what he wrote about was he novelized and philosophized about what he called freedom but what was really about the sexual liberation of entirely subjugating somebody else. And the reason that, you know, he's gone in and out of fashion over the last 200 years is that I think that there are moments where we're like really tantalized by that idea of freedom, the idea that, like, you're allowed to want whatever you want, and like...

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: Right? "Don't yuck my yum" and like "kink is good" and that is all true, and then it goes to this extreme where we're like, "Oh, right, but too much of that actually becomes about subjugation," right? And there's this great Simone de Beauvoir quote that she says about the Marquis de Sade: "It is my unhappiness he wants, my subjugation, and my death." And Sade would say that it was about *his* liberty to create her unhappiness and subjugation and death. And so, I think this is a live conversation and a complicated one where sadism with consent is not bad, right? But, like, the Marquis de Sade and the way that he talks about it and thinks about it... I agree with de Beauvoir. Right? Like, he wants women unhappy, subjugated, and dead. And so, this article is saying, can this please not be a moment where he

comes back into fashion? In the time of Jeffrey Epstein, I don't want the Marquis de Sade to be translated again and to have, like, The New Yorker writing articles about how great the translation is. Like, this is not the moment. And the quote that I want us to look at is this. It says that, "Epstein's predations present us with this: A vision of precisely how money and power twist those relations."

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: And that really, I was like, "Yes! That is my concern! That is my concern!" Is that like, me going into a bedroom where 2 little girls are dead-to-the-world asleep with money and like the power to take their body part with this like story of "I'm a fairy princess" is like twisting that relationship. So again, the sentence is it's "a vision of precisely how money and power twist those relations" and I don't want anything to twist my relations with these kids. I just want to be the one who makes all their favorite food.

Casper: It's such a powerful sentence, Vanessa, because it feels to me like there's 2 parts of it and I wonder how this resonates with you. Because as a parent, there's always going to be power, there's always going to be money, and in fact, that's part of your responsibility is to manage those things to keep children safe and to raise them as healthily and well as you can. And then the second part of the sentence is that twisting, and that feels like the crux of this sentence for me and so I wonder how you navigate the reality of having to have more power and obviously money in relationship to the kids and where is that line of having that safely and when it twists?

Vanessa: I mean, I think to some extent I still hide behind my lack of technical power in their lives. Like, whenever I am alone with them and they start fighting, I notice – I just did this recently and I was like I have to stop doing this because it is undermining my own power – but I will say to them, "You're not allowed to fight until papa gets home. \*Casper laughing\* You have to be peaceful because like I'm not the real parent." And like, mostly what I mean, is they're not allowed to get injured on my watch.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: I feel like if one of them falls and like hits their head and a parent is there, it's like not my fault and I do not feel like I have enough cache to be like, "No, I was doing everything I could and they still hurt themselves!" Even though I am confident that their parents would not be mad at me, right? Like, kids hurt themselves. Both parents are super chill about that, but / still feel that extra anxiety.

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: Like, it's actually a vote in confidence in me that they feel comfortable fighting in front of me. They wouldn't in front of like a friend's parent.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: They feel comfortable enough to fight in front of me and I should let them fight in front of me, or at least use that power differently. Not be like, "Well, I'm not the real parent so you can't get hurt in front of me!" I need to step into power in a different way and be like, "Do you know what? I *am* the real parent right now and that means go to your room." And so, I think that I still hide behind my lack of formal power sometimes, and that twists the relationship, right? It's like inauthentic.

Casper: I really feel what you just said, the hiding behind the power. That really makes sense to me why the Tooth Fairy brought this out because you're literally hiding behind another character as you have

that power, both going into the bedroom, putting money under the bed, like constructing this fairy tale. That's claiming a lot of power so I'm really seeing that echo with this piece of text that you've chosen.

Vanessa: Well, and to me, pretending to be the Tooth Fairy is also about pretending to be the parent.

Casper: Mmm!

Vanessa: Like, it's only parents that are Tooth Fairies, right? And so, I think it felt transgressive to me because I was like, "But I'm *not* the real parent." I *want* to be – like, I think I love them so much that it feels very real in so many ways, but it also felt a little bit dishonest to me, like I was the wolf in the grandma's clothing. I was the Tooth Fairy in parent clothing, right?

Casper: Mm-hmm.

Vanessa: I was pretending that, like, I had the power to be the Tooth Fairy, but at the end of the day, like, I'm not their parent. Like, should I really, like, just be the Tooth Fairy?

Casper: How would you know that you are a parent to them?

Vanessa: Are you saying we should do a ritual birth with them? \*Casper laughing\* Because I'm not going to do that.

Casper: No, but for real! Like, that feels like what's at stake is the role.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Casper: Because I hear from the girls a loving, joyful acceptance of you in all it's messiness, right? They're fighting in front of you. I hear from their birth parents a joy and gratitude to you. They're leaving their kids happily with you on their own. It feels to me like the block is from you about really accepting that role, maybe.

Vanessa: Yes and no. I also just, like... It's about me respecting their biological mom, right? Like, I didn't meet Emma until she was 8. Amy doesn't remember before me, but Emma does, and it's a genuine like I want to be honest, right?

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: About the fact that like I wasn't there for a lot of things. I never changed a diaper with either child, and to this day, if one of them is like up in pain late at night, they wake their dad. They like don't wake me, right?

Casper: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Vanessa: I mean, like, it's just I'm not their mom. Like, I'm not.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: I am this other thing, right? I mean, I remember the first time when I took the kids to like a trampoline place and it was just me and the kids, and this woman came up to me in front of the kids and said, "Are you the mom?" and both girls looked at me. Like, neither of them were like, "No! She's not our mom!" and neither of them were like, "Yeah!" They both looked at me like...

Casper: "What do we say?"

Vanessa: At the trampoline place, yes. But, like, in general, no. Right? \*Casper laughing\* It was just this, like, *uugh*.

Casper: Honestly, Vanessa, I feel so much empathy for your situation because I think partly what makes it hard is that constant navigation of like, yes at the trampoline place, not at home. Like, yes, Tooth Fairy in this moment because, you know, mom and dad aren't here, but no, if they were here. Like, I understand so much about why, like, it would have this confusing set of feelings that comes up around this question. I mean, is there something that you've discovered that is, like, the specific powers of a step-mom that you've had to step in to, like that's different from a parent but still parent-like?

Vanessa: I mean, that's the thing, right? Is like, there's no manuals as to how to be a parent but there's *super* no manual as to how to be a step-mom. Like, what do I do? Turn to Snow White? No! \*Casper laughing\* And I also think that, like, both girls – and I am sure this is true of parenting, too – but like, both girls want me to be very different step-moms. Like, one of them feels much more comfortable with me being this extra mom than the other one, who, you know, really does treat me as more of a beloved babysitter, and I think it's totally fine to let them set those boundaries, and I think so much of my job is to pay attention to that and to honor that, and like if one of them got injured at the trampoline place, I was the one who paid and therefore signed the thing saying that like they're my responsibility and I was supposed to watch them and it's up to them and then it's not up to them.

Casper: Well, that's the central challenge to me, I think, because, you know, you have those comfortable moments where, as you say, like you're letting them lead, you're saying don't fight until papa gets home, right? You get to be there without imposing on them. But then there are moments, and the trampoline place was one and the Tooth Fairy, I think, is another, where you're having that power whether you wanted it or not, and you're coming up close to the realities of, "Oh! I have to protect you!" and that pain of, you know, something bad happening to them is just imposed on the situation and that's a whole extra burden. Like, I'm just wondering if that resonates, that kind of experience of the danger or the pain of the power that you then have?

Vanessa: Yeah. I think that that gets back to that question that you asked me when was the moment that you were like, "Oh! This is complicated"? and I thought it was moment where I was like, "*GASP!* Being the Tooth Fairy is complicated!" When really maybe it was a moment that I was like, "*GASP!* Being a parent is complicated!"

Casper: Mmmmm!

Vanessa: It was like I became a parent a little bit more, right? Like, I don't think you go from being non-parent to parent, but like, I became a little bit more parent in the moment where I was like, "Oh, the Tooth Fairy isn't just fun."

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And, oh, my God, something horrible might happen to their little bodies one day, right? And that that is obviously part of loving a child. It's not that it had, like, never occurred to me that bad things could happen to them.

Casper: Yeah.



Vanessa: It was just like, I felt how vulnerable they were and how, like, little control I had over their vulnerability. Like, I can plan all the meals and I can make all the playlists, and like...

Casper: Yeah. I can totally understand that. This absurd situation of having power but also knowing that the power has limits and that they will be hurt, they will be heartbroken. I mean, bad things will happen, right? The people we love with die and we can't do anything to stop it and it feels like that was that precious powerless, hopeless, beautiful experience was just all wrapped up into that moment of, like, tiny handwriting and slipping a note under a pillow. Yeah. That feels so real to me. Before we complete the conversation with this text, let's just look at it one more time and see if there's anything in here that we haven't yet picked up on.

Vanessa: Yeah. So the quote one more time is, "Vision of precisely how money and power twist those relations."

Casper: Is there anything that strikes you this time, Vanessa? Something maybe clearer that sparkles through this time?

Vanessa: Yeah. It's power twists relationships but not, like, not all twisting is bad?

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: Like, it's just one of my pet peeves in the world when people step away from their power. When people are like, "Oh! I was just a person on the subway witnessing something racist. It wasn't *my* job."

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: Or, "I'm *just* X, Y, and Z," and they don't see the authority and the power that they have, and so I just need to stop saying, "You can't fight til papa gets home," and what I actually need to do is be like, "Go to your room," right? Prevent them from hurting themselves not by reminding them that I have no power but by stepping in to my power, because, like, that's just... it's just cowardice, right? I don't want to be power grabby, because I want to respect their parents and I want to respect the fact that, like, I wasn't around all the time, but I also need to stop hiding behind that.

Casper: I want to reframe the coward piece because actually I think you've earned this responsibility, right? If you had done that day one, my God, the girls would have been like, "Screw you!" right? Like, "You don't get to tell us what to do!"

Vanessa: "You're not my mom!"

Casper: Yeah, exactly! And they'd be right. And it feels like over these 4 years, you've earned that right. The invitation is now there. You know, I think it's taking the next faithful step in this step-parenting journey, which you've honestly done so beautifully.

\*Sacred Text music plays\*

Vanessa: So we're always going to bring 2 texts to any question that we bring, right? So I brought this article from the New York Review of Books, and now I'm going to bring, like, a more important cultural artifact, I would argue, in every single way that I think speaks beautifully to this place that we ended

getting to anyway, and that is the song “Super Trooper” by ABBA as sung by Meryl Streep playing Donna Sheridan in the movie version of the jukebox Broadway musical *Mamma Mia!*

Casper: \*laughing\* Amazing!

Vanessa: So for those of you who are, like, bereft in your lives, this is a 2008 film starring Meryl Streep based on the hit Broadway musical. It is a jukebox musical that uses only ABBA songs, and it follows the story of this young woman, Sophie, on the eve of her wedding on this beautiful Greek island, and her mom, Donna, and Donna, 30 years ago before Sophie was born, was this like disco queen and Sophie loves this about her mom and is, like, worried that because she’s getting married young, she’s disappointing her mom. She’s like, “I’m never going to be like you. I’m never going to be like Donna and the Dynamos.”

\*movie audio plays\*

Sophie: Do you think I’m letting you down?

Donna: Why would you even think that?

Sophie: Well, because of what you’ve done. I mean, the Dynamos, raising a kid, and running a business all on your own!

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Vanessa: And Donna is like, “Well, yeah, I think it’s weird that you’re getting married young, but I’m very supportive.” \*Casper chuckling\* Well, the Dynamos come to Greece for the wedding, and at Sophie’s bachelorette party, Donna and the Dynamos, like, get into their old spandex that’s, like, tight on them because they’re in their 50s now and they haven’t done this in like 25 years, and they do a performance for Sophie and for the, like, whole bachelorette party of this song that they used to sing back in the 70s.

\*movie audio plays\*

Ladies and no gentlemen!! Presenting for one night and one night only –

Because that’s all we’ve got breath for!

\*laughing\* Speak for yourself, you old bat! The world’s first girl power band – Donna and the Dynamos!

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Vanessa: And Sophie just loves this. Sophie is just like moving her mind over this great performance that her mom and her mom’s 2 best friends are putting on for her for her bachelorette party. But the song they’re singing is this song “Super Trooper” by ABBA, and the song, the lyrics that we’re going to look at are “Tonight the Super Trooper beams are going to blind me,” right? Like the beams of a concert...

Casper: \*chuckling\* Uh-huh.

Vanessa: The spotlights of the concert are going to blind me... “But I won’t feel blue like I always do,” right? Like usually that makes me feel sad and isolated but I won’t tonight because “somewhere in the crowd is you,” my lover who is, like, here at the concert tonight. But the way that Meryl Streep sings this song, the way that Donna sing this line to Sophie is, “Tonight I won’t feel blue like I always do because somewhere in the crowd is you,” and she looks right at Sophie in this like beautiful moment of like “you

are the reason that I'm not sad in the world. Like, you are the reason I put on these disco boots and had to, like, Spanx my way into this outfit," \*Casper chuckling\* and it's just the most beautiful. So Casper the exact text I want us to look at are those 4 lines that Donna sings to Sophie at Sophie's bachelorette party which is:

*Tonight, the Super Trooper beams are gonna blind me,  
But I won't feel blue  
Like I always do  
Cuz somewhere in the crowd there's you.*

Casper: Mmm. But I'm curious! Like, why did you choose this? What sparkled at you about this piece of text?

Vanessa: I mean, it's just like the most beautiful moment in the whole movie. Like, it's utter chaos, and like mother and daughter are staring at each other, Sophie's in the audience and, you know, Donna is singing, and Donna is like in this outfit that doesn't fit and all of these things and is doing choreography but she takes this moment with just, like, laser-like focus, and looks at her daughter and says, "Cuz somewhere in the crowd there's you," and she, like, leans forward and like sings the word "you" in a different key and like with a different tone because Meryl Streep is perfect. It's really like, "Everything is fine because of you," and I just love that her mom has, like, put on this spectacle in order to make that clear. This gesture means everything to her. She's like never seen her mom be Donna and the Dynamos before. She's never seen her mom in her like disco outfit before. She's never seen her mom sing with her friends before, and she's, like, so touched, but she also sort of gives this face of like, "I know. Like, I know I'm your everything."

Casper: Yeah, I can totally see the fact that it's affirming something that both of them were already aware of that it was true, right? It's like re-binding something that was already bound together. There's a simplicity and a loveliness about it, but this scene is also really silly. Like, it's stupid, right? Like, the costumes are surreal, the dance moves are absurd. Like, mom is at daughter's bachelorette party. It feels like the silliness is important in this scene. Does that resonate as well?

Vanessa: Yeah, I mean, I think that is what I love about... I mean, it's what I love about all of *Mamma Mia!* Both *Mamma Mia!*s. Right? I love how silly it is, how ridiculous it is that you can like declare your love for your daughter as a disco song. It's like a lot of how I like to interact with the kids. We do a lot of voices. We have characters that we are when we play Uno! and that's different than the characters we are when we dance. And I could, like, investigate some of the silliness and wonder if it's all good, right? Like, our characters when we play Uno! are gamblers and so I'm like teaching the kids about gambling, and like Donna could do that, too, right? Like, Donna could have totally talked herself out of this and I could see myself talking myself out of every joyful thing. Donna could say, "I don't belong at my daughter's bachelorette party. This is about Sophie. She's the center of attention, not me." Right? Like, we can problematize fun until all we're doing is like sitting in a dark room with our children.

Casper: Well, and also I see play and like this silliness upfront being this bridge to the sincere, and it's actually through playing that we can get to the heart of the matter which is at the end, she is saying like, "Because somewhere in the crowd there's you," and it's this public declaration of love, and that will always be true even though she's getting married. Like, nothing's going to change that. But if she had

stood up and been like, “I will always love you forever!” \*laughing\* you know? With everyone standing there...

Vanessa: Right!

Casper: That would seem ridiculous, but this doesn't because it's cloaked in the playful, and I feel like what I've heard you asking is like, “Is the playful wrapped around something that's actually very dangerous or frightening or wrong?” But what if it's wrapping something that's trustworthy and good and essentially like a love that you have for these girls?

Vanessa: Right. I got scared and so I'm like, “That was bad!” when like the kids didn't get scared, and I mean, I as a kid – and I think this is true of a lot of kids – you like believe in the Tooth Fairy and you a little bit suspect that your parents have something to do with it, and so yeah, there isn't anything sinister wrapped up in the Tooth Fairy for the kids. There is actually this, “Oh, we trust Vanessa enough to come into the bedroom while we're asleep at night, so much so that... ” Right? Like, Emma asked me for an envelope and a piece of paper to like put her tooth in and write the Tooth Fairy a note. \*Casper laughing\* The Tooth Fairy was very much invited into this room.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Like, there was a tooth under the pillow.

Casper: And if she had said, “I want to save this tooth until papa comes back,” I know you would have been like, “That's a great idea. Here's an envelope to keep it safe and then you can put it under...” You know, like...

Vanessa: Totally.

Casper: That's what's so trustworthy about this situation to me which is so beautiful.

Vanessa: Right. It's not the bait and switch of the kind that Jeffrey Epstein and the Marquis de Sade did regularly.

Casper: That's right. That's right!

Vanessa: It's a bait and switch like what Donna is doing. It's a bait and switch of “I'm just singing a silly song, but like really the message here is I love you.”

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: And the thing that made me feel like that I was being Jeffrey Epstein was just the fear of the fact the Jeffrey Epsteins are out in the world. It was this realization of like, “Oh, my God! They are vulnerable.” But that doesn't mean I'm Jeffrey Epstein.

Casper: Mmm. We've talked about these 2 texts separately and I wonder as a final reflection exercise what happens if we can combine these 2 texts and make one whole new text, and we're really inspired by the ancient practice of *flora legia* here, which really comes from a Christian monastic context where monks would be writing out a particular piece of biblical text, often the Psalms, that really stood out to them that day, and by doing that every day, they would construct a whole new text essentially from different quotes. So, it might remind you of a quote journal, for example, and then reading that as one whole text rather than lots of little bits, because sometimes you might find echoes or interesting new

angles to that new constructed text. So I'm going to read to you, Vanessa, the 2 bits that you've chosen. I want to ask you to think about the question that you have of "How do we deal with the Tooth Fairy? Is it a good thing?" as I read you this final little text that you've chosen.

*A vision of precisely how money and power twist those relations... Somewhere in the crowd, there's you.*

Vanessa: Yeah! It's like because of the kids, I'm seeing how scary the world is anew.

Casper: Mmm!

Vanessa: Like, I used to carry that fear for myself and then, like, abstractly for the world, but because in the crowd there are these 2 kids, I like have a new vision of precisely how money and power can twist relationships, right?

Casper: Mm-hmm.

Vanessa: Like, they give me this like specific way to be terrified again, and I mean, like, the thing that that wants me to feel called to is to step into my power not just to say, "You don't fight because I say so," not "You have to wait until papa gets home," but I also want to step into my power of like advocating outside of the home. I step away from power all the time. I'm like, "That's not my job!" I need to stop. It's so childish in a bad way. It's just not being a grownup, right? Being a grownup is about acknowledging the power you have and using it to the best of your abilities, and it's okay if you make it look like the Tooth Fairy. There's power in that.

Casper: I love that. I really hear you coming to that clarity on a kind of meta scale. I wonder if there's anything specifically with the Tooth Fairy, next time a tooth falls out and one of the girls says, "Hey, Vanessa! I lost a tooth." Is there anything that you're going to do differently next time?

Vanessa: I mean, the thing I feel really called to for that is, like, to make it even sillier. \*Casper laughing\* To be like, "Oh! The Tooth Fairy is going to come. Do you think she likes to eat the teeth? Because maybe then we should bake brownies and put the tooth in the brownie." \*Casper laughing\* Just really lean in. It's like such a weird idea. It's so delightfully strange that we're like, "There's a fairy in Fairyland and she needs this tooth so much that she's going to fly to your house at night while you are asleep and give you money for it." Like, what a delightfully strange story. So, I want to go full Donna and like go sparkles and like choreograph it, and be like, "How do we make this weirder?"

Casper: The tooth is going to do disco dancing in spandex. That's what I'm waiting for.

Vanessa: Should we dip the tooth in glitter?

Casper: Actually, that's awesome! You can make some really cool jewelry with \*laughing\* like glitter-covered teeth!

Vanessa: Yeah! Like, should I make tooth earrings? I'm just really going to want to explore with the children how we can make this weirder, and then have their biological mother being like, "Never mind. I don't trust you alone with my children" \*Casper laughing\* and then this whole problem goes away.

Casper: Oh, my gosh! Well, Vanessa, I am so grateful that you shared this question with us and that we got to think about it through these 2 texts, and next week, I'll be bringing a question to you with 2 texts, and I just hope we'll have the same good conversation next time around.

Vanessa: Well, Casper, I want to thank you for talking this through with me, but also I want to thank the Marquis de Sade and *Mamma Mia!* Couldn't have done it without you. \*Casper laughing\*

\*Music plays\*

Casper: You've been listening to The Real Question, and a huge thanks to all of you who are joining us from our previous podcast project, Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. We're so glad to have you with us. Please join our community in conversation by joining our Patreon. All Patreon join our community Discord where people are sharing their own questions and their thoughts on the episode, you get to send in voicemails that we can feature in the show, and you'll know what question we're sharing next week before the show airs. Plus, there's all sorts of other fabulous perks, so head on over to [patreon.com/realquestionpod](https://patreon.com/realquestionpod). We can only make this show thanks to your support so we really appreciate it. Thank you. You can also follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and sign up for our newsletter at [realquestionpod.com](https://realquestionpod.com). We are a Not Sorry production, our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman, our music is by Nick Bohl, and we are distributed by A-cast. Thanks to Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Meghan Kelly, Molly Baxter, Danie, and all of our patrons who submitted voicemails, and our dear mentor Stephanie Paulsell. We'll be with you again next week!