

**Esther Perel:** *In this following session we discuss assault and I want you to know this before you listen.*

So why are we here? What made you say, okay, I need this. Why now? And what would make it helpful?

**Caller:** I suppose I kind of feel like I have two opposing parts that I have not been able to reconcile for years. One part is this logical part, the part that listens to my friends and family. And that part says my past relationship was unhealthy and I should not be with him. I am not currently with him. We were together for nine years, married for three, have been divorced and lived in separate states for two years now.

And then there is this deeper feeling part that can't let go of him. That I have never felt so lit up, desired, excited, seen with anyone else before. And so, why now? Um, he, through all this time away, has stayed pretty constant in his love for me. He has also dated other people in the meantime, but he reaches out every few months and we started talking again maybe two weeks ago, and I, I know how this sounds.

**Esther Perel:** Tell me.

**Caller:** That everything he says sounds right. Obviously I'm not there, so I can't, I can only speak to what he's told me, but it sounds like he has made major changes in his life. He owns up and takes responsibility for the worst parts of our relationship. He seems to be reckoning with those things within himself. And so we have been talking about, um, spending a weekend together in a few weeks.

## **AD BREAK**

**Esther Perel:** Does he know you here?

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** How did that come up?

**Caller:** I told him because I wanted to say everything to him before I came to you. So, um, my therapist, close to two years ago, shortly after I left, had me write a breakup letter to him, and this letter was a collection of the worst things in our relationship, the worst moments. A sort of justifying to myself and him, or or reminding myself of why I left. And so I recently read that letter to him before

coming in here today because I wanted to hear how he would react being reminded of those worst moments.

And I think he reacted well, you know, he was quiet, it was clearly hard for him to hear those things. And he apologized and owned up to it. You know, when we were together. I often told him, it was like there was two people within him. There was the person I was in love with that I knew loved me, and then there was this other part that I called the stranger. And this other part would take over and all of a sudden talk to me like I was the enemy. And that was very combative, you know, led to a lot of arguments. And so I asked him what happened to that part. Where, where is the stranger or how did you deal with that? And he said, it's still there. I recognize that it's still there, but I have to, it's a combination of making decisions, putting myself in the right place to not get sucked into that and to recognize what triggers are likely to bring that part of him forward.

**Esther Perel:** Does your therapist, he, she, they, know that you...

**Caller:** She.

**Esther Perel:** She. Does she know you here?

**Caller:** No. No one else knows.

**Esther Perel:** Okay. Does she know you're going, you're planning to have a weekend with him?

**Caller:** No.

**Esther Perel:** Okay. Does the logical, the contingent who lives on the logical side of you, do they know anything?

**Caller:** No. No one else knows. No family. No friends. Uh, he is the only person who knows.

**Esther Perel:** Okay. So the emotional, passionate side of you is having a secret with the logical side. One is having a secret of the other. Okay.

**Caller:** So, I suppose I want to be clear that I am not a victim, if I ever was, I am not anymore, and I will never be again. I know that leaving was the best thing for me and I have done a lot of work on myself, a lot of growth. I feel like a

completely different person than I was when I was with him, and certainly than I was when we met over 10 years ago.

**Esther Perel:** Can I ask you, for me to have a sense of a few of the things that are in the breakup letter. Is that okay?

**Caller:** Yes, yes. Um, it talks a lot about fighting. There was a lot of fighting, frequent argument. Often, I didn't know why we were fighting, why he saw me as such a bitch. He seemed to react to me in a way, like I was looking to hurt him, which I wasn't most of the time. The first time that I noticed some disconnect or that he wasn't emotionally supportive. Um, this was in our very first year together and I was finishing up grad school and I was going into my very last final and that morning he's sitting outside smoking a cigarette, looking at his phone. And rather than kind of send me off in love, he said, oh, will you go buy me a cup of coffee before you go? And I was so stunned and confused. I don't have time for that. Why are you asking me to do something for you on such a big morning for me?

**Esther Perel:** For exactly that reason.

**Caller:** What do you mean?

**Esther Perel:** You're too busy with yourself? You have too big a day. It's about you. It's about your professional autonomous pursuit. It symbolizes you being able to do things without me. It highlights my dependence on you. It highlights your independence from me, and I don't like the fact that you are completely involved in something that's important to you when what should be most important to you is me.

**Caller:** Yes. And so you may not be shocked to find out that that attitude continued. And at the time I had never been in therapy and so my kind of untreated, whatever childhood wounds, I was at that time looking for a source of identity in another person.

**Esther Perel:** How old were you?

**Caller:** I was 20. I had just turned 24.

**Esther Perel:** Okay. And how much is the age difference?

**Caller:** He is 10 years older than me.

**Esther Perel:** Okay. So maybe it's not only about childhood wounds, maybe it's also about being young and immature.

**Caller:** Yes. Yes.

**Esther Perel:** I mean, they may be both, but just to put things in a developmental perspective as well.

**Caller:** Yes. And I had decided that I did not want to stay in the field that I was in graduate school for, but I also didn't have another plan. And so this guy who came along had a very, was very charming, had a career of his own. The idea of, oh, I don't have to decide, I will attach myself to this person and that will be what I do...

**Esther Perel:** He will be my project.

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** And if he is not feeling well about us, my project will be to find every way possible to reassure him, make him feel secure, make myself feel deserving of him. Make him appreciate me. Any more?

**Caller:** All of that. And I stopped working on myself, stopped investing in my own social life, my own career, and became very resentful of him that our life, you know, after a couple years when, when we kind of stalled out professionally, developmentally, um, it was all his fault in my mind. If, if he would just do X, Y, and Z, then I would be happy.

**Esther Perel:** If he would do what, for example?

**Caller:** Make more money, work harder in his own career, treat me better, allow me to do whatever I wanted. If that meant sit on the couch all day and he should love me anyway and be thankful to be with me. So, you know, we both contributed.

**Esther Perel:** Thank you. I appreciate and I highly respect your insights, your honesty, your ability to see how it takes two to create some of this. He became your project and you needed him to justify all the sacrifices you made and so now he had to perform on your behalf so that you would not be as resentful for what you had given up.

**Caller:** Exactly.

**Esther Perel:** If I am no longer me and you have to fill me, then I need you to be a double dose of everything, at least.

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** And the less I liked myself and the more resentful I was toward him.

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** And him?

**Caller:** You know, resentment built back up because I think he initially was attracted to me because I was smart, driven, independent, had friends, and I, over the course of a few years, stopped being all those things. But I told him, he couldn't say that to me. You can't criticize me.

**Esther Perel:** Because I made it look like I did this for you?

**Caller:** Yes. Yes.

**Esther Perel:** And you are not giving me enough back, and therefore you're never good enough.

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** And so that's becomes a relationship of two people who don't feel good enough. And who become very fused with each other and end up at each other's throats.

**Caller:** Yes. Yes.

**Esther Perel:** Physically too?

**Caller:** Yes. A few times. Mostly shoving.

**Esther Perel:** Can I ask you something? In the name of this really beautiful moment of accountability, do the people who belong to what you call the logical part of me, do they see the dynamic or did they buy into mean guy/sweet woman?

**Caller:** I mean, a few of my friends and family have used the word “you are perfect”. They think I am perfect and he's the bad guy.

**Esther Perel:** So the secret isn't necessarily that you're gonna see him. The secret is how either you've come to represent yourself or how the story was told back then. And so it becomes the story of abusive control, narcissistic guy, sweet victim, perfect woman who needed to save herself. And your therapist, what story does she go by?

**Caller:** I don't think she would describe me as perfect.

**Esther Perel:** Good.

**Caller:** Um, but I also think at some point, I think, she decided he is irredeemable.

**Esther Perel:** He is irredeemable.

**Caller:** Yes. I started seeing her with him. He actually found her. And we went together. And in the first few months, she helped us immensely. Our relationship got to the happiest point it had ever been. And then he went to rehab, checked himself in, decided the drinking was unsustainable. And then when he got out, he stopped trying to work on anything else. He seemed to kind of hold on to that sobriety as a, a kind of defense against doing any further work.

So I kept going. And then the arguing continued. He slipped back into old patterns. He refused to go to therapy. And after listening to me cry and complain about his behavior for a very long time, she finally said, “you see it”. And then I, I couldn't avoid it anymore, and it felt like she was my last hope. That I couldn't get him to change on my own. And when it became clear that she couldn't help either, I knew I, I, I loved him, but I could not, I would not stay in that relationship as it was.

**Esther Perel:** How did he react to your leaving?

**Caller:** He was devastated. Sobbed and cried and hugged me, but he also, he didn't fight me or try to convince me otherwise. And he has said since then that he wished he had put up more of a fight. But I actually really appreciated that he didn't, it made me feel like he was listening, like he heard me, like he respected my decision.

**Esther Perel:** And when you say the, the patterns came back, you, you're referring to what?

**Caller:** He would kind of get in his own head? Um...

**Esther Perel:** Do you know why I just smiled?

**Caller:** No.

**Esther Perel:** When you say the word pattern, you instantly think “him”. Now, he may come to you and tell you all the ways he has changed or what he's accountable for or how he understands what happened. But if when you use the word pattern, you instantly point a finger at him, then the change is not reciprocal enough. It's just an observation. If the first word out of your mouth is “he”, then your frame hasn't shifted.

**Caller:** I hear that. I hear that. So previously in our relationship, when I say that he would get into these kind of antagonistic moods and would pick a fight and I was often left feeling like, why, whoa, why are we fighting? Why were you offended by that? You are clearly hurt and defensive and kind of counter attacking. And in the early days, you know, I would try to reason with him, I would cry and think, oh, if he sees how much his, he's hurting me, if I, then he will realize what he's doing. That didn't matter. And then eventually I started fighting back. Well, fuck you. You know? If you're gonna talk to me that way, then I'm gonna punch back twice as hard. And surprise, none of those worked. So when he came back from rehab and started in with that old behavior I had, was still in therapy, still working on myself and had enough, I don't know, growth, internal boundaries, backbone to just not engage.

**Esther Perel:** Got it.

**Caller:** Not engage, not react. And then I watched him...

**Esther Perel:** Double down?

**Caller:** Spin on his own, have the argument with himself. And I realized, oh, it's not, it's not about me. I am not a player in this game. You'll have the fight all by yourself. And so that's when I started to detach, and kind of look at him with sort of pity. And that was what led to the end.

**Esther Perel:** How much were the two of you living with this secret? Like did people think you had a perfect, you were the perfect couple? Like people think you're the perfect person?

**Caller:** No, no. My friends have since told me that they didn't like the way he talked to me or treated me, or there was something that... And my dad asked me multiple times before we got engaged, is this the one? Are you sure? But I knew they weren't crazy about him. I'm sure they did sense something in him or in our relationship that they thought was unhealthy. I think they also, he was scary to them. He's 10 years older. He's from another country. And so I think they were afraid or felt like he was going to, and, and I guess to some extent he did kind of steal me away from them.

**Esther Perel:** Was there a part of you that wanted to get away from them?

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** Can we talk about that?

**Caller:** Yes. Yes. Years ago, I would've told you that I had the best childhood. My childhood was perfect. And so why wasn't my life going? Uh, what was wrong with me? I had the best family, the best childhood, and a previous therapist helped me see that, um, she called it emotional enmeshment with my mother, who saw me as a, an extension of her, a little her. I was her best friend, her confidant, her therapist. She shared so much about why my dad was not a good husband. And they eventually got divorced shortly after I left high school. So I moved halfway across the country, I think, to get some breathing room. And to, uh, my dad was also very controlling, authoritarian, rigid, and I ran away to have some space, to find myself. And this relationship was the first big decision I made. Not because I should or anybody else wanted me to, but because it's what I wanted.

**Esther Perel:** And then you went and recreated the same emotional enmeshment?

**Caller:** Yes. Yes.

**Esther Perel:** You went with the attachment model that you knew?

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** Okay.



**Caller:** I lived with a lot of shame through our relationship. Shame that I wasn't thriving, doing enough for me, shame that I was allowing behavior and treatment from him that I know my family and friends would not be okay with. And since leaving, I have addressed a lot of that. I'm independent. I have a thriving social circle. My life is filled with a lot of love and energy, *and* I still have a bit of shame about the way I feel about him.

**Esther Perel:** Like I shouldn't be curious, I shouldn't be loving, I shouldn't be wondering, I shouldn't be longing for him if I really...

**Caller:** If I am a strong, healthy, independent woman, I would not feel this way.

**Esther Perel:** Can I try something from the other side? Since you said I live with parts of me, different voices, different pulls and pushes. A part of you says, if I was a, a really strong independent woman, I would have none of these inclinations toward him. I would know better. And another part says, I am such a smart and strong woman, it cannot be that I made such a mistake, that I was so wrong in my judgment that the one time I finally decide something that I want, and not that I should, or that everybody's expecting from me, it went all wrong. What if I knew something that nobody else knows?

**Caller:** Yes. Yes. Um, I, I do think I'm smarter than the average bear, and I can't help but think there's something other people don't see. I've got some inside track here that I guess I, I haven't been able to explain to the people who love me.

**Esther Perel:** What's it like to hear me say it? Because you don't often voice that one out loud.

**Caller:** Um, it feels a little bit like, ah, you see it too *and* I have an immediate suspicion that there's a "but" coming or, or that it's foolish for me to think that. That you are highlighting it so that I can hear how foolish that sounds.

**Esther Perel:** That's not what I was thinking actually. I often have a sense that when people commit to someone, they are making an engagement with that person. But I often find that they're also making a bargain with themselves. This person will not lie to me, will not cheat on me, will not abandon me. This person will see what no one else has seen... You know, I, I know something, you know, with a almost grandiose sense of confidence. I know something that no one... the inside track that you're talking about. And what is hardest sometimes from people to disconnect with is less the person that they are leaving than the conviction that led them to that person.

**Caller:** I have tried so hard to let this go. I mean, I have drawn or tried to draw such a hard line with myself since I left. That is the past. That was not healthy. You cannot go back. The future is ahead of you, in front of you. There are other people...

**Esther Perel:** But you can say to me and to yourself, that conviction, I wanna follow it. I'll take the chances. You know, the first time you, you left because you needed a root canal, you know? It's not what you wanted, it's what you thought you should do, and it's what other people wanted for you. This time you'll see. If you stay, it'll be because you want. And if you don't stay, it'll actually be the real departure.

You will, maybe, have to take on the next level of emancipation which is to tell yourself, your therapist, your friends, your family, there's one more thing I need to do here that I know from the outside will look a reversal, a regression, um, a lack of consciousness about this, a lack of awareness. And that may all be true, but you may say, despite all of that, I feel like I need to go. And now that I know more what I want, I wanna go and decide this on my own and make that decision myself. And that's a conversation for you with your therapist too. So that you don't, you know, feel like I'm sneaking. I'm sneaking behind to, to....You don't owe anybody, you know? I mean, in your mind, I'm sure you think these people all help me leave and now, and they, you know, all they're gonna want is to hold me back. They see me plunge into the same cesspool, et cetera. But maybe you need a different leaving.

See, your question is about can there be a new start? And that's a possibility, but I wanna add to it. And can there be a different kind of leaving? You don't have to decide a thing right now. You just have to watch two people come back in a conversation with a whole different level of accountability. When people come back and all they say is, I'm sorry. The first question to ask is for what? How much do they actually see and have taken in and taken stock and taken responsibility for their contribution to what happened? How much do they see who they were in the relationship and what they did? To just say I'm sorry, not enough. To just talk about behaviors, not enough. Patterns, not enough. But the deep sense of understanding, clarity, responsibility, accountability, that's where it starts.

**Caller:** Yeah.

**Esther Perel:** But the issue of the secret is important because part of it is vis-a-vis him. The other part is vis-a-vis your, your entourage and your world to whom you say I need to know what I know. In some way, if I continue to just do what you all want me to do I stay in the same pattern in which I grew up in. I

continue to be compliant and resentful rather than independent and accountable. Do you understand?

**Caller:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Esther Perel:** Tell me what resonates for you in what I'm saying. What's useful? What stands out? What's irrelevant? What needs to be sat with?

**Caller:** What is new and feels empowering is to recognize the way I have continued the pattern of this Greek chorus is wiser than me or I owe something to them. Or I should do what they say and kind of reclaiming some of my autonomy, that I, I don't have to justify myself to them or explain myself to them, and I, I certainly don't have to make life choices based on what, take a poll and, and ask the audience. I would like to think about trusting myself, trusting my own decisions and knowing that I am the only one that has to live with the consequences of my decisions. And that feels new and different.

**Esther Perel:** It will be very different if you do it behind their back because that's pseudo autonomy. The point is can you listen to them and listen to you? The audience sometimes does see something that you don't see. And because of that other voice that says there's something here that only I know and I have a certainty about it, and you know, there's a grandiosity to that piece, it accompanies itself with I can take it, it's not as bad. I can change it. I'll manage to make the perfect concoction. So they see that too. You're smiling with your head, nodding big yeses.

**Caller:** Yes. Yes.

**Esther Perel:** I just wanna make, yes...

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** Okay. So you understand what I'm saying? If you're just gonna shut them out and say, you know, I know better, it's I know something, I need to go check it, and I need you to stay close by me because I don't always have a good sense of when bad is bad. When dangerous is dangerous. When unprotected is unprotected, when abusive is abusive, when violent is violent when... So it's both and. I know and I may not always know. You know, on some level he's secondary to the plot. He's a minor plot in a bigger story.

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** How did the two of you frame this gathering, this meeting?

**Caller:** He has been kind of asking for something for a while, you know, he reaches out in emails and, um...

**Esther Perel:** But he reaches out for an opening or for a proper closure?

**Caller:** For an opening. And I, um, I'm on a summer break from work. I have some free time, and I was feeling strong and impulsive and free, and I said, let's meet for a weekend. You fly here and we'll have a couple days and I'm not going to tell anyone because they'll be upset and afraid and try to talk me out of it. I mean, I think my sister might lock me in her basement until I said I wouldn't go.

**Esther Perel:** But there's another way of saying this, it is not, I won't tell anyone because they will... It's I won't tell anyone because it'll activate the other part of me and it will put me in such a state of ambivalence. And I find myself either in a state of denial where I don't wanna hear any of what they say, or in a state of ambivalence where it's hard to hold on to some of my own feelings because all I hear is what they say.

**Caller:** Yeah. That if it stays, uh, a secret, I don't have to reconcile all these various voices and...

**Esther Perel:** And I say, or I suggest that is the purpose of the meeting. This needs a proper closure before anything else. And that closure is not just about reviewing what happened between us. It's the reconciliation of these two voices.

**Caller:** You know, I said at the beginning, I, I was hoping to kind of reconcile these two parts of myself and before I even talked to anybody else, I, I feel, uh, like I'm not as split within myself, like these two opposing sides can talk to each other, don't have to be in opposition, that maybe they both bring useful insights.

**Esther Perel:** Mm-hmm. Yep.

**Caller:** And I can listen to both.

**Esther Perel:** Tell me, where is your therapist based?

**Caller:** Los Angeles. Um, and she's wonderful. You know, I started worrying that saying I have this secret from her would... she's been incredible.

**Esther Perel:** I think that you take the session and you share it with her and then you send us a voice note or together with her. I think that would be a very beautiful coming together of different sources of support.

**Caller:** Yes. I love that idea.

**Esther Perel:** Many people have a therapist and come to do a podcast episode and to find ways to reconcile those two experiences is always important.

**Caller:** Yeah. I, I mean, she's so loving that there is part of me that's terrified that this will hurt her feelings.

**Esther Perel:** Then you tell her that. That's exactly what you say is, I'm, I feel like I'm letting you down.

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** Like, you worked so hard to help me extricate myself and here I am, you know?

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** But I don't wanna go behind your back. I want to actually use this to find my own confidence, and not to feel that it can only exist if I'm hiding it from others.

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** And you can, everything you said to me, there's nothing that a therapist here wouldn't wanna know and hasn't heard. And yes, every time a person is in a relationship that carries its shame and then they say they want to go back to it, they feel like they're betraying the therapist. But if they don't do that then they feel that they're betraying themselves.

**Caller:** Yes.

**Esther Perel:** And that definitely belongs in a conversation with her and, uh..

**Caller:** Yes. Yes.

**Esther Perel:** And if she says, I'm disa, she will never say I'm disappointed, but she may say, you know, what are you doing? Then you will say, I. I need to go and find out for myself because as long as I don't know it that I made the decision, then I will always question and I will always live with the fantasy of there's a truth that I know that no one else does. And that fantasy does not allow me to actually connect with someone else. And on that note, I do have to go. Thank you so much.

**Caller:** Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

**Esther Perel:** Talk soon. Bye Bye.

**Caller:** Yes. Goodbye.

**Jesse (Producer):** This was an Esther Calling, a one-time intervention phone call recorded remotely from two points somewhere in the world. If you have a question you'd like to explore with Esther, could be answered in a 40 or a 50 minute phone call, send her a voice message, and Esther might just call you. Send your question to [producer@estherperel.com](mailto:producer@estherperel.com).

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