

Caller: *Uh, my younger sister just got proposed to, and the hurt, the heartache that I feel, it's so overwhelming and my partner of 8 years is amazing. After multiple, multiple conversations that we had, he just doesn't believe in the institution, doesn't believe in the ritual, doesn't believe in, in the, in the romantic side of it. And he made it very clear that this is not the path for us. And most of the time I'm okay with that. I can't kill the hope, but I live happily. And those moments when somebody close to me experiences something that I deeply so much desire, I feel the pain really, really deep.*

My other sister, I'm the oldest of three, also got proposed about three years, four years ago. And it was also very difficult experience, and I remember processing it in a little bit different way. I think I tried to just bottle my emotions and pretend that I didn't need it. Today it's a bit different. I feel like I wanna let those emotions out.

Growing up as a child from a different biological father to my sisters created quite deep wound for me of being somehow not enough or different or just outcasted. Maybe this experience is kind of replicating this, this desire, because I had multiple relationships and we always had that same issue where the person would be against it, and I would drop the relationship. It's just without, without that ritual, without that jewelry, without, without that party, without that public declaration, but that pain, like I feel now, it makes me feel like maybe it'll never go away.

Esther: I'm all ears.

Caller: When I recorded the message, it was the very, the peak of the emotion. I still feel it like, like that it was...I think it subsided a little bit, but as when I send it, I, I don't even remember pressing the button, you know, to record it. Cause it was so raw. It just had happened and it took me by surprise.

Esther: What took you by surprise? Her announcement or how much it pained you?

Caller: How much it pained me. Uh, 'cause I thought I had already resolved it, uh, within me and it just clearly showed me that I didn't, um...

Esther: Can I ask you a question about what you said? When you say it hurts so much and there's something about it that it taps into my need for belonging, my fear that I'd won't. And what's the pain point for you?

Caller: It's embarrassment. It's some kind of shame. It's like a pain of being left out, a pain of somehow being not good enough to get into this VIP club somehow. That there is something broken about me.

Esther: Right, right. That's what I heard as well. Why can't I join you? What's it about me that I can't enter here? That I can't be legitimized in this way? Will I always be one down, one out?

Caller: Yes. That that's...

Esther: That's the fear and that's the feeling.

Caller: Yes.

Esther: Did you, have you brought this at all to your boyfriend? Not with a request but even just simply... has he ever heard that message?

Caller: Um, yes he has because I was resolving other issues of being different and especially when I started exploring this pattern of me being from a different biological father when I started to get into the topic through. So I have made the connection for him. Why is it so difficult for me? And I think he does truly understand but he doesn't really see how deeply it, it is affecting me. Wanting something that is beyond him, and he has made it before that, he said it'll never be enough for you. And he's not the first man that told me that the ring will never be enough for you.

Esther: The ring will not be enough for what?

Caller: To be fulfilled or like I've complete or feel like I've arrived or...

Esther: Is that really the case? I mean, do you experience that too? It's not about is it true, but do you experience some of that? Do you wonder, is there something deep inside of me that continuously questions my sense of belonging? Or would this symbolically actually give you an experience of being welcomed into what you call the VIP club?

Caller: I, I think it, it does, um, feel like...

Esther: It's both and.

Caller: Probably both and, and also like I do feel that the public declaration that that would mean quite a lot to me. So when I imagine or dream about the event,

it's usually what brings out the most joy is sharing it with people. And what, um, so we will be sharing with my work colleagues or sharing it with my friends or my family instead of something like two people experience together. Because I feel like I have all that, like I have the, the marriage, I feel like I have it. Uh, the relationship is close and we feel connected and, and we always think about growing old together. So all that I feel like I, I have.

Esther: Right. Can I ask you to tell me a little bit more about the family constellation that you grew up in? Because what I'm hearing from you is there is a, there's a set of very deep and painful feelings that travel with you through life and they originated in your family of origin. And then there is the relationship that you are in, and then there is the meeting between these two and how one is telling the other here are some things I need from you. How, how did you enter the family you grew up in?

Caller: So I.... It was always a taboo. It was a secret. I, I was never meant to know it. Um, so, uh, we...

Esther: Okay. Okay, let's hold on a second. Just sit with this. Because the secret is on the other side of the public declaration. It's important that we understand why this matters in the way that it does. Otherwise, it just, we are gonna have, I don't believe in marriage. I don't believe in the institution. I don't, I, I want the ring, I want the white dress. I want... There's something, there's a deeper story here that, that involves shame, that involves secrecy. It's about that more than about marriage. It's the stuff that marriage tries to cover up and sometimes succeeds and sometimes doesn't. So you were not supposed to find out. So there's a story here. Tell me, can, can you tell me a little bit of the story?

Caller: Yes. So, um, my biological father left us when I was two years old 'cause he had another family. And my mom met my dad very soon after and he adopted me and they decided to never tell. But we lived in a very small town and...

Esther: Where people don't keep secrets very well?

Caller: Yes. And, uh, I started to hear it when I was seven first from the kids because they heard it from their adults in the, in the neighborhood. Then I heard it again in school, but I never told them. I wrote in the diary in a separate color. And I remember used to hate these pages. I used to flick through them, but I, I told them what they told me. And..

Esther: You told who?

Caller: Just the diary. I never really told my parents or anybody about.

Esther: So you told your diary, I know a truth that no one wants to talk about, but you did not approach mom or dad. You called him dad?

Caller: Yeah.

Esther: You thought he was your dad. And I didn't approach my parents to let them know that I had heard something. And so how did you as this little girl, seven years old, live with that discovery? That must have been so heavy, so confusing.

Caller: Yes. It was very, um, heavy and it was so embarrassing and I hated these people. I can see their faces now when I, I remember them saying it as in their childish way, really saying, well, I've heard that this is not your dad, and, but I somehow just pushed it away.

Esther: Can you say in the language it was said to you?

Caller: That's a Lithuanian language.

Esther: And they would make fun of you when they would say it?

Caller: I felt like they pitied me. I felt like they felt..

Esther: They pitied you. That was exactly the words. Those were children or adults?

Caller: Some older little bits, some younger, some of my peers. Um, at different stages. Um, when I was seven and 12, I think I remember two occasions that really stuck in my mind. But then over, over the years, I just never brought it up and I brought it up once to my grandmother, but she said, oh, don't listen to them kids. You know, they talk nonsense. And I was kind of brushed off so I felt good in the moment, but uh, I still felt like there was something not right. My, my dad showed me so much love. I never, you know, felt excluded. If anything I felt like more probably paid attention to. But then we had a big conflict when I was 18 and it kind of came out. Or was about to come out, and I just said to him, I, I know what you're gonna say. And he was very surprised, uh, because he couldn't believe that I knew. And I said, I knew all my life. I knew it.

Esther: That's such a big thing to hold and carry all alone like this. Even from people who wished that you would just have a normal childhood, that you would

never feel excluded. I mean, in a way, what they wanted so much to achieve by creating the secret is what they ended up creating.

Caller: Yeah.

Esther: They wanted you not to feel ashamed. They wanted you to feel like you belong. They wanted to feel that your dad was your dad, that the man who raised you was your loving father, and yet because you knew it, then what did you do with those two realities?

Caller: I just, um, I feel sometimes that I had these feelings that my dad wasn't good for me. That somehow I was creating conflict with him. And I think over just past five years when I started to uncover this and that the deep wounding that it has caused, I started to change the relationship with him and started to say more thank you for what he has done for me and that I, I know he, he was not perfect. He, he struggled to show love to any of us because of his own upbringing, and he was a bit distant. So the household was run by the women, uh, by my mom, my grandma. So my sisters came a lot later than me. And, um, but now I, I just feel like our relationship got a lot better, since I have spoken about this openly, but not to him. I, I've spoken to my mom who still struggles to go back to that time. I still try to piece together the narrative of what happened in those first two years, but it's like pulling and pulling, trying to get more and more information. Unfortunately, my, my grandmother who really wanted to tell me, I think the story, um, she passed away before it, I started to dig deeper into this, um, five years ago.

Esther: So five years ago is when you were 18 and it all came out?

Caller: No, so I'm, I'm nearly 40, so I, so five years ago I actually real started to check.

Esther: What happened five years ago? Well, first of all, what happened at 18? What was this first revelation when you said to your dad, I know what you're gonna tell me, and he realized that you had lived with a truth or with a secret that they thought they had been able to keep from you, hoping to protect you, but in fact it inflicted a big wound? If we had time, I would say what happened at 12, what happened at seven and what happened at 18 and what happened at 34? Right? Those are four major milestones for you, but we may not be able to get through all. So let's start with the 18.

Caller: So after that, we, uh, my parents were going through a very difficult time in their life, in their relationship. I think that's... I was always kind of in the middle of

this, this conflict. Obviously he was distraught. He thought that he was gonna lose me. Um, and I just wanted to soothe them. Say, it's fine, it doesn't mean anything. I know that you're my dad. I don't wanna know anything that was my 18-year-old talking.

Esther: I'll take care of you basically. Don't be sad. I will take care of you. Don't worry about it. I'm not gonna hold it against you. And you were all focused on him.

Caller: And mom, maybe more, even more so.

Esther: And to mom you said what?

Caller: That I'm, I'm okay that they don't need to worry about anything and I was, um, soon after left and never came back. So that moment of the 18-year-old just was, I never explored it. I never wanted to go deeper. I just wanted to make sure that they are okay and they're not, uh, making, I'm not making them feel worse.

Esther: Because making them feel worse meaning... what happened? Your parents had their amount, their fair amount of conflict? But your mother always had to be thankful that her husband had married her when she already had a child?

Caller: Yes. And um...

Esther: She had her own shame.

Caller: She had, she still has, I feel like this, this big, big shame because she was very, very young. I think my dad maybe sometimes used this situation with her. I dunno, the, the full, um, story of...

Esther: But your mom had a relationship with a man who was married?

Caller: Yeah.

Esther: And she was a young woman and she got impregnated and he disappeared. And she had the child alone with the help of her mother.

Caller: Yeah. And, father..

Esther: And father. And they welcomed you?

Caller: Yeah, it was so much love. I feel like my grandparents were, I adore them at, well, they're not here anymore. But..

Esther: Yeah, but they welcomed you?

Caller: Yeah. Yes.

We lived in this very small household and we lived in a very small space, a lot of us, so I was always protected and felt very loved.

Esther: And was your mother loved for having gotten pregnant with a married man or did the love come to you and the shame went to her, and then she just had to find someone to marry her and not wonder if that was the man that she wanted to be with or loved or felt loved by, that she just had to take whatever was gonna be available to her or whoever would want her because she no longer belonged to the VIP club?

Caller: Yes. And um, it was a small town. It was a lot of shame in there, especially in those years. She had big support though, from my extended family. I think they really protected me. Every, all of them.

Esther: They protected you. And my question is, did they shame her? Not that they needed to do anything very proactively that that behavior in itself.

Caller: She never expressed it. But when I tried to talk to her a few years ago about this, trying to find out the story and narrative, she, she feels so ashamed and she is... She, she cannot go there. She struggles and I mean, it's been nearly 40, 40 years and she struggles to go there. Uh, so I think she still carries this big guilt or maybe shame, shame more than, than guilt. Um...

Esther: And how do you think her shame for what had happened to her influenced how she related to you? You say everyone else protected you. How about her?

Caller: I feel like I protected her a lot. I felt, I feel like her emotional state, kind of, was declaring my safety. So if she was safe, I was okay. Or if she was okay, I, I felt safe. And if she, she was very emotional throughout our lives, tried to control a lot of the environment and I felt like it was very, we were very codependent, so it felt like we were talking all the time. We were very entwined in our together and separate from from sisters more, more so. And I just felt like I needed to break that connection and reconnect in a different way because it felt too painful, it felt unhealthy, it felt really, um, like she was living her life through me in many ways.

Uh, I was always supposed to be the perfect one to go to get a degree, to get, to study, to, to be the first one, to, to achieve things.

Esther: All things that she had not been able to do?

Caller: I think so, yeah.

Esther: So she was gonna live vicariously through you?

Caller: I think she did until like these past years when we started to change the dynamic in the family.

Esther: So you started the journey of differentiation?

Caller: Yeah, it was very painful, but uh, I made really big steps since Covid, Covid just opened the whole, the whole pot of it really, um, that's when I started to feel again that shame that I was getting into relationship. Another one, a third one where the marriage was not on the cards. And I, I felt again, that I was gonna drop and leave because that's what I always did. I would get committed, I would get to the point and I would leave. And I didn't wanna leave this time, uh, this time I wanted to because it, so it was so obvious that it was happening again. Um, exactly the same story with a very different person.

Esther: And exactly the same story meaning?

Caller: That, um, I get loving I get, um, in a very good relationship. We are very close. We are very happy. But then it's just not enough to, to make that step, to make that commitment, like that public commitment. Uh, it would always be something that stops it. And I didn't know why and I always felt like, no, that's not working. I'm gonna try again. I'm gonna try with somebody else. I spoke to my sisters and my mom and...

Esther: And how was your conversation with them?

Caller: It was very painful, but I think they understood it. My sisters especially because they felt like my and mom's relationship were very odd.

Esther: Was the VIP club that they couldn't enter?

Caller: Yeah.

Esther: Right. There are many VIP clubs in this system. So you and mom had a particular closeness that your sisters could not compete with and could not enter, and you wanted to decide on your own terms if you wanna be in a relationship that may not materialize or evolve into marriage without having to feel that you are actually repeating what your mother went through. So every time you left, you were basically saying, I'm not gonna experience what my mother went through.

Caller: I never thought it like that when I did, but it, it makes sense.

Esther: I know, I saw your face, but that's ano, that's, it just adds another, another layer to this. It's that she too started out her story with someone who wouldn't be public. It's, you know, um, it's not just that there was a secret inside of you, but you were a secret in this man's life.

Caller: Yes.

Esther: With mom you were not a secret, but there was a secret about who you are and where you come from and all of that. And do you ever discuss the possibility of what you call the public declaration separately from marriage as a symbolic act of acknowledgement? Celebration?

Caller: I, I have brought it up not long ago. I think it's because I listened to many, many different ways of doing it, but that's when he said, I don't think that will be enough for you.

Esther: But that's maybe not for him to decide.

Caller: Yeah.

Esther: I mean, that's a good answer to kind of say, I don't wanna do something and it won't be good for you either, so we shouldn't do it. But we don't know. And, and even if it doesn't take care of the entire wound, there's something about the symbolic nature of just having a few people at the table or not at the table, wherever you want for that matter, who recognize, acknowledge, celebrate, ritualize your relationship. If you celebrate your birthdays, you may celebrate an anniversary. You know? It may not fill the entire gap of the original wound, but so what? Maybe that's not the purpose either. The purpose is to do small gestures that respond to the shame. Shame is about hiding. When we feel ashamed, we hide. We don't wanna see people, we don't want them to see us, and we think there's something wrong with me rather than something happened to me.

When we make a public declaration, it's exactly the opposite, and you can do little gestures like that. They honor, they legitimize, they make it known they're not hiding. Maybe little things, maybe little things between the two of you too. It doesn't just have to involve the community. And because you grew up in a small town, you had the village, but basically you had the community at your doorstep, you know? And they came in even if you didn't want to. Here you would get to invite them and you would choose who you want to invite. And so would he. And it wouldn't, it doesn't need to carry a name even.

Caller: It feels so strange. I don't know. It's like as if I am scared to do it. Scared to, it's not so much that he would not let me, it's more like that I somehow don't wanna do it.

Esther: Say more.

Caller: Um, that's when I was thinking about this desire thing and obsession. I feel sometimes that maybe it's me who doesn't want it. It's, it's that just thought that just came to my mind very like in the past maybe 48 hours.

Esther: Me that doesn't want what?

Caller: To declare it publicly.

Esther: Him? Us? It?

Caller: It. Like the relationship that, um, it, it, I dunno. I, I have this feeling that deep inside is what he actually wants.

Esther: That he would like that, but not you.

Caller: Yeah. And I know it sounds twisted, but I don't get it. Um...

Esther: No, it's just the opposite of what you said before. It's not, but it's, uh, you know, I like twisted. Um, so tell me more. So what, what's, if you had the the voice, that's the master of ceremony and that just creeps up right now, where's the resistance?

Caller: That it is just not me. It's just not what I do. It's not, I never dreamt about... I never imagined it. I never had, you know, even...

Esther: I never imagined what?

Caller: Any of these rituals. I never imagined ever in the dress even. I never imagined myself going through the ritual.

Esther: Because I imagine what? How did I imagine myself?

Caller: Just being okay with things as they are being unique and different and, um, kind of proving that I don't need this. They call me the daughter-in-law. So...

Esther: So when your sister announces that she's getting married, your first response is loss.

Caller: Yeah.

Esther: Loss of a certain story, loss of a certain set of societal expectations that you won't be following upon. Loss of the sense of homogeneity between you and your sisters, and then it switches from the loss and the sadness and the pain into I'm different. Not just because I had a secret, but now I'm taking that difference and I'm turning it into how I choose to live and what I wanna live by, and which one of the rituals of our society I actually want to adhere to. And so I turn the whole thing upside down. But that just happened 48 hours ago?

Caller: Yeah. Like very recently. I, I just don't even know why that thought came to me. Um, 'cause I was thinking I was preparing what to say and, and all of a sudden it just kind of came that thought. It kind of came as a question, like, do you really want to do this? Or is it just that what you just told yourself for past 10 years?

Esther: And then you added to it, but I think he wants it more than me.

Caller: Yeah, because I said it's about, he doesn't believe in the institution, but he's writing the wedding speeches for his friends, you know, as if it was his full-time job. And he loves attending all these ceremonies and all these, um... It just seems a bit odd to me that somebody who doesn't believe in institution participates in it so wholeheartedly.

Esther: Everyone. Their contradictions.

Caller: Yeah.

Esther: So when he says to you, this won't be enough, what's he really addressing? Because now you've conveyed, I say I want something that may not really be the thing I want. But I want something. So what is the it and the something that is not being properly named that he says no ceremony will take

care of it and you both seem to never name this it, or at least I have not. I'm not sure I capture but you seem to each know something that lies underneath.

Caller: It is not so much my worth, but, um, it's like a prize. It's like the final jewel, you know, in this whole thing, it's like a final piece of the puzzle. So I have this whole thing that works for me, but I'm missing that one little puzzle piece. Maybe I thought that was that commitment, that that ritual, that ceremony would, kind of, um, put that piece in, but I just don't... Now I say it and I don't think that it would.

Esther: Can I suggest a thought for you? Just came up for me and you tell me if that adds some clarity. When you talk like that, I want to have a ceremony, I want to get married, I want to have a celebration and all of that because I think it would officialize me, it would make a declaration and all of that. On some level there is, he, he, you don't mention him. It's like he's being recruited for a part, but it's not about him. And I'm wondering if part of him, him saying, I don't wanna do this. This will not add it, this won't fix it. It's because you're asking him to do something that isn't really his role. In a way, you're asking him to do something that your parents haven't done. You're asking him to legitimize, to officialize...

Caller: And he's not the first person I asked that as well.

Esther: But he's the one where you decided not to go. So there's a part of you that knows that there's certain things that you want from him but it's not about him. And it's actually not about marriage either.

Caller: No, I, I just don't know what I want. What is it really that I want?

Esther: If you turn to your parents now, not to your boyfriend, but to your parents, and you talked with them about a public declaration. Turning shame into pride. Acceptance. Acceptance that doesn't sit on a secret, and primarily releasing the secret so that you don't have to hold it in order to protect them. That's the release.

Caller: They told it, but it was too late. They said it.

Esther: No. They just said one thing. What was the conflict you had with your dad at 18? That led him to let the cat out of the, the hat as they say.

Caller: I, I discovered his affair and told my mom about it. Um, he called me. He was very, obviously, he thought that that was it. That was at the end, and he was angry and, uh, he just wanted to hurt me, I think, at that time. I was in university

back home. I only went there for a very short time, uh, before I moved away. And um...

Esther: So he was saying, you wanna hurt me by making me public to your mom? Let me tell you and I know what I can use to hurt you.

Caller: But he couldn't, 'cause I kind of interrupted...

Esther: But that wasn't he told me That wasn't him telling you. That was him basically exercising revenge. You think you have one up on me? Let me tell you one on you. That's a different game. And your mom, you still haven't had a conversation with her about it?

Caller: I had it in terms of, but when I had five years ago started to go through this, I called and cried and said, you know, this is really deeply hurt me. Um, so I did say everything, uh, then what I felt and I said it was...

Esther: And was she able to hear you?

Caller: Um, not, not fully. I don't think we had another conflict a couple of years ago where I, she took it so badly that she said, you know, 'cause I, I said, I'm, I'm still, she still wanted to have the same physical kind of connection, you know, but we were very close and I, I needed space. And she took it very badly. She took it very hurtfully. Uh, she was hysterical and I, after she calmed down and I calmed her down, I, I said to her that it's, it's not that I don't love her, it is that, uh, it's suffocating me and that, um, that I need to disconnect from her and I need my sisters to step up into this relationship. So I am not the one who is always looking after her emotional, um, being, and, you know, all these conflicts with my dad that she had, she used to share with me and I said, no, not anymore. I don't wanna hear anything anymore. And actually their relationship improved now because I think I stepped down. I stepped down. I stepped away. I moved, um, my sister stepped up. They started to feel a bit more out of my shadow. Um...

Esther: So you did a lot.

Caller: I did a lot for the family. Yes.

Esther: The family restructuring. Yes. Beautiful.

Caller: Um, but she still struggles to talk, to talk about it, but she's trying, she wrote me a lot of letters to say how, uh, she doesn't know what comes over her, and I understand because I know how these wounds work. She's been very gentle and

soft, you know, in, in our conversations. But also I feel like she downplays the, the experiences of my sisters, which is not fair because, you know, I want to celebrate with them. You know, they, they are beautiful experiences for them and important, and I want them to celebrate it, but I feel like I'm just always in the way with all this, with my stuff, especially with the trio, the triangle of me, my mom, and my dad, and the invisible man. Somehow it's four of us there, and then they are on the sidelines.

Esther: Tell me if I hear this right. I look at my parents' marriage and it is official and it is sanctified by the church and it is legal by the state, and yet it is filled with secrets. My secret of my origin, but also my father's affair, and who knows what else. I look at me and my boyfriend and my partner, and we are not sanctified, nor legal, nor recognized by any public institution. But we don't have secrets. We grow. We are open. We're there for each other, and here I am facing the opportunity, but also the falsity of what the official declaration presents and means versus what happens in the actual experience of the relationship, even if the titles are not there. Did I hear it accurately?

Caller: Yeah. Yes. So I always wanted an opposite of the relationship. That's what I always was going for.

Esther: I want truth, authenticity, trust, honesty, safety, discovery, exploration, growth, all these beautiful juicy things in a relationship. And I want that to be declared. I can find ways to create rituals and celebrations and opportunities to bring in the community. Whoever I invite, it's not sure that I want all the titles, when in fact it feels that behind that there's a web of secrets and unacknowledged truths, and I started this process five years ago and my sister's announcement of her marriage led me to the next step in this process.

Caller: Yeah, I feel like it's a big step what happened in the last 48 hours. Um, something shifted, I think, more than it shifted then even. Um...

Esther: How is this?

Caller: It, it sits. It's landing. It's landing better. But I, I hope I'm not just trying to soothe myself. It's, you know, like, 'cause I'm such a storyteller, like I'm just hoping that I'm not just doing it...

Esther: ...Because it sounds good.

Caller: It sounds better. Yeah. Um, so that's what I think I'm, I, I want to start to see if, if this thought is taking, because it's quite fresh.

Esther: This is a story but so is the other version. And you can decide which story you wanna live by. It's not like there is one true story and the other is not. At least not here.

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.

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