

5. We All Hate Kokomo

Vanessa: There are two kinds of people in the world: People who keep their old love letters and people who don't. I am a keeper.

I have every postcard, ticket stub and little note that I've cherished in a bunch of old shoeboxes. But most fastidiously, I keep old love letters.

In fact, I have kept a photo of me reading the first love letter I ever got. It was from a boy named Danny. And he wrote it to me in the card for my twelfth birthday present. It was 1994 and I had a roller skating party. It was awesome. In the photo I am chewing on a finger and smiling, realizing that he is telling me that he likes me. Cute, right?

I have looked for this love letter in my many boxes of memorabilia. I can't find it. For a while that really bothered me. Now, I suspect that having the photo of the moment is more precious than the letter itself would be. But I still wish I had the actual love letter.

Not so that I could re-read it. I don't really care about what the card said. I want the proof. That at 12, a boy; a cool boy, liked me. That even though I had curly, frizzy hair that my 6th grade math teacher teased me about, and people always told me how cute I'd be if I just lost 5 pounds, a boy liked me. The photo needs a story, and you'd have to take my word for it, what's actually going on. The letter would prove it to you. And to me.

Old love letters prove that we are lovable. Old love letters are also sad, right? Evidence of loves lost, of mistakes we've made, of people who've hurt us or people who we have hurt.

On this week's episode, we talk about the theme of reunited lovers. Of old love letters that come to life. I'm Vanessa Zoltan, this is Hot and Bothered.

[THEME MUSIC]

"Reunited Lovers" is about the one who got away, the one we just can't stop thinking about, even though we should. The one whose love letters we keep in a shoebox in the

closet. I love this trope. Some of my favorite Romance novels are 'reunited lovers' novels. Two people love each other very much and something comes between them: war, a misunderstanding, awful parents, a huge fight. So they break up.

But then something changes. The war ends and they find each other again; and although they are different people now, there is still something essential, undamaged by war. Or the awful parents, you know, die.

The trope Reunited Lovers is the most hopeful end to an old letter. You've kept something, carried it with you, move after move, and then, like magic, it goes from a sad, stale thing, to evidence that you were meant to be together all along.

I honestly can't imagine anything more romantic than something tearing two people apart and them crawling their way back to each other.

Our writer for this trope is Sejal. She's a lawyer who has been married to her beautiful husband for nearly 20 years and has two gorgeous kids.

Vanessa: Who are your characters? What is keeping them apart? What gets them back together? I want to hear it all.

Sejal: Alright here we go: Her name is Misha Tehani. She's 25 years old. And she's the public defender in Boston. And when she was 25, she met this Boston police detective whose name is Gabriel Messi.

And they're dating on the sly because she's a public defender, he's a police officer, that's like super forbidden. I mean, not forbidden but you kind of can't do that. Never expecting that they're going to have a case against each other. But then they do. And it's a murder trial. And her client ends up being found guilty. And she is PISSED because she thinks that her client was wrongfully convicted. And she blames Gabriel for doing this to her. And she ends the relationship. And he's heartbroken. And she's like I'm never talking to you again. So, then, 20 years pass. She's now 45 and he's 50. And these are, you know, people my age. She's left Boston about a year after the trials when she was 26. When she turns 35, she leaves the law permanently and becomes a professional dancer. And he rises in the ranks in Boston at the police department. So she's coming back to

Boston for a dance performance and he learns that she's going to be there. And in the intervening years, he felt so bad about his mistake that he looked back into the case and realized that they did make a mistake and he helped the defender's office exonerate her client, and so he wants to apologize and see if he could make amends. But not knowing a lot about what's going on with her life. So, that's where, that's kind of where I'm headed. So, are they gonna, aren't they gonna. I'm a dancer too, and I've always dreamed of actually quitting my job and being a professional dancer, so this is a little alternate reality fun for me too.

Vanessa: Part of what is so interesting about Reunited Lovers is the years that the two people spent apart from one another. Like, Misha and Gabriel, who are apart for 20 years! Even if they aren't busy being obsessed with each other, there are flashes of them remembering each other. There are smells, sights, songs, that in the years apart made them think of one another. They've seen someone from afar, thought, "is that?" and then have been either relieved or devastated to realize, "no. it isn't." In Sejal's story, we see this kind of haunting. The way that our past creeps into our present, and we can't seem to shake it off. It's not just love letters gathering dust in a box, it's the way our memories keep someone alive.

Sejal, in her Romance novel, has mysterious text messages. Once a month, on the fourth of the month, Gabriel, whose mistake with Misha weighs on him all these years later, gets an anonymous text message hinting that he is missed. And even though he hasn't spoken to Misha in over 20 years, whenever he gets this text, he thinks of her.

Sejal: We all have these things where something, you, you eat something. This is Proust. Right? You eat your madeleine, and you're suddenly taken back to a memory. So, whatever it is. Maybe it's a ding dong. Maybe it was a romantic burrito. I don't know But there's some food or a song, some super cheesy, you know, Kokomo by the Beach Boys. Something that just puts in either an uncomfortable or romantic or nostalgic spot with respect to somebody. I HATE that song Kokomo, by the way. I HATE it. So I can use a different example, but there is some song like that. So, that to me, this idea that there's a text message. And that someone is really trying to convey something to you and you want to try to forget it. Haven't you ever had that experience? I had this problem with phone numbers. A person that you used to maybe once be in touch with, and you're not anymore, but you still remember their phone number. And every now and then, I'll check in — my best friend growing up: 827-7230. That was her phone number. I haven't dialed that number in 30 years. But I will never forget the number. And sometimes I'll be like, is it there still? And I'll test it and there it is! It's still there.

So that's kind of what I like, I liked the play with the text messages. There feels an urgency and immediacy about it. That would mean, would be relatable to someone who is looking for themselves in the book. And they can say, "Wow, what if I thought of this person."

Vanessa: I asked Sejal to expand more on this; because this text thing... I'm not sure I found it romantic. Like... isn't another word for this, harassment?

Sejal: Don't reunited lovers each on their own in their brains wonder, "Is the other thinking about me?" And that's also what I liked about starting it that way. That yes, they both are. Very much, in different ways. But all these years have past and you've not forgotten about this person. There's something immortal about it too that I really love. Aspirationally.

Vanessa: God, how satisfying to imagine the ways in which all of the people we think about are thinking about us.

Sejal: Ultimate narcissism.

Vanessa: OK. Interesting. I was thinking about all the good bits of reunited lovers. The forgiveness, the pining, the faith being restored. I have always focussed on the reunion part of reunited lovers-- because that's the romantic part. But what Sejal is wrestling with is the being haunted. She's obsessed with the impact of the time apart. She is thinking about the ways that our minds play tricks on us. About the phone numbers that would still ring if we dialed them, but somebody else would now pick up. Gabriel and Misha will end up back together. But they'll never get those 20 years back. And Sejal wants to talk about those 20 years. She is thinking about a kind of longing for how things could have been, but can't be now.

Sejal loves her life, she has that beautiful husband and two gorgeous kids. But also, there's an alternate life out there she could be living. And there's always grief for the lives we don't get to live, even if there isn't regret.

Vanessa: So, is there somebody in your life who you would want to get a text message like that from?

Sejal: Why do you ask such hard questions, Vanessa? Don't we all have somebody in our life?

Vanessa: But is there someone particular in mind?

Sejal: Sure.

Vanessa: You don't want to talk about who it is?

Sejal: Sure, I can say. I had, it was relationship turned best friendship. For many many many many years. And then, as it happens, this person moves into another relationship with the person who he then married. That wife was not cool with our friendship. Even though our friendship had been over, I don't know, 15 years? Really long period of time. And then we just completely fell out of touch. And it was very clear to me that he couldn't be in touch with me. It would cause problems in their relationship. And I still think very highly of him. I don't think, it wasn't anything, um, acrimonious. But when someone is that close to you for so long, and then it's been now, oh my gosh, it's been all 18 years that I have, we have not heard, I have not heard boo. And there's not much to know. But, someday, if I ever did hear from him, it would be, like, such a joy. Just to hear how he is doing. So, yeah. Him. And then there's other people, actually not romantic, but, um, friends. Once upon a time you were really good friends with them. For whatever reason you are not in touch. And then you just wonder, or maybe just I wonder. I actually think maybe there's a whole universe for people who really just don't care. They move on. But I am hopelessly nostalgic. That's probably also why I picked the trope that I did.

Vanessa: I keep things, remember? I'm a keeper? So I get the idea of this, I really do. But, and maybe this is about my lack of maturity, but something about what Sejal is saying here really upsets me. I don't think that I want reunited lovers to be about nostalgia or haunting. I want it to be about forgiveness, and hot reunion sex.

But, maybe there's a reason that I don't find this text, or "haunting" idea romantic. There is someone who I think about. (Not Danny, who wrote me my first love-letter.) We'll call him, "J." I loved him. I never understand why people say, "I thought I loved." Sure, I now realize I shouldn't have loved. He was unworthy of my love. But I had the feeling of love. And then he betrayed me. He is the one who haunts me, the one who I think I see around corners. If today, I got a mysterious text from an untraceable phone, I would immediately assume it was him. And I would feel stalked. And the reason for that is simple, right? I haven't forgiven him. I am still mad at him. And I don't want to hear from him. I did love him once and it would be dishonest to forget that. But I'm not going to keep the door open to a future with him; not even as friends.

Sejal: I think different people hit you in different ways. And I think some are more forgettable. Others aren't. It's an interesting exercise to think about, how do we create and recreate our own memories. So, you know my daughters are getting to an age now where they can see yearbooks and things from my high school. And I made the deliberate decision, I had one highschool, it was middle school, 7th grade, I wrote a mean thing about someone. I took the middle school yearbook and I ripped it into shreds and I threw it away. And I just changed my history. When my kids look through my things, they will never find that evidence of me. Now, I've told them. But they'll never find the evidence of it. And I recent — and I've been keeping actually letters from exes for a long time. And only in the last couple of years, I just decided to chuck them all. Why? I don't want to remember, I don't want to read the letter. I don't want to be there again. I didn't even read them again before I threw them away. I just threw them all away. And it took me a long time to get to that place. For awhile I kind of wanted to curate, but then memory is also so inaccurate, right? So if you're thinking of someone in a particular way, are we really also remembering — is it all bad? is it all good? Is it the mixture? Do we remember a single day of any relationship? I remember flash points, and that's psychological theory, too right. Remember what they call, like, hot moments. Where someone is really infused with emotion. But the mundane, like, you know. What did my mom give me for breakfast even one day of high school. Any year, one day of high school. Do I actually remember her, where she was standing, what did she give me? Same holds true in a relationship. Did we go on this date? Where did we go, what movie was that? How does all of that just go away? Then, did it not happen?

Vanessa: It's funny, right? I want the evidence on hand, but not to think about it. I have the old shoe boxes, but god, I never read the old love letters or notes, or look at the ticket stubs! Sejal wants to delete the record. Which makes me wonder: Why am I keeping these things? Because I agree with Sejal — I think we should be moving on. Like, I love that photo of me reading that first letter from Danny. I can prove it to you — a boy liked me. But if you found the letter, I'd say, "great! Throw it in the shoebox!" and if you offered to read it to me, I'd be like "no thanks!" I want the record. But not to engage in it.

Vanessa: I find past love letters just because, at least in the one *very* serious relationship that I had that ended, the ending ended up being the dominant narrative for so many years, and I do think it's for the best that it ended, but it's also nice to remember that we loved each other.

Sejal: I agree with you. I did. I can't explain my actions. It's a funny thing. I just got to this point where I was like, no more. I just don't want it, no more. I don't want my brain cluttered with it anymore, I don't want to think about it anymore, I don't want to wonder about it. I want to select my museum.

I don't know. I find that interesting in parallel with what I do for a living, because I reconstruct facts for a living. And maybe that also has also really influenced me in seeing, wow, like when you leave that kind of history it can come back. And then you can have to relive it minute, frame by frame, minute by minute. And do I want to be able to do that. And for whatever reason I decided no. But I haven't quite figured out yet why.

Vanessa: I mean, there's something so freeing about the idea of it. Right? It's...it's, I mean it's living in the present and saying I forgive myself for all the bad things I did and —

Sejal: And I will forget.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Sejal: I'm allowing myself to forget.

Vanessa: I walked out of the studio and couldn't stop thinking about this idea; the thought that I can just trash all of my old shoe-boxes. But it felt to me a little bit like Sejal's doctoring evidence and she's a lawyer! Evidence is how you get to the truth, right?

But god, wouldn't it feel great not to trash the whole shoeboxes, but to go through and cut out certain things from them? (Or, who am I kidding. I'm not a million years old. At least delete certain emails.)

I thought about this a lot in the month that Sejal and I were apart. What role does evidence have in our lives? Why do I keep things if I don't like the idea of being haunted? Why do I love Reunited Lovers as an idea, if there is no lover in my life I want to be reunited with?

[AD BREAK]

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: So I have a confession for you.

Sejal: Oh, yes?

Vanessa: Which is, last time we talked, you told us that you threw out a lot of old memorabilia, old love letters and yearbooks and stuff in your life.

Sejal: Yes.

Vanessa: And I was pretty judgemental, I like, couldn't believe that you would just erase chunks of your life. And first of all, before I confess, how are you feeling about that decision? Have you thought about it, or was it, "I did it and now it's done."

Sejal: No I feel great, I'm so glad I did it.

Vanessa: So I went home and deleted, well for me, the thing I got rid of was emails? There was one ex in my life who it was like particularly fraught and I didn't behave in ways that I was proud of and it was just sort of ugliness sitting in my cloud archive. It's not even like I had them filed in a folder, and I went through and I deleted and then I re-went through and permanently deleted every email that we ever exchanged, and every text conversation, everything. Entirely inspired by you.

Sejal: How do you feel?

Vanessa: I do feel a little bit like I've messed with the record of history. Yeah, it like feels fine—

Sejal: Yeah.

Vanessa: It feels like I've taken away a potential weapon of self harm.

Sejal: Yes!

Vanessa: Right, it's like there was something there that could hurt me, and I had access to it, and I've trashed it.

Sejal: That's what I loved about it, right? Whether it's something toxic, and I've had those relationships too, it's yucky, right, or even something that, it was fine but... I don't know. I was saying to someone the other day, I get to choose what I'm gonna get mad at now. I am not anymore just gonna let someone make me mad. I don't cede that control to somebody else, they don't get to choose. If I'm going to get mad I'm going to decide to get mad and that's that. The real resistance point is those days, like when I'm having a bad day, I'm googling people who make me feel bad about myself. I don't know why, I don't do it anymore, but I did for a long time. Why in the world wouldn't I just get up and go to starbucks or get a cupcake or something.

Vanessa: Yes, exactly. Maybe I'll use that shame time that I used to secretly go back and read those emails between me and J to pet my dog, or re-watch Grey's Anatomy for the 9th time, or cure cancer. Nothing productive was ever coming from reading those emails. I would just do it when I wanted a reason to hate myself. I didn't do it when I wanted a reason to forgive myself; to say, "wow, Vanessa! You messed up here. But it's OK because we all make mistakes sometimes." I would think about those emails from J like Lady Macbeth's spot of blood on her hand; the awful thing I couldn't get over, that I couldn't wash away.

Sejal: You know, there are some people who have been so mean it makes me mad, they've been so mean to me for no reason, and I don't want to care about them, I don't care what they're doing, I don't want to know about them. And it's cool, you didn't like me, I didn't like you, that doesn't make either of us a bad person, it's just the chemistry was off. Fine. But I don't want to be thinking about it either. So I don't know, that purge to me, it feels like taking the cloud of our brain, and putting down the little monopoly pieces, like we're commanding that real estate in the way that we want to do it, and that feels good to me, don't you

think? I'd rather write a card to a friend, send them some chocolate, I have a friend who loves dark chocolate, and I would so much rather take the time, get her a card and get her some really rich like 80% dark chocolate because that's gonna make her so happy, then googling an ex boyfriend or that mean person who shall remain nameless.

Vanessa: Well, you'll never guess what happened just a few weeks later. I was walking the angel-pup (which is what I call my dog in order to maintain her sense of privacy and anonymity), and I thought I saw J's haunted form from around the corner. But it couldn't have been him, because he was pushing a child in a stroller and the quick mental math didn't add up. I, in fact, had to move apartments and call the police because one night he was knocking on my door and windows and wouldn't stop, and that was just two years ago. This child was too old for J to have been pursuing me just two years ago.

And then, the shock came rolling in. It was him. Off to google, with the help of a best friend I went. And with the help of google calendar, I found the date of J's and my first date. With the help of their Bed Bath and Beyond registry, I found the date of his wedding. My first date with him was three weeks before his wedding. He had been married for two years when he was still knocking on my window.

Hopeless nostalgia felt out of reach, to say the least. Now, my deleting the evidence no longer felt like a profound act of self-care; it felt like I had deleted evidence of my own complicity in a moral crime. If I still had the emails, I could pour over them and see if he had made any signs that he had been married. And see all the things I had missed.

How can I get healthy about this if I don't have all of the facts? And I need the evidence for the facts! I want to one day be able to forgive myself for this dumb relationship I was in; but if I don't deal with the harsh realities of it, how will I ever be able to get there?

So, I did what I always do when I am at a loss. I made it someone else's problem. When I deciding whether or not to break up with J because something about it didn't feel right, there was one friend who I would turn to. Lucky me, he's also a professor studying forgiveness and an episcopal priest. Professor Matt Potts.

Vanessa: Matt, do you mind introducing yourself to our listeners?

Matt: Sure, I'm Matthew Potts, I'm an associate professor of religion at Harvard Divinity School and I'm also a priest at a church on Cape Cod.

Vanessa: We asked to talk to you because you are writing a book on forgiveness, and in interviewing our friend Sejal I've been really interested in the role of forgetting in forgiveness. So here's the problem that I'm having: So Sejal told us that she recently basically redacted all of the evidence of her younger years, pre-children, in order to curate a version of herself for her children. And I was like really intrigued by that – and so I was like 'okay, I'm going to go through all my emails and delete all the emails from that guy J, who you remember when I dated.

Matt: Mhmm.

Vanessa: And now I feel like, weird about it. So on the one hand it feels good because it's not like I was going back and re-reading those, but it does feel like I deleted an instrument of potential self harm. That on a night where I'm spiraling about all the mistakes I've made in my life and all the times in my life I've been humiliated, I can no longer search my gmail filter and find those emails. But it also feels like a lie. And, he is one of the people in my life that I super haven't forgiven and he's just still someone I feel a tremendous amount of shame around. So I'm wondering if you can help me unpack the role of memory and forgiveness and evidence and self-forgiveness.

Matt: Okay, so there's a lot going on in what I just said, so I'm just going to kind of, begin by drawing some distinctions that I might want to make, in the way you described it. The first is just that like, there's a difference between forgetting and choosing not actively trying to remind oneself. Right, and so the way you talked about deleting emails, that seems sort of useful and wise to not put the instruments of self-harm nearby, right, to remove those from your immediate vicinity. But that's different from forgetting. It's not that you've forgotten what happened, or forgotten Jay. It's just that you've decided that active reminding of yourself is a thing which only serves to hurt yourself.

You know, most, I would say, most philosophers and theologians would say that proper forgiveness involves some sort of forgetting – you have to actually look past some things or ignore some things in order to forgive someone. But I tend to

define forgiveness much more modestly, I tend to think of forgiveness as simple restraint from retributive harm. Basically, choosing not to hurt the people who have hurt us. That doesn't mean not being angry with them, it doesn't mean trusting them, it doesn't mean restoring relationship with them. It just means "you hurt me, I'm not going to hurt you back." And it seems like in order to do that well, in order to forgive in that sense, you have to remember. You have to remember what happened to you, you have to remember you were hurt.

But the other thing I'd say is that, in the way we tend to think about forgiveness, it is often blurred with or overlaps too much with reconciliation. And that these two things are discrete and very separate acts that carry very separate demands and requirements. If I'm going to reconcile with somebody, that is "restore full relationship with them." I need to have trust in them. And because trust is not an entitlement, that trust needs to be merited and has to be earned, by the person who has harmed me.

But forgiveness, if it's separate from reconciliation, if it doesn't require that trust, again, just simply means that I am not going to hurt you back.

Not having access to those emails from Jay was probably a good thing for that 72-hour period when I was obsessed with the new level of his betrayal.

But the thing I felt bad about was that what I had also deleted was my own complicity. I had no idea that he was married. But I had been with a man while he was married. And now there was no evidence of this horrible thing that I had done, inadvertent though it was.

Vanessa: So how do we do all of this, the memory and the forgetting enough in order to forgive ourselves, and how do we reconcile with ourselves?

Matt: The case of self-forgiveness is really complicated — or at least the kind of blurry overlap between forgiveness and reconciliation is more complicated with self-forgiveness because you're always in relationship to yourself. You can't break healthily, psychologically, break relationship with yourself, the way you can with a friend who constantly causes you harm.

But I still think forgiveness remains the same thing with self-forgiveness — it's just deciding not to harm yourself. Deciding not to punish yourself for mistakes you have made. I think that's different from forgetting — I think wisdom would demand that you remember what mistakes you've made so you don't make them again.

Vanessa: The problem with self-forgiveness is the fear that you'll make the same mistake again, right? It's like, once you make a mistake like that, and you've broken a trust with yourself like that — I mean, and all I did, the “terrible” thing I did was trust someone who didn't deserve my trust. But I'm like “Oh am I someone who doesn't actually have a good read on people, and is actually really stupid and naive? Am I gonna make that mistake again and just hurt myself again?”

Matt: And see, this is precisely why I think the distinction between forgiveness and forgetting is really important and why forgiveness can't be forgetting. Because to forgive is to actually name the past as broken. I think forgiveness is actually an act of memory, it's actually saying, “I remember this happened.” And that should be a reminder or a way to keep in mind those things and to keep oneself from falling into habits you worry you might fall into or falling into traps you worry you might fall into. Where on the contrary, if you forget entirely, you won't even recognize the traps when they arise and you'd fall in again.

Vanessa: So the thing with Jay right is that looking back, it turns out that the whole time we were dating he was engaged and then married and I did not know and I then I figured it out two years after. And there was this moment when I figured it out, where I was like, “do I find his wife and tell her?” Where is the morality in that, of like, I didn't want to cause him more harm, because he harmed me, and I didn't want to hurt her, and I know that they have a kid together now so I'm like, I didn't want to hurt this child, and I also like, think she deserves to know.

Matt: That's a really complicated question. So there's this moral philosopher named Lisa Tessman and she has a concept called moral failure which I think is really useful and maybe especially in a context like this. Which is that we tend to think about ethics, or we tend to think about morals, as “what ought I to do in this situation, or what am I obligated to do in this particular situation.” And what she

says is that as we actually encounter the world before us, there are some situations where no action we take is actually one with great moral benefits which results in great outcomes. There are no good options sometimes. That our obligations are sometimes, contradict one another and so we have to fail, we have to just kind of choose the direction in which we're failing. And so the situation you described is maybe a case in point. You can see here in this situation how, on the one hand you're reflecting morally and saying, I do not want to act out of retributive spite, and I can't suss out the degree to which retributive spite is motivating my urge. On the other hand, I also know that were I in her situation, I would want to know. And so is there a moral good in telling her? And it seems to me, first, you're not her so you don't know what she would want to know, so that makes it tricky.

Vanessa: Right.

Matt: But it also seems to me that maybe just because we live in a broken world there may be no path forward or avenue or act that you can take where you come out scott free. And a better moral accounting might be to say "which is the right thing where I succeed morally, but which way is the manner in which I fail and am able to live with myself?" There are some situations, maybe all situations, where we cannot but make mistakes and so we have to throw ourselves on the mercy of others to kind of reckon that we are doing our best, and figure out the failures we can live with, the failures that we can build relationships and communities around because none of us are going to be perfect.

Vanessa: I am not going to tell you whether or not I decided to tell Jay's wife. I'm sure you have opinions on what I should and shouldn't have done. I promise you that I gave it a lot of thought, and had a lot of conversations and am at peace with what I did. Here is what Sejal helped me realize: what we do with our past is entirely impacted by what we want for our future. Sejal trashed those yearbooks because she didn't want those gorgeous kids to see them. She doesn't google the people who were mean to her, and instead uses that time to send her current friend chocolate. She engages with her past in order to be her best self in her future.

So, a huge part of what I did or didn't do as far as J and his wife is concerned is because of the man I love now. He and I discussed what he would want; what would make him feel comfortable. And he is the one who matters to me now. Usually, I don't

really care what men think about my life. But this isn't just my life, this is his and my life. So I did the thing that I could live with and that he could live with the most. Because reunited love isn't just about the past; it's about imagining a future.

I used to hold onto everything because I want an honest record. I don't think I will have a future biographer. But I do have a vision of myself at 85. 85 year old me is going to be awesome. She's gonna talk a lot less. She is going to have 12 dogs. She's going to be doing her very best to stay up on pop music, and she'll do things like wear "house slippers." And although she'll be very busy taking care of all her chickens and washing the feet of the homeless, one day, she will decide to go through all of these old shoe boxes and email folders. And even though she won't quite remember who this guy "J" was, she is going to have such profound sympathy for 30-year-old Vanessa, and will reconcile with her former self wholeheartedly. I used to keep ugly things because I hoped that future me will be able to look back on them and see their beauty. But now, I have started to think about curating the ugly things because I have to get from here to awesome 85 year old me, and I don't think spending a lot of time self-flagellating will get me from here to there. It's a balance.

Nostalgia is about cherishing the way that things used to be. I want reunited lovers to be about the future — about the apology, the war ending, the reconciliation; the fact that Gabriel goes back and gets someone out of jail because of his love of Misha. It's not that the memory of Gabriel was so great that Misha had to get back to him. It's the fact that he loved her so much that he DID something about it; he went back and reinvestigated a case and got an innocent man out of jail.

But as far as Jay, I'm glad I burnt those letters. And by burnt those letters, I mean pressed delete. I have taken away my future self's chance at completely forgiving me. But I've given my today-self more of a chance of spending time investing in the relationship in front of me, instead of the one behind me.

[AD BREAK]

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: And now it's time for our next assignment from Julia Quinn.

Hi Julia!

Julia: Hey! How are you?

Vanessa: Good, how are you?

Julia: I'm great!

Vanessa: Okay! So, so far you have had people do these like, pre-writing writing assignments, where they're getting to know their characters.

Julia: Yes.

Vanessa: Now we are in our third assignment. What should people be doing?

Julia: They're gonna actually have to start writing.

Vanessa: [laughs] Nooooo!

Julia: Which, I'm really sorry but the only way to write a book is to actually write a book, and if there was any other way to do it, I would have figured it out by now. And so, I think, since it's such a short piece, there isn't a lot of room. And so I think that the first scene of the novella is going to have to be where the two protagonists either meet or re-meet, because you could be doing something where you have people who have known each other in a different capacity, in a different way, but I think you need, in such a short piece, to just get right into it.

Vanessa: So knowing that there are a million good ways to do this, and knowing that people are looking for just assignments, for a way to do it, what are some recommendations that you would make for just this version of an assignment? What is one way for people who have never done this before to practice?

Julia: I think some things to keep in mind are how are the characters perceiving each other? Is there some kind of misunderstanding? And it doesn't have to be

like, the big misunderstanding, but are they perceiving each other in an incorrect manner? Another thing to think about is, in whose point of view are you? Because you can't be hopping back and forth the whole time. Now, you can write it in a way where you switch, but your first meet may be through the eyes of just one character and you do need to think about, okay, whose point of view do I want that to be in, and then also think about the next scene, whatever you're going to do next, okay, whose point of view should *that* be in.

Vanessa: So Julia I think that this is a great first writing assignment in the capital-F first, right, like they are actually going to be sitting and writing, and you said writing is about the butt in the chair, and I am asking this question on behalf of people with standards, because I am someone with low standards, so I have very low anxiety about bad writing. But other people, I've heard about them, have standards. And so for anybody who's like "oh my god, now I'm WRITING, and now I have to write my first sentence." What advice do you have, like what makes for a great first sentence.

Julia: I'm gonna avoid that question specifically, at least right away, and instead I'm going to invoke the queen and her name is Nora Roberts.

Vanessa: Yep.

Julia: And she once said, "I can fix a bad page. I can't fix a blank page." And you have to remember that, that it does not have to be perfect the first time you get it down. Now, a lot of people seem to feel like maybe your first line has to, because that sets the tone, but if you don't have it in you right then, if that's not there, go onto paragraph two.

Vanessa: To me, the only thing a first line needs to do is make me want to read the second line.

Julia: That's true! I do have one book, *To Catch An Heiress*, which came from the first line. I thought of the first line, and then I basically wrote a book to follow it, and it was, "Caroline Trent hadn't meant to shoot Percival Prewett, but she had, and now he was dead."

Vanessa: So it sounds like from what, from your example, it's like if you have no other idea for how to start, give us who what where, right? Give us Poppy Bridgerton lived in this place, and a fact about them.

Julia: Yeah, I think that's a good analysis, I think the best first lines do that. And again, I'm the first one to say not all my first lines are the best first lines. Sometimes your story just doesn't have the first line that's going to go down in history as best first lines ever.

Vanessa: I don't pay attention to first lines of books, so I would just encourage people to go and write, and if that first line thing is holding you up, write the second line.

So that's your third assignment. Go and write your second line, and write your meet cute, and we can't wait to read what you have written. Julia, thank you so much, and we'll talk to you in two weeks!

Julia: Sure, and don't forget to write your first line too.

Vanessa: Yes!

Vanessa: Before we go, I thought we should call my favorite biographer.

Vanessa: Hi mom!

Mom: Hi honey, how are you?

Vanessa: I'm okay, how are you?

Mom: I'm good, thank you.

Vanessa: So I have a question for you.

Mom: Yes.

Vanessa: Do you remember my twelfth birthday party which was at Skateland?

Mom: Yes.

Vanessa: It was a really good party. Do you remember, there's a photo of me, reading this very sweet note that Danny wrote me? Do you know that photo?

Mom: Yes.

Vanessa: Why did you take that photo?

Mom: Because I took pictures of everything you did.

Vanessa: [laughs] But you didn't take a picture of me opening every present, and of me reading every note that everybody wrote me.

Mom: No I didn't, I tried to be selective and as I remembered, this note was a little bit special to you?

Vanessa: I think he was telling me that he liked me.

Mom: He was? As I remember, you and Danny had a very nice, friendly relationship, more than just friendship, it was a level, a step or two above.

Vanessa: So I have that great photo, but I don't have the note, and I'm wondering, do you think that there's a good thing in holding onto like, old love letters? Do you have, you were engaged before dad, do you have any of the letters he wrote to you?

Mom: No I don't, and I'll tell you there is something, if you think in later times, that will spark some joy in you, or happiness, then yes I think it's worth holding onto. The problem is that at the time, we don't realize it.

Vanessa: Do you wish that you had the love letters that your old fiance wrote to you?

Mom: I've never thought about it and no, I don't think I miss it. It was a closed chapter, and I did much better with your father, so no.

Vanessa: [laughs] Burn, ex-fiancé! Take that!

Mom: [laughs] Well no, it's obviously an ex for a reason, and it was great at the time, just like that letter that you read from Danny was great at the time, but the person becomes meaningless to you, to me actually, so the letters would mean nothing to me. Why hold onto them? The only reason I would hold onto any letter was if I respected the person now, because now those letters would become totally irrelevant to me. I don't care what he said or what he felt, it felt, probably felt good at the time, but today would be meaningless.

Vanessa: So like, your friend Wendy had a high school sweetheart, and then she married someone else, and that marriage fell apart, and now she's back together, like 40 years later, with her high school sweetheart. Like, you never know! Maybe you and your ex-fiancé will get together after dad dies.

Mom: I still think it's different. I still think that what you did when you were young, or forty years earlier, you were at a different place mentally, emotionally, whatever, and if you reconnect it should be for new reasons and not nostalgia.

Vanessa: Well, also I hope dad doesn't die for a while, so.

Mom: Um, he's not planning on it, so.

Vanessa: Okay. Thanks for letting us torture you.

Mom: I love you honey.

Vanessa: Love you too, I'll talk to you later.

Mom: Bye.

Vanessa: Bye.

Vanessa: This has been Hot & Bothered. Send us your own love advice question at hotandbotheredrompod.com for me or my mom to answer on Patreon. Which, by the way, you should sign up for! Besides answering love advice questions, we are also offering romance reviews, and stickers that are really cute!

If you want to read Sejal's story, you can go to our website: hotandbotheredrompod.com

You can follow us on Twitter and Instagram @therompod

Our Romance Teacher as always is Julia Quinn.

We are a co-production of Not Sorry Productions and Spoke Media.

Executive produced and written by me, Vanessa Zoltan and Ariana Nedelman.

Our Production Team is:

Julia Argy, Brigid Goggin, Chelsea Ursin, Janielle Kastner, Caroline Hamilton, Jenna Hannum, Will Short, and Alexander Mark.

Special Thanks this week, to Matt Potts, my present and my future, Peter Mueller and my mom. Thanks mom.