

Hot & Bothered Episode 15

Vanessa: Happy birthday, Julia.

Julia: Thank you Vanessa.

Vanessa: How does it feel to be older?

Julia: I feel like I'm Benjamin Button. I'm just aging in reverse.

[music enters]

Vanessa: You just look younger and younger.

Julia: I just look younger every moment.

Vanessa: Um, what do you want to call today's segment?

Julia: Stay safe

Vanessa: Or get away.

Julia: Protect yourself.

[theme]

Vanessa: So this week's question is intense.

Julia: It is. It's, it's one of the tougher questions we've gotten, I think.

Vanessa: And by gotten you mean

Julia: That I found

Vanessa: Chosen to take? Yes.

Julia: Yeah.

Vanessa: So I'm gonna jump right in.

Vanessa: My boyfriend, 21 year old man is a serial drunk driver and I do not know what to do. As the title states my boyfriend often gets drunk and then drives around. We live in a college town full of alcoholics, so this is unfortunately normalized. He called me today to tell me about

his weekend when I was out of town. He bragged about how much he drank all night and then early the next morning drove to the lake in his friend's car without his friend. I told him it was stupid to not only drive drunk, but in someone else's car. He doesn't have the insurance and it could even look stolen. I said I've known people to get injured by drunk drivers. My parents had a friend who killed someone while drunk and is now in prison for life. I told them it was incredibly worrying to me that he was so nonchalant about doing something so dangerous.

Julia: He started screaming at me on the phone that I was harassing him and trying to change him. I did not scream back because I'm in a place now where I can't scream, but I definitely wanted to. He continued to scream, fuck you at me over and over when I told him I thought he was being dangerous and I wish he wouldn't do that. It obviously worries me as I love him and I know how quickly things can go terribly wrong. He told me if I was going to say anything else about it to him to not come home because he doesn't want to see me and to be harassed by me. I'm sick of worrying and shedding tears over someone who takes their safety and others' so lightly and is so casual about drinking at a very young age. I'm considering moving all of my stuff out of our house while he's at work and going back to my parents house for good. It's not fair for me to be in emotional turmoil over someone who thinks what he's doing is acceptable. I just can't do it anymore.

Vanessa: Am I overreacting to this? Should I just let him be and do what he wants to keep the peace? Should I just leave?

[Ad Break]

Vanessa: So I come from a very specific place on this, which is that I think most people shouldn't be in jail for most things, but I think drunk drivers should be treated as attempted murderers. And so like, I think she should call the police on this criminal because he is constantly and regularly endangering the life of others.

Julia: You would tell her to call the police and say, I know he has been committing a crime.

Vanessa: Yup. I like, but this is why I'm not an advice giver. Right. I am not emotionally separated from this situation. I know people who have been killed by drunk driving and I know someone who has killed someone while driving drunk. And I just like in the day of Uber and like there's just like zero excuse anymore. And I have incredible patience for alcoholism, but I have no patience for people who drive drunk. I have none. And I also have no patience for somebody who says don't bother coming home if you're gonna, you know, try to control me, which obviously isn't what she's trying to do. He's basically insinuating that she's a nag.

Julia: I don't think he is insinuating that she is a nag. I think he is specifically and aggressively gaslighting her to think that she is the one who is harassing him, but he's the one screaming and

yelling fuck you at her and she's not yelling. And that's totally in line with the role of abusers and the people who they abuse.

Vanessa: Right

Julia: But I also don't totally know how to give advice. Like I feel like if I really knew how to give advice about this, I would have resources at my disposal that I could refer people to. I would know what you could do if you wanted to retroactively report a crime. Like, like would, would she have to wait until she knew he was currently drunk driving to call the police. Like

Vanessa: In my gut I know it's like, I know what I want to say to this person, which is get away from this guy. He's a bad guy. Um, who hasn't figured out his stuff yet. But I feel like this happens in friendships too, right? Where somebody comes to you with a problem and you know in your gut with the right thing to do is but you don't have the resources to tell them, you know this is the best way to do it. Or you notice a pattern in your friend but you don't think it's any of your business or Like I don't actually know what practical advice to give her. I just have this gut of like he's bad get away. Certainly I know the answer to the question, am I overreacting to this? Which is no, but I don't like, I'm completely at a loss as to like what specific advice to give.

Julia: Yeah. I think our position as podcasters is different than as friends because we are able to use language that she's not using and that doesn't necessarily negatively impact her in this circumstance. But if a friend came to me and gave me this circumstance, I'm not sure I would say this is a classic pattern of abuse where he's gaslighting you. I think my advice would be a little different and a little more inquisitive as to, you know, figuring out what she thinks would be safe 'cause she's the person who has the best knowledge about what is a course of action that would make her most comfortable and make her feel the most safe.

Vanessa: Yeah. The other thing that I think always worries me with friends and that I'm noticing with myself in this situation is that it like triggers things within us. Right? So if a friend comes to me for advice about something that I've never gone through, I feel like I'm able to be inquisitive and more objective. But if it is something like drunk driving that I have such strong feelings about, I feel like if my friend came to me with this problem, I, I would be a terrible friend in that moment and I'd be like, get away from him. He is basically a murderer.

Julia: Why do you think, if you believe that that is your advice for this person, why do you think that telling her your actual advice would make you a bad friend?

Vanessa: Because I don't think that my friend would need to hear that her boyfriend, that I think her boyfriend is a murderer.

Julia: Mhmm

Vanessa: Like I don't think that that is actually what this person needs to hear in this moment. I think that that's about my feeling and not about as you were saying like what makes you feel safe? How do we get you out of this situation? And that that's always a hard thing about giving advice to friends, right? Is like what's best for them and what stuff you're projecting. And like none of us are professionals and yet I do think that friends are one of the most important support systems. So I feel like I'm being a bad podcast advice giver right now. And I'm also sure that if she was my friend I would be a bad friend. I am just right like I am nothing but like an exposed nerve on this topic.

Julia: I think part of giving what I think is good advice, and I'm already about to do it now where I say what I think is good advice. I don't even say this is good advice. It's coming from a really subjective place where you're able to tell the person based on my past experiences, based on what I believe, this is what I think. But I think another part of the puzzle for advice giving is trying to put yourself in their shoes and giving advice based on what they would want to do. And I think I tend to go towards if I was in your situation, this is what I would do as more of an option rather than perhaps the more effective form of advice, which is putting yourself in their shoes and saying what, What should you do?

Vanessa: Right. And I just feel like there are different ethics depending on the position that you're coming from. Right? Like we've gotten ourselves into this like gray area of giving advice to people who didn't ask for advice. So I think what we've realized is that with this question we have bitten off more than we can chew because we are novices at advice-giving and you're missing a tooth which doesn't help with chewing. And so we should talk to like a professional advice giver.

Julia: Yes.

Vanessa: And luckily we live in the same city as one of the two Dear Sugars, Steve Almond, who has been writing an advice column and now has had a podcast for years where he responds to listener emails.

Julia: Yes. So I'm going to talk to Steve Almond about our questions about how to give good advice.

Vanessa: Great. I'm jealous that you get to talk to him.

Julia: You should be.

[Ad Break]

Julia: Hi Steve.

Steve: Hi!

Julia: How are you?

Steve: I'm good, I'm good.

Julia: I'm so glad. I was wondering if you could tell us just a little bit about yourself.

Steve: Okay, sure. I am mostly a writer of books and articles and things and some years ago I started a column, I'd done a few advice-y type things for websites and stuff and so I started writing a column for the Rumpus that was called Dear Sugar in which I, I think quite poorly played a sort of world-wise female advice giver in her mid fifties or late forties or something. That's what was in my head and did that I would say rather ineffectively, uh, for about a year or so. And then asked my friend Cheryl Strayed to take over that advice column, which she did because she was the actual true sugar and was startled along with other people who are interested in matters of the heart to see her kind of reinvent what the advice column can be. And I thought, Oh, that's what I should have been doing. Which was really rather than trying to dispense advice to sort of turn over the paradigm of advice giving and tell stories from her own life, which were really about, I think just struggles that she'd experienced that she could sense that the people writing letters were struggling with. I'd asked her to do that column, which was absurd that she said yes, and then I asked her to do a podcast and she absurdly again said yes. And so we started doing that and we immediately realized that both of us really enjoyed the inner life and people and kind of getting into people's deep struggles and trying to approach them as thoughtfully and non-judgmentally as we could. Um, and so we did that for about four years and that's, I'm going to imagine rather than my scintillating short fiction that's probably why you view me perhaps erroneously as somebody who might tell you something about advice-giving.

Julia: Yes I definitely have listened to Dear Sugars. I was wondering if you have different advice when you're working as an advice columnist rather than advice just in your personal life with friends and stuff.

Steve: I think I have the same advice. My role on dear sugar's was to, or I saw my most valuable contribution as talking about literature and literature is a place where it's really created like other art as a sort of productive form of bewilderment to try to sort of dive into those parts of the human arrangement that are totally heartbreaking and confusing and to not make sense of them or tie them up with a bow, but to just be there in the struggle in the room in the shitty, difficult conversation, uh, with, you know, your characters if you're a fiction writer or nonfiction writers reflecting on their life. So my job was to just sort of gather up all the wisdom, all the brilliant advice about love and desire and loss and all the big ticket items that I found in literature and to offer them, uh, as perspectives for the podcast. But my basic take is that people, human beings are storytelling species. That's what sets us apart from all the other species. I mean, I'm

sure goats are telling a certain kind of story that can look good, whatever it is, but human beings have two burdens that they face. One, they can't kill and fuck anything they want. They have a conscience, right? So they have this moral responsibility that's quite a burden to carry around. And I think they also know that they're going to die and they worry about it a lot. And that means that their life takes on a certain kind of quivering sense of I've got to do something with it because it's not going to last forever. And so the stories that people tell themselves serve them well to survive particular circumstances, but they kind of hang on to them past their expiration date in ways that aren't good for them. And so human beings are kind of always telling two stories. One story is about the way that they want the world to see them, and then there's the other story, which is the story of who we know ourselves to be. All our pettiness and doubt and disappointment and just the ugly parts of us that we're struggling, I think hopefully effectively to forgive and live with. And those two stories always show up in letters. And they always show up in characters and they always show up in our own lives. So when I talk with friends of mine, I'm listening to the story they're telling on the surface and the story that's underneath that. And when I read a letter for Dear Sugars, I'm looking at the letter that's on the surface. I really love this guy. He's, my, were soulmates. It's the best thing ever. And then the letter underneath that this person is hurting me and is damaging me, but I can't, I don't quite have the courage to tell them that I need to be out of this relationship, whatever it is. And that is true on every level. There are always, I think there's a text and a subtext. And so I think a lot of what Cheryl and I were trying to do is address the very real feelings that are expressed in the letter and maybe some of the feelings that the letter writer isn't quite aware of or is struggling not to feel or insights that they're struggling not to recognize because they're disruptive.

Julia: So it's not as much about giving concrete steps as it is kind of offering up a mirror to the question that you're seeing.

Steve: I think so, yeah. What Cheryl was able to do in the column was to say, we've got advice giving all wrong. What people want is company in a, in a moment of real anguish or an era of struggle or with some terrible, you know, relationship that's failing or, or, uh, a loss that they just aren't able to absorb. They don't want somebody to come in and fix it. They want somebody to come in and keep them company in their pain really, and to say, yup, this is a part of it. And not try to, you know, erase it or talk it away or dispense with it with bromides. And that's kind of what we did. For the most part, it Cheryl was saying, well, I can't fix that, but I can tell you about a time that I went through a similar struggle. And, um, there were certain insights that I gained from that. Take what you can leave the rest aside.

Julia: Yeah. There's this really beautiful notion in Quaker theology where they say, if someone's really suffering and you don't feel like you can do anything or you don't know what to do, you just try to bear witness to that.

Steve: Right

Julia: Okay. So our question is definitely one of the sticky situations we were kind of talking about. So my boyfriend, 21 year old male is a serial drunk driver and I don't know what to do as the title states....should I just let him be and let him do what he wants so I can keep the peace. Should I just leave?

Steve: Yeah. This is not a complicated question. This guy sounds like he has a drinking problem and he also sounds like he has a toxic male aggression problem. And you know, this is an example of a letter where you know, the letter writer, you know that this is not a healthy relationship and you know that it's dangerous. It's dangerous to you at least emotionally and maybe more than that if he's capable of yelling at you on the phone when you present to him the reality that he's might get himself or somebody else killed or grievously injured. It's not as if that's something you pluck obscure from obscure possibility. Oh my, you shouldn't, you know, ride a bike to work that can be dangerous. Like this is you have a, your parents have a friend who's in prison because of uh, I guess vehicular homicide or something of that nature. And it's not just that the drinking is worrying, it's that you're even raising the issue with him doesn't elicit any self-examination and that he thinks it's a cool thing. This kind of question drives me nuts because if we really dig down what it is about is the patriarchy and internalized patriarchy is what's really happening. In what universe would you think letter writer that it's okay for you to drink to excess and drive around and then if your boyfriend dares to suggest that that might be destructive to other people, are you okay with yelling fuck you fuck you fuck you to him over the phone, harassing him and essentially trying to emotionally extort him into shutting up about this concern. It's so crazy that, and I guess I want to say this is patriarchal thought and behavior in action and you are, you know, you need to recognize not just for this guy that he cannot handle anybody pointing out that that's a dangerous thing to do and more to the point, if he loves you and you're concerned about it, he should just at the very bare minimum listen to you and take it seriously. There's this great quote from Moby Dick: Ahab is up on deck on the P quad and he says to the crew, we're not going on a whaling expedition to like make money. We're not going to get whale blubber. This is a personal grudge, a whale bit my leg off and we are going to kill that whale. And that's what this whole thing is about. I have a prosthetic leg made out of a whale bone that commemorates how hung up I am because my male aggression, my male ego has been wounded and and I am going to lead us all on this expedition and that's what you're signing up for. It has nothing to do with self-interest. This is pure vengeance and defensive rage, male defensive rage. And the crew says, yeah, let's do it. Sure, that sounds great. Let's sign up to make the central story in our culture about male rage. And so then to update it, we now have a president who every single day we all signed up for that expedition and we all went on that doomed journey and we are in the middle of it. And you letter writer are also in the middle of it because you got a dude who rather than recognizing that he's doing something profoundly dangerous. Okay. I don't need to present the hypothetical, but you could if you wanted that there is a three year old kid or a family or whatever, whoever it is, who it happens to be, you know, by the side of the road late at night when your boyfriend, who you love so much want to try to love so much is driving drunk careening down the road because it's a fun, cool thing to do and he murders a three year old. Ha ha ha. Okay. That's a real possibility that he is setting out every time he gets behind the wheel drunk. And for you to bring that up in the context of, I find this

disturbing, I'm worried about you and have him react with male rage is and defensive male rage is just the Ahab approach. And forget the emotional abuse that you're absorbing. Forget the risks to other people. This is exactly the idea that you're keeping the peace by silencing yourself is exactly what belies the entire sort of firmament of the patriarchy. Shut up if you are you, especially as a woman are saying anything about my conduct, no matter how blatantly self and other destructive it is, you're the enemy. I mean you're basically kind of living in Trump's dome at this point and you know, I get that you love this guy and I get that he has laudable qualities and that it's not easy for you to move out. You guys cohabit I take all that seriously, but this isn't like a flashing yellow light. This is like a siren alarm, red light that says get out.

Julia: I think I was really concerned about all of the immediate concerns that you were talking about. What if he gets pulled over? What if he hit someone? What can we do to stop those? But I love the lens of looking at it from an underlying structure of patriarchy, which I don't think I considered. I mean I always consider that as a possibility, but it didn't come to the forefront of my mind in such a question where there are these immediate worries having it be about the underlying systems that cause the person to feel that the way they feel.

Steve: Yes. And we should all the time because it's sort of like institutional racism. It's always there. Okay. We're living in a moment where young men who have ready access to weapons are going and literally shooting women up and shooting people up and committing mass murder in public places. And what is one of the central throughlines along with this crazy white supremacist, uh, kind of proto fascist mindset that there's a whole media complex brainwashing young people. And a lot of it frankly, is on Reddit, which is why I find that whole ecosystem so disturbing. But at any rate, one of the through lines in addition to sort of racial incitement and hatred is misogyny, right? We are living in a moment where the guy who just shot all those people, including his sister in Dayton, was somebody who was an angry, frustrated incel whatever they call them, just a young man who is so sort of engorged with patriarchal rage. And that's been so enabled by our culture that we don't even think twice about saying, well gee, maybe the motive is that lots of men hate women and are allowed to hate women in ways small and large, and they hate themselves more than they hate the women, but they get to take it out on the women.

Julia: Yeah. So our advice to her is get out.

Steve: Yeah, I mean get out of that relationship, but if you want to see it in other terms, it's take care of yourself, take care of yourself. Recognize that this is not a healthy relationship, that you're in. A healthy relationship is not one in which one clearly has a substance abuse reliance and a habit of amplifying the danger of that because of essentially weaponizing his whatever vehicle he's driving and the other person is saying, this is dangerous. It's dangerous for you. It's dangerous for us. It's dangerous for other people we don't even know yet. I've seen this in my own life and at the very least to feel safe, you would need to have somebody say, I heard what you said and I do like to drink, but I need to keep boundaries around it. So that I keep the world safe and that I keep most important you my beloved safe and me safe in the relationship. And

that's not what this dude said. It's not even in the same zip code as what this dude said. So that's the way I would look at it. When I think about this young woman really think about you. I think yeah, you need to get yourself out of there. That doesn't feel like a safe relationship to me. And so maybe it's easier to say it like that. I am worried about you. I'm worried about your your boyfriend and I'm worried about anybody who might be around when he's drinking heavily and driving, but to keep it focused. I'm worried about you. When I think about like if you bring this up or if he has an experience where he's real drunk and he gets into an accident or he has a DUI and you want to say, Hey, I think you need to get some help. This has gotten serious. I worry about what his reaction would be, especially if he has booze in him. Don't you logically Julia listening to this, don't you think, wow, that that could really quickly turn into a physical abuse situation

Julia: Absolutely

Steve: Or repeated or even more intense emotional abuse.

Julia: Yeah, I was. I was definitely worried about that. Especially because the letter writer says he was saying that she was harassing him

Steve: Right

Julia: When it's so clear that he is the one are harassing her.

Steve: Correct.

Julia: It's total gaslighting,

Steve: Right. It's projection, which is like the designated Olympic sport of the patriarchy. Everything gets projected, right. Every, every accusation is confession.. The thing that's interesting about letters like this Julia, is I honestly feel like when I hear them, I almost feel like it's a hostage situation and that the implicit threat is male rage. You hear this in the extreme, we think, Oh, okay. You know she's already thinking about it. You need to get all my stuff out of the out of the apartment, but when he's at work, when he's away and get it to my parents and like you are already realizing that his rage and his anger, which is his self doubt, that's been weaponized, right? Women turn their self doubt inward, right, and men project it outward. You're already thinking, I need to kind of be careful in how I get out of this relationship. Physically careful. I need to get to a safe place. I need to do this in a way that doesn't arouse his ire. That always feels to me like there are hints of a hostage situation where the, the usually woman is being held hostage by her fear of the man's rage. And that's, that's not a, that's not a version of love that's safe or sustainable.

Julia: I think you have such an amazing double vision for reading a letter all the way through. Like you were talking about this story that they're telling and you totally hone in so quickly onto

the story that is actually going on underneath. And you can do this sentence by sentence translation when you say, I think I should move when he's gone. What she's actually saying is I'm afraid to move with him around.

Steve: Yeah. Or, you know, I want to keep the peace. Maybe I should, you know, be quiet and keep the peace we means if I speak we're at war, that's what I mean about there's a letter and then there's a letter underneath it. And it's tough because so many of the letters that we encountered on Dear Sugars were this kind of thing where somebody basically saying, I know this is not a safe relationship for me, but I'm terribly frightened to be on my own, to figure out how to extricate myself from it, to initiate the difficult conversation that begins that process to give up the dream. And the dream is you guys are just, you know, you're young and you're having fun and you like to drink because that's an exciting thing too and it's not a big deal. And if we all agree it's not a big deal, then it will be okay. It's hard to let go of that. I'd rather live in that delusion, you know?

Julia: Well thank you so much for joining us in talking about advice and giving advice.

Steve: Absolutely. My pleasure.

[music]

Julia: Okay. Vanessa, what did you think about my conversation with Steve Almond?

Vanessa: You were so charming.

Julia: Thank you.

Vanessa: He is also so charming and so brilliant. I think what Steve really made me think about is that you're not, and this might sound really obvious, but that when giving advice to somebody who's written in for a podcast, what you're also doing is sharing their story with all of your listeners. Right? Using their question as like a way for other people to feel less alone. Like we joke about how these people didn't ask us these questions and this young woman is almost statistically impossibly listening to this episode, but there might be somebody who's listening who sees themselves in this young woman and therefore can feel less alone. And Steve also talked about this, right, that we are a species that likes to share stories about ourselves. And that's one of the ways that we build community. I hadn't thought of that advice questions being a way for people to feel less alone. And the other thing that I love that Steve talked about was reading between the lines, right? Of like doing a very close reading of when she says, you know, should I stay and keep the peace? What she's actually afraid of is violence. Right. I think being called to read these more closely is a lovely invitation as well,

Julia: I think as two women who I feel are quite sensitive to male rage. The fact that we didn't talk about that explicitly when we read this question and could, and I could only see that when

Steve brought it up I thought was really interesting and I wonder what about our first reading of the question didn't make that alarm bell go off or if we were just so consumed by the immediacy of the situation that we never considered. What other factors were at play that caused the situation to occur in the first place.

Vanessa: Yeah. And I think that Steve has done a really good job of focusing so much on, you know, on doing a close reading and of bearing witness and of focusing on the letter writer. Whereas I was so wrapped up in my own emotions on this and this is the joke of my life that technically I am trained as a chaplain and I've like not seen responding to these letters as a chaplaincy opportunity as like an opportunity to reflect back and bear witness. And yeah. So I feel like I totally missed this really obvious thing that was going on here. Anybody who's listening to this right now and has listened to this Reddit question will have read different things between the lines. And I think that maybe that's part of our role is giving even more perspectives and sort of sharing more and more stories.

Julia: So we initially named this episode stay safe, AKA bad man. Do you think that still rings true?

Vanessa: The stay safe definitely still rings true. Um, because I feel like this young woman is in such a difficult position of trying to get out of an abusive home is an incredibly complicated thing. But the bad man, I think I'm more interested in like bad patriarchy,

Julia: Bad men,

Vanessa: Bad systems, right? Like bad, bad society. And I just want to be clear, I'm not diagnosing society. I'm trying to scold society like a bad dog, like bad society.

Julia: So what are you doing after this Vanessa?

Vanessa: I am praying that it won't be raining as I bike home. Do you want to ride home on my handlebars?

Julia: No, but I'll pray with you.

Vanessa: This has been Stay Safe and episode of Hot and Bothered. Send us your love advice question at hotandbotheredrompod.com and sign up for our Patron for romance reviews. My mom giving advice and hear an extended version of our Steve Almond interview. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at the rom pod and leave us a review on iTunes. It helps other people find us. We are a coproduction of Not Sorry Productions and Spoke Media. We are executive produced by me, Vanessa Zoltan and Arianna Nudelman. We are cohosted by Julia Argy and edited by Chelsea Ursin. Special thanks this week, of course, to Steve Almond, go by his amazing book about football. It's my favorite of his books. Our production team is Bridget

Goggins, Janielle Kastner, Caroline Hamilton, Jenna Hannum, Will Short, Alexander Mark Jonathan Villalobos, Evan Arnett, and Nora Murphy. We'll talk to you next week.