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0:00:02.3 Speaker 1: Welcome to the Pop-Up Pod. A podcast that's similar to a pop-up shop or a pop-up restaurant in that it's sporadic, sometimes it's here and sometimes it's not. Each 12 episode season dives deep into a single question. And the question that we've been exploring in Season 1 is this, should I get married? 12 episodes, 12 different people, honest conversations about the joys and the struggles of long-term romantic relationships. These intimate conversations are 100% listener funded, paid for by my sliding scale Patreon community, and that means that you won't hear any ads or sponsors on this show. It's just me, backed by the support of 400 plus people who have all come together to ensure that everyone involved in making this podcast gets paid, that includes me as the host and creator, my sound engineer, musician, and dear friend, Adam Day, as well as every single one of our guests.

0:01:00.3 S1: Our Patreon community also funds the creation of a full transcript for each episode, which you can find in the show notes to help make these conversations more accessible. Those are our production ethics here at the Pop-Up Pod, and if that aligns with your own values, I would love to invite you to come check out our community and join us at patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. It's a really fun and easy and welcoming space, and remember that it's run on a sliding scale, so that means you can pay whatever amount makes most sense for you, either as a monthly payment or an annual payment, you can cancel at any time, you can move up or down the sliding scale as needed, and when you join, you'll get access to a ton of bonus content. You'll get the chance to help shape the topics and conversations of future seasons and more. That's patreon.com/nicoleantoinette, and hopefully, I'll see you there.

0:01:52.8 S1: In the mean time, I'm excited to introduce you to today's guest, Cait Flanders. Cait, whose pronouns are she, her, joins us to talk today about healing. More specifically, she shares what the past two and a half years have been like while healing from a sex-related trauma. So yes, this is a gentle content warning for you about the conversation ahead, but I want you to know that Cait does not go into any detail at all about the experience, and instead, this is just a beautifully honest and thoughtful accounting of what helped to bring her back to herself, as well as what she wants from dating and sex, now that she's open to those things in her life again. She talks to us about therapy, about how the commitment to no longer accepting harmful treatment in one relationship wound up changing pretty much all of her relationships. She tells the story of why she bought herself all new sex toys, how she is romancing herself these days and more. Cait is such a dear friend of mine, and I feel grateful and honored for the tenderness with which she shares this story with us today. Here we go.

[music]

0:03:10.2 S1: Alright, here we go my dear, Cait Flanders, welcome to the show.

0:03:15.1 Speaker 2: Oh, friend, thank you so much for having me.

0:03:18.6 S1: I'm so excited. It's such a treat to interview close friends. It's like such a... It's like an

add-on bonus to a relationship that I really like.

0:03:27.3 S2: Yeah. It's funny, I don't get to do it often enough myself, but the conversations are so different, it's so different. Yeah.

0:03:36.6 S1: It's funny, I like both, I like that getting to know someone on air, it's almost like, we're going on a first friend date and everyone else just gets to listen, that's its own kind of sweet thing, but when you don't have to do any... I know you very well. [laughter] So it's like, great. Let's just dive right in. [laughter] Oh my gosh. So our kick-off question, share with me, please, and with everyone listening, your relationship bio, less of what do you do and more of who and how do you love?

0:04:08.5 S2: Yeah, it's funny, I've been listening to the podcast so I knew that you asked other people this and I did not prepare an answer. [chuckle] A few different things right now, number one, my relationship with myself is super important to me right now. So, I love myself, and something I feel grateful I can say is that I am experiencing lots of different kind of love in my life right now. And so, I have people who I have really deep friendship with. I have people who I'm reconnecting with, being in a different country after many years and not seeing them for many years. I have new friends I'm making. I have family and friends that I'm staying connected with after having moved away from them. It's really full. My life is really full right now. There's a lot of good love. Yeah, it's wonderful.

0:05:10.8 S1: You said that your relationship with yourself is really important right now, and I sort of pinned on the right now, is that new, was that not always the case? Was that not something that you used to value?

0:05:22.9 S2: That is a very good detail to pick up. [chuckle] No, I would say that it's kind of new. That is not something that has felt true for me when I look back at maybe the past. Well, maybe the first 30 years of my life, and then honestly, even up until I was about 34, I probably still wasn't really true in my romantic life. I don't think that I loved myself enough to really pay attention and be intentional about who I was choosing to have romantic and/or sexual relationships with. And so in some ways, it is really new. Yeah.

0:06:09.0 S1: I've been spending a lot of time alone, the last three, four, five months, specifically in a... Partially circumstantial, but I feel like it's more alone time and more intentional alone time than I've ever spent that I've started thinking of it as, Oh, this is my alone practice, I'm practicing being alone, I'm practicing being a better friend to myself, I'm practicing enjoying my own company and not seeing that as less than having plans with other people, or being around other people, and it's been really hard and lonely and wonderful. So I feel like I'm particularly attuned to how other people are talking about their relationships with themselves right now. We pay attention to what we are working on.

0:06:55.3 S2: Yeah. Yep. Oh yeah, absolutely. It's something that has come up for me, like I said, kind of... Well, largely probably since about age 34, which I know we're gonna get [chuckle] into,

it's like something happened at 34 that really was sort of the catalyst for all of this, but it's happening again right now, because at the beginning of this year, I left Canada. So left my family, all my friends, community that I have there, moved across the world, now live in the UK, where I have friends, I have community, I have all kinds of love here, but not many people who are super close by. So equally, I'm spending a lot of time by myself again and yeah, getting to know myself all over again, because I just spent a little over two years living with my family during the whole pandemic and got no alone time. I think in over two years, I might have spent about three to four weeks alone in all of that. So yeah, in a new way, 2022 is getting to know myself all over again.

0:08:08.3 S1: Yeah, I wanna ask, I wanna stay on this alone time thing for a little bit. Right now, in the current iteration, you said you've just moved or spending a lot of time alone, what do you do, particularly in the evenings?

0:08:23.4 S2: Yeah, good question. So right now, it's kind of a mix. Evenings are when it's easier for me to connect with people back in Canada, just because of our time zone differences. So we are eight hours apart. So, as an example, my sister will typically call me a couple of times a week, say either on her drive to work or on her lunch break. So it's like, chat with people back home, occasionally. I typically in my evenings... Well, say four or five evenings a week, I'll probably have a phone call, I'll have a phone call with somebody, but it's also the time that... Yeah, I've noticed that I've been eating a bit later than usual, and I really take my time with it, and then take my time to actually do all of the dishes. Not kind of half clean the kitchen, Oh, I'll finish some things in the morning, just fully clean and sort of fully... I don't wanna say get everything kind of ready, but kind of for the next day. Even kinda lay out the things, so when I come down in the morning to make coffee for myself everything is just there.

0:09:38.8 S2: Yeah, so there's a little more intentionality in some different ways like that, but also like, yeah, I might just re-watch a show, watch a movie, something like that, but it all... Yeah, every night's a little bit different, but it's all those kinds of things. I don't know. Does that sound boring? Does it sound...

[laughter]

0:09:54.9 S1: No, it sounds... It sounds like what lots of people do. We read things, we watch things.

0:10:01.4 S2: Yeah.

0:10:02.4 S1: I don't know what it is. Sometimes in the evenings, particularly, Gent has recently switched off of working nights, which has been really good for our relationship, he was working 3:00 PM to midnight, and it was just... Not only were we not really seeing each other, but he wasn't getting enough sleep, and so then, his reserves were low and it just... We had a rough time in our relationship when that was happening, and that has recently stopped. And so I'm having less alone time, but when he was gone, it would be like, Do I just watch Netflix? Do I read? What do I do? How do I have at home dates with myself that aren't just falling into the media hole? And there isn't

necessarily a right or wrong answer, but I have been asking friends that lately. I was like, What do you do in the evenings? That seems to be like a curiosity question for me.

0:10:45.4 S2: I also think evenings for me, definitely when I'm on my own. If I'm with other people, I can stay up pretty late, but honestly, when I'm on my own, I could easily go to bed at 9 o'clock.

0:10:55.6 S1: Oh yeah, I go to bed at 9:00.

0:10:56.8 S2: Yeah. So for me, evening was two to three hours and then it's over.

[laughter]

0:11:03.8 S1: Yeah.

0:11:04.0 S2: Go to bed.

[laughter]

0:11:06.8 S1: Yeah, that's true. I feel like this would be a whole interesting topic of its own, talking to people about their alone practice, what you do alone, what you think about alone? What are you working on alone? But we are here today to talk about something else, but go ahead. Yeah.

0:11:21.1 S2: Well, that's also we're too, evenings then for me are kind of actually the boring part of the day, 'cause it is just kind of end of day, yeah, read, watch something. Talk to someone. Because I'm such a morning person, it's almost more like, Yeah, if you ever did that conversations like, What do you do in the mornings, or what do you do in the afternoons? 'Cause it would be different for everyone. There's probably way more intentionality in the other parts of the day.

0:11:44.9 S1: For me too, and that's why I struggle with evenings, the evening comes and my energy reserves are really low and what do I wanna do with it?

0:11:54.2 S2: Yeah.

0:11:55.0 S1: So, great. Everyone who's listening, tell us what do you do in the evenings?
[laughter] Send it in, give Cait my ideas. So you mentioned that you were 34, something happened, changed your life. Where do you wanna orient us for this conversation that we are gonna be having about that? Why do you wanna have this conversation now? What do you wanna share about what happened? Give contacts that will lay the foundation for everything that we are going to discuss.

0:12:20.1 S2: Yeah, I love the question of why now. That's super interesting. Partially because you asked. [laughter] That's what prompted it. I think I just feel very ready, and honestly, there is a deep desire for me to talk a bit more openly about what the past couple of years have been like. Because there's this almost a sense for me that, because it's something I haven't been talking about, I don't

know if this will make sense to anyone who's listening, but it's almost a bit of a creative block for me, especially because so much of the sharing that I do is very personal. The fact that I have this huge gap of my life that I'm not really talking about, I honestly, now I'm at a place where I'm like, I can see how much it's impacted my ability to show up, and not that I've had to show up. I don't owe anyone my story, I don't owe anyone anything, but creatively, being personal, sharing personal stories is something that has always been part of my practice. It has always helped me.

0:13:28.6 S2: And over time and experience and all the different topics I have talked about in my life, I know it's helpful for others, and all the content I consume, I know it's helpful to hear other people's stories. That's what I enjoy most. But yeah, honestly for me, I think that there's a block almost around my creativity, because I don't talk about this. And now I'm almost two and a half years on the other side of it, I've done so much healing work, there's been so much growth, so much change, and I feel ready. And so I'm like, Oh, what does this look like? And so actually, when you came to me with this question, I thought, you're literally probably the only person I would do this with, first of all, but yeah, I'm just like, No, I do feel I'm in a place I can talk about this. And I think it will be really helpful for me to talk about it. Yeah.

0:14:20.4 S1: Yeah, I often feel like closing a healing loop, not that healing is linear and necessarily has an end date, but being in conversation about it in some way for me is really necessary. Obviously, there's some kind of core reason that you and I are both lifelong personal story sharers, and early bloggers, and all of that type of stuff. It's like the chicken or the egg. Do you start doing that kind of sharing because you're someone who needs to do it for yourself, or because you do it, then do you need it? I think it's both, but I resonate with that very much. That sometimes it becomes an obstacle where you can't fully move on or move past it or move into what's next if you don't... I was just gonna say, if you don't cannibalize it in some way. [laughter] That sounds really aggressive, I don't mean that, but for me, it has to be churned through the mechanism of narrative and storytelling in order for me to feel like I've gotten fully to the other side.

0:15:23.0 S2: Yes, I'm nodding, incessantly, yes. And I... Not only... Yeah, talking through it, working through it, but I guess when you were saying that, what it made me think of is, I don't really talk about it with anyone ever, not never, but the reality is even... And we'll probably get into this, or I'll probably mention this more as I'm talking through it, but the reality is that this is something a handful, maybe 10 people know about. I don't talk about it with people, and that actually too has also impacted relationships and all kinds of things. So yeah.

0:16:11.3 S1: Yeah. Great, let's talk about it.

[chuckle]

0:16:12.2 S2: Okay. So entry way in... I guess, yeah, 'cause I know you were gonna do a content warning on this, I guess, I'll name quite simply, in November of 2019, I was actually over here in the UK. I was living in Wales and dating someone, and we'll just say had a sex-related traumatic experience at the hands of that person. And disassociated, felt myself change in an instant, in an instant. And I'm obviously now two and a half years on the other side of this, but it changed so

much of my life, because I changed right away, it changed so much of my life.

0:17:09.2 S1: Changing in an instant, what happened right away?

0:17:16.9 S2: I'll sort of say after the piece of disassociating, I disassociated for about 24 hours, and... Actually, I do have one very distinct memory that feels worth sharing. Within a few hours of it happening, I was alone finally, and I called the person I would have said... And can say back then was my best friend, called her and told her what happened, and because I was still out of it, I wasn't crying or anything, I was totally in shock. So I wasn't super emotional, I wasn't really aware of even what I was feeling or thinking, but I just kinda named things that happened and was telling her about it, and I remember saying I don't know what to do, I'm not okay, but I don't know what to do in this moment. And her response to that was actually... And I guess, the way I received her response was that was actually the first sign that I had changed, because what I noticed is that the way that she responded, I immediately felt unsafe with her. And I don't wanna even name it. Name it, not in a way to ever sort of shame her or anyone who has said the wrong thing, if someone comes to you because... We just do this, we're not trained for this, unless you're literally trained in trauma, we're not trained. We're not equipped. We don't know what we're supposed to say or what we're supposed to do for people.

0:18:37.9 S1: Being someone's friend, it doesn't mean that you are their trauma counselor.

0:18:40.2 S2: No.

0:18:41.2 S1: Yeah.

0:18:41.8 S2: No. But... So I don't feel anything towards her about the fact that she said this, but it was "not a thing to say." Because she said, I think you're just gonna have to not think about it. And my whole body was like... It received it as, I'm not safe with you, I can't share with you if your response is that I kinda just have to get over it or not think about it, 'cause I'm like that completely invalidates the experience that I'm having. And so that... Yeah, just to say that moment... Yes, the other realities, it changed our friendship or kind of was the catalyst for that as well, but it showed me that I was not okay. It was like, Oh, I don't even feel safe talking with my best friend about this, because what happened is, I just shut down. I heard her, it didn't feel good and I completely shut down. Whereas before, I would have just said something to her, "Hey, that didn't feel great." Blah, blah, blah, "Let's talk about this."

0:19:45.2 S2: But no, I completely shut down. I think things that I noticed in the days that followed were, I didn't really feel safe talking to most people about it. So I felt like I was isolating a bit. There were other symptoms happening of panic attacks and some stuff like that, but I think almost visually, something that I saw in myself was this old version of me, it was literally like She floated away. It was like she just came out of my body and floated away, and I did not know who was left over. And over time there were more examples of what that actually meant. I remember...

0:20:30.0 S2: I think you might have been the first person I ever named it to you, one specifically

was realizing that kind of old me, say around sex, dating and sex, she had immediately disappeared. I was like, Oh, I'm never gonna date and have sex with people the way that I used to. Interesting, okay. And it just felt like this clear... Yeah, that's gone. It's just gone. And there was grief. There was so much that happened, every little change that I did see or notice, there was grief that followed, because not even necessarily that I loved that part of myself, or all these different parts of myself, but I knew them.

0:21:11.5 S1: Yeah, it's familiar.

0:21:13.3 S2: And also I didn't ask for this to change, I didn't do this, I didn't ask for these parts of myself to disappear, but it really changed everything. I'd say the biggest ones were around how I related to people, but because I had changed it then changed how I related to people, it then changed relationships and yeah, how I was showing up. All kinds of stuff.

0:21:37.4 S1: I also think that it's relatively rare that we have an experience that's so black and white, that's so before and after, that's like there's a fissure. I think a lot of change is gradual, and if it's something that changes the way that you relate to other people, maybe there's an on-ramp, maybe there's communication about it, but what you're explaining is something happened to you that you didn't choose could not have possibly prepared for, couldn't have prepared your relationships for with yourself or with other people, and then this thing happens and then quite quickly, you are different, and then there's that whiplash of that.

0:22:22.8 S2: Oh yeah, actually. I think it was my therapist or I heard it somewhere, it was like a short definition for some people of what trauma is, is too much, too fast, too soon.

0:22:33.7 S2: So it could be anything, that's why we could apply it to the pandemic or anything, 'cause it is too much, too fast too soon. You're not prepared, you don't know what to do, you're not equipped, you don't know what to do, and that very much is what it felt like. It was... You're right, I hadn't thought about that before, but it was a very clear example of a before and an after, I was different. And to be honest, at the time, one of the hardest things to hear from people, because I did hear it was, you've changed, and it was the most painful thing to hear because I knew it, but I couldn't just change back. Even now, I'm like, I'm not who I used to be. And at this point, not that it needs to be said, but I'm okay with the fact that I'm not who I used to be. But yeah, I'm not, I'm not who I used to be.

0:23:28.6 S2: And in the early days of that hearing that was so, so painful because I also didn't know what to do. It was like I couldn't change it, but then I was also like, I don't even really know how to show up with people, I don't know how to be honest, I don't know how to be vulnerable anymore, I don't know how to share this or not share that also because actually something that's really challenging for me is withholding.

0:23:50.5 S2: I find withholding from especially people I care about really challenging, so actually an extra layer of it was it was actually really difficult to not tell people what was going on and why I had changed, but yeah, I just couldn't. I couldn't.

0:24:07.7 S1: What were some of the first steps that you took in, I guess, what could be called a the healing process?

0:24:14.9 S2: So right away, something I feel so grateful looking back on to say that it's true, is there was this full body knowing that I needed to go home and I needed to find a therapist. That was... I just knew it, there was no other option for me, and I do think in the past, I've gone through situations where I've suffered through something for a long time, and then I eventually make the decision, but it was so clear for me, and I would say I was mad about it. I was mad that I was having to leave the UK or having just to make that decision. And of course, there are other options or could have been other options, I could have found someone there or whatever, but it was like... I wasn't okay.

0:25:02.2 S2: My body was like, go home, go to your family. Meaning to live with my family because I didn't have a home in Canada. And so it was like, go home, go be with your family and find a therapist immediately. And that piece was a little challenging just for the time of year, because I booked a flight and I was home nine or 10 days later after it had happened and I'm looking for a therapist.

0:25:31.1 S2: But the last month of a the calendar year, everyone's booked, and also everyone who has benefits is using up their benefits, and you're like, I'm someone who doesn't have benefits 'cause I'm self-employed and I would pay for immediate help, but every single therapist I reached out to was like, Oh, I'm unavailable, or, Oh, I'm not free 'til February. Oh, da da da da. And they would always just pass on another name, so I honestly think that I probably contacted 12 different therapists, which is...

0:26:00.8 S2: Which when you're already having a hard time, the insurmountable nature of making one phone call when you're having some version or any version of mental health crisis.

0:26:11.8 S2: Yes, it was so much and I feel grateful at the end, I got just so exhausted by it that I ended up texting a friend of mine in Squamish who I knew had a Therapist she'd worked with for a long time, and I just said, Is there any way you could ask your therapist if they know someone, because I can't keep doing this, I can't keep emailing people. And anyways, a connection was made, she actually couldn't see me until early January, so that was a challenge for me. December was a challenge for me, but at least I knew it was coming, I knew therapy was coming, so it was a really challenging month, but then I knew it was going to be there. And I still work with her, I still work with the same therapist now. So I feel very grateful for that, but yeah, I think that... I'm not gonna right or wrong them, it's just like the steps for me were I went home, because I had to sit with it for December, I really compartmentalized and kind of just held it all in, I didn't really talk to anyone about it. I also like, I didn't see that many friends, part of compartmentalizing was keeping a boundary of I'm just gonna be with myself, be with my sister, just navigate this for a month. There were a handful of friends who did know what had happened, so stayed in contact, but also didn't just dump it all on people, the beginning was kind of challenging, but getting myself home and at least getting a therapist was key for me.

0:27:50.8 S1: Yeah, something that I'm really interested in that I know was part of your healing was navigating the both and of taking absolutely zero blame or responsibility for this thing that happened to you, while also being radically honest with yourself about your own history of dating men who treated you, in your words quote, 'like absolute garbage.' And I think that there's really something here because I both think that we live in a culture that wants us to take on too much responsibility, this self-exploration, self-actualization narrative, bootstraps, whatever, etcetera, etcetera. And then also a culture where nothing's our fault, and it's very simple to form a narrative at either end of that spectrum, but you had and continue to be in this center of the Venn diagram where both of those are true, and I'm interested in how you feel like you were able to hold seemingly conflicting truths at the same time, what did it look like to actually work through your own patterns and choices and history that it's like... I don't even wanna say that led you to that because it wasn't your fault. You get what I'm saying or like even trying to find the language around it is hard, so I can't imagine how that felt in your own body.

0:29:19.9 S2: Yeah. No, and this is a great topic. One thing I can speak to just in general, is I am someone who does always look at my own behavior and see where it's getting me, especially if it's getting me to a place that I don't like. So this is why I'm sober. Because I was drinking in a way that was unhealthy for me and leading me to bad places or just unfortunate circumstances and getting out of debt, I was someone who lived off credit. So it's like I am someone who, I guess, is always willing to look at my role in something, and I will say I feel quite grateful for that because that's not something that was modeled for me growing up, what was modeled for me was to play the victim and to blame everything on everybody else and take zero responsibility ever for where life was. And so it's like that was what was modeled. Being the victim was what was modeled. I had no interest... In my whole life, I've had no interest in being the victim, I'm not interested in living that way, but I will say when I started therapy, I kinda knew it as a back topic of...

0:30:41.8 S2: 'Cause when I said a thing I knew that was gonna change right away was around dating and sex, that was this thing of like, Oh, I'm clearly not dating or sleeping with people the way that I used to anymore, but I hadn't quite looked at what that meant, what those patterns were, stuff like that at that moment. But starting therapy is what helped prompt this because there was this space where, of course, I'm coming in, we're talking a bit about the experience and obviously working through that, but then also in therapy, you're looking at other things. What does the rest of your life look like? What does your support system look like? What are your closest friendships? Who is your family? Who are they?

0:31:23.0 S2: What's been modeled for you? And what I was able to see in therapy was not only in the past that... I already knew some of this stuff just from some reading and work I had done on my own, I knew that I was someone who had an anxious attachment, that I always picked men who were avoidant, literally, always. And why, which is just like, it's familiar, my mom was avoidant, etcetera, etcetera, so I knew those things a little bit already, but what I'd never examined was really the topic of co-dependency and co-dependency and people-pleasing, enabling, especially as being someone who's anxious and who is, I don't always love therapy terms, but it's true, my core wound is abandonment. So I am always, or not always, but that is my core wound. If I'm deeply anxious,

the fear for me is I'm about to be abandoned, and so that, all of those pieces led to me consistently, my entire life, staying in relationships where I was being treated horribly, putting up with it because I was grasping to hold on to whatever good was there, not only because it was familiar, that was the entire pattern of my childhood, but also because I just didn't wanna lose that last little bit, which is so hard to just say out loud to say, Yes, I accepted the worst behavior from people, including things like I've been cheated on by almost every single person I've dated, but I would...

0:33:13.3 S2: If we didn't break up, I would stay with them for a little bit longer. And often it would happen again, to constantly being gaslit, the list is long of behaviors that I sort of put up with. That is who I was. And so I think the pieces I hadn't quite understood enough around at that point were the co-dependency pieces, enabling people pleasing, I hadn't looked at all of that quite before, and in those things, you do have to look at your... Especially co-dependency, you have to look at your role because yeah, that might have been developed or prompted by someone, but you're also doing things to stay in it, and if you know that it's not right for you, you have to get out of it. So there was a lot of work in those areas that then ultimately not even just have anything to do with dating, ultimately changed more relationships of mine because I actually had co-dependency in a few other relationships, and all of those had to change as well.

0:34:20.5 S1: Will you talk a little bit more specifically about what co-dependency looked like in your relationships?

0:34:27.9 S2: Yeah, two things are coming to mind. It is like my mom is coming to mind, growing up with my mom, but also, yeah, the person I had been best friends with for so long... Gosh, actually, in both relationships, in a way, it's like both of them would act really fragile at times, not always, but at times, and act like they needed me, desperate at times, the reactions almost like if I couldn't show up, it was desperate. It was almost I can hear their voices still, it's almost like life or death if you cannot show up in just that exact moment, and you do it partially because maybe you do just care about them, but partially because you... Sadly, it just feels good to be needed, but also that you do kinda get warped in your thinking of you think that something bad is gonna happen if you don't. You genuinely think it. And first of all, growing up as a child, that's way too much to put on a kid. So the fact that that was my childhood, literally from day one, I can reflect on memories of experiences where I'm like five, six years old, and that's what the relationship was like with my mom and...

0:35:55.1 S2: Yeah, you put up with it. You keep doing it. So even though as you get older, you don't quite know it obviously as a kid, but as you get older, it's like you can tell in your body kind of something's not right here, or what I now understand is the feeling that's not right is really like, This is unhealthy, and I'm crossing my own boundaries if I do these things. Yeah, it's just the cycle that you end up in, but the other parts of it are like, these people weren't always that nice to me or didn't always show up for me when I needed them. So it's such a weird thing 'cause it's not always... Some co-dependency is you're both playing that role fully, equally for each other, and sometimes it's not because I didn't get that same thing. If I needed something from my former best friend, there were actually lots of times she wouldn't show up for me, which is so interesting, and yet, I would still show up for her any time she needed me, and actually that's very similar to my mom. My mom did

not show it for me unless it was gonna make her look good, unless it was gonna make her look like parent of the year, that is the only time that she would show up, and so that was more like if someone else was gonna see it, then she would show up.

0:37:04.7 S1: I think it's interesting, this reflection on how you are the common denominator in all of your relationships.

0:37:12.2 S2: 100%.

0:37:13.9 S1: That obviously, we're talking about this through the lens of a catalyst of a sex-related traumatic experience and the healing process of that then leads to looking at your patterns of why are you choosing the men that you're choosing, why did you deny your needs and feelings in past romantic partnerships, what stories were you telling yourself that led you there? And then it's like, okay, that's worth looking at. But you really, in my experience, can't change one thing without it affecting everything. I found this a lot personally with my own sobriety, that at the beginning, it's so cute that I thought that I was just quitting alcohol or that that was the goal, and I needed to believe that delusion in order to even do it to begin with, because if you had told me, Okay, you're gonna get sober and then your whole life is gonna change, I don't think that I would have done it because it would have felt too overwhelming. But changing that did in fact change everything, and it sounds from what you're explaining that this was similar, that starting and getting deeper into the healing process for this specific event that happened, then really wound up leading to you breaking patterns in other relationships, that it affected the trajectory of other relationships as well.

0:38:28.6 S2: And massively. So it's been two and a half years, in the time that has followed, it took time for all of these things to ultimately happen or for me to get comfortable making the decisions I'm about to tell you about, because again, it's not like you just make some of these decisions overnight, but yeah, in the two and a half years that have followed, I am no longer friends at all in any contact with the person who had been my best friend for...

0:38:57.3 S1: With the person you called at in this trauma.

0:39:00.3 S2: Yes.

0:39:00.4 S1: Yeah.

0:39:01.6 S2: Number one person, number one phone call, and who I would have said was my best friend for 15 or 16 years, we are no longer even in communication, and it's not just because of that or just because I'm looking at things. There were other factors as well, but it's like once you see it, you can't un-see it. It's like once I saw all these different things, I'm like, Oh, I can't actually just go out into the world and be in our friendship in the same way anymore, I can't actually put up with the same things or I can't... I'm no longer willing to deny my needs and yeah, it's things like you don't show up for me. Okay, well, I don't actually think that's a friendship I can keep going. Whereas for years, even though it had bothered me, I had put up with it. So in the time that's... Well, yeah, it's like I'm no longer friends with her, I ended one other friendship, and I guess it's not ended, but I set

a very firm boundary with my mom last year. And the boundary is one that I knew kind of would be the end.

0:40:08.0 S2: Quite simply, I said to her that we could not have a relationship until she went to therapy. Unless she was willing to go to therapy and look at things on her end, we could not have a relationship. And I knew in saying that the reality is, she'll never go, my mom will never go to therapy. And so what I'm also saying is this is the end, or at least at the end for now if she... And I will uphold what I've said if in 20 years, she comes to me and says that she's going to therapy or something I will have a conversation with her. I will stick to that. But yeah, I set a very firm boundary, a lot changed. It was not just healing from nothing.

0:40:47.3 S1: It was not that okay, I'm gonna date differently in the future?

0:40:49.9 S2: No.

0:40:51.9 S1: This might be sort of a nuanced topic to ask about, but what's coming up for me in thinking about this, and obviously, you mentioned it's a two and a half year period, it's always funny when you're talking about a big change in a condensed way that it seems like these things happened like dominoes falling rapid fire, when actually this is quite a large chunk of time, and maybe I'm projecting from my own periods of change, but when you go through something that makes you feel isolated from people around you, either because they didn't experience it with you or because their reactions to your experience make you feel unsafe like you described, and then you decide consciously or unconsciously to start changing these relationships. Was that lonely for you?

0:41:32.9 S2: Yeah, I mean the short answer to that is yes. Actually, it's interesting of any question you could probably ask me, it was interesting that I almost felt emotional at that. It was incredibly lonely.

0:41:43.7 S1: Yeah.

0:41:44.5 S2: That's interesting too, because a reflection I have now is like, so I said there was one other friend who I ended our friendship with as well in this time, something I even noticed was a couple of people that I had gravitated to to talk to about some of this stuff, it's like even as time went on in those relationships, was able to see things like, actually, they weren't... This was not a healthy friendship either, they kinda knew the right things to say, but actually this wasn't healthy either. And so there was so much a feeling like there was no one person. And this is true, there was no one person who said all the right things or made me feel like they completely understood what I was going through. And there have been people who have made me feel very seen, who can hold the space for it. In reality, it's just validate you, validate you, validate your experiences, that's really... Honestly, if I could give any advice on it, it's like just that, you can just validate someone's feelings, I'm so sorry that that happened, and it makes complete sense that you feel that way, that is literally what you can give people.

0:43:00.4 S2: That's like a gift to just validate. But yeah, there was no one person who said or did

all the right things, there was more often than not feeling like, I don't wanna talk about this either because you kinda just feel like people are gonna say the wrong things, sometimes you feel like you're gonna be a burden. I'm just like, I don't wanna put this on people. Yeah, it just was. And you know what I will say too is as time's gone on, it's not even just about the trauma, actually the mom stuff more than anything is actually one of the things that's been super isolating because I find that people don't have a lot of open conversation around this, around the fact that they've chosen maybe to end a relationship with a parent. I also feel like it's still not quite culturally acceptable almost, you're just supposed to put up with anything because it's your parents, and so... Actually, I find that one the most... I don't have that many people I can talk to about that without these looks of reaction of just like, oh my gosh, either how could you do that? Or That sounds so awful or so difficult, this must be so horrible for you and you're like... That's actually not even true either. There are moments, I guess, where it's kind of sad, but I'm like, I've done all that grieving all of that years and years behind me, and so I find that one too honestly like an isolating experience.

0:44:27.3 S1: Yeah, trying to make sense within ourselves, forget about in conversation with other people, but try to make sense within ourselves of what treatment from others we're gonna accept, what is a compromise versus what is a deal-breaker? Because you're right, there really is a lot of culture, a baggage around what you're supposed to accept from your blood family, from your parents, that the things that you're supposed to just put up with or the number of... I guess it's not a second chance after the second time, but the number of second chances that you're supposed to give people and that the rules seem to be different for different relationships.

0:45:02.4 S2: And why, why is that? You know what I mean? I guess I get it. And that's so unhealthy. If you are not healing the stuff that is actually part of you and taking care, especially too of the parts of you that did not maybe get taken care of as a child, honestly this all... I haven't even thought to talk about this, but a whole other area of sort of healing was literally inner child stuff. I've just taken care of who I was when I was like six, seven, eight years, even younger. There are pieces of this that have been taking care of a child version of myself who was not being taken care of, and who was constantly neglected and ignored and things like that, and it's like, if you're not healing that stuff, I don't know how you actually can heal the rest of it. Maybe you can, but for me, as I'm continuing to go through this, I'm like, I don't know that I would be on the path I'm on if I hadn't done some of that work, if I hadn't actually addressed childhood stuff, family stuff, I don't know that I would be where I am in this journey.

0:46:18.5 S1: Can you name a couple of other things that were supportive for you in the healing? Obviously, therapy.

0:46:26.2 S2: Therapy was huge. It's gonna sound strange 'cause it's in a way, nothing to do with it, but I also think I just took a lot more care of my physical body. Now, what I really mean by that is going for regular massages in just once a month, but going for a regular massage, and that took time because I was not comfortable with people touching my body for a long time, but doing that, I remember another experience was going for a proper bra fitting and having this experience of being like, oh my God, even if it's with a woman, and I'm straight, even if it's with a woman, you might feel safe with a woman still having this feeling of like, I don't know if I'm comfortable with this,

and then being like this was... It was actually such a safe experience being like okay, people can help you in all kinds of ways, and it's safe, it's okay. And I think inner child stuff and what that very specifically means, if I can get a silly example even to lighten the mood here is something I realized if we're talking about how I used to deny my needs in relationships, etcetera, etcetera. One of the things that I used to deny in relationships was whatever my hobbies and interests were. If I could tell that they were different from what the person I was dating was interested in, I immediately hid them because it made me feel like they wouldn't like me and therefore would not be interested, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, and I would be abandoned and all the things.

0:47:56.4 S1: It's like you have to change yourself in order to be palatable, likeable, lovable or whatever. Yeah.

0:48:00.9 S1: Yep. And again, it honestly too goes to, it's like I just didn't think I was enough, I didn't think my interests were good enough, I didn't love myself enough. So genuinely, one of the things that I've done is figuring out what I loved when I was a kid, and so I've always loved reading, but I do think that there was an age when I kinda stopped reading kids books and probably started reading adult stuff way to soon, and so I then started this whole journey of kind of revisiting middle grade novels, so books that are for kids like eight to 12 years old, because I definitely by 10, I was reading stuff that was too old for me, including just self-help stuff, literally reading that stuff at 10, 12 years old.

[laughter]

0:48:46.6 S1: Oh my god. I have such a clear image of like little Cait, and obviously we're on video right now. And that's not being recorded the way you just touched your glasses, I just imagine you put the glasses on, you sit down with the self-help book, it's both sweet and heart-breaking at the same time.

0:49:03.2 S2: Yes, I'm grateful, I could laugh. So I've gone through, yeah, for the past at least two years now, but it really kicked in in 2021, I read middle grade novels all the time, and it is both comforting, also extremely satisfying. I think, sometimes too, I've read obviously so much non-fiction over the past 10 plus years, written non-fiction, and also adult fiction, you just kinda read a lot about adult problems, it's actually so incredible to read books written for kids and to see the imagination that's in the them, the magic that's in them, also just kind of the language that's used, it's so, so different and so satisfying. But has really in this strange way too also become... Yeah, now, part of my identity. I'm like, no, I am just someone who loves middle grade novels and loves children's stories in general. Honestly, a love language for me, and I love that I have someone in my life who will do this is literally read me a children's book, and you have my heart, we're done.

[laughter]

0:50:21.8 S1: Yeah and getting to the point where not only is that not something that you're gonna hide about yourself, but that you're gonna celebrate it and bring the other person into it, or if they're not interested fine, but you're not gonna change it.

0:50:34.0 S2: No, no, no, it is me and middle grade novels forever and ever, the end. [laughter]

0:50:38.5 S1: That's your convict partnership. Less kid friendly, tell me the story of buying all new sex toys as part of this process.

0:50:47.7 S2: Oh man, yeah, yeah that's a... I guess, honestly too yeah, because that while in the beginning was never something I imagined would be part of the healing process. I can now look back at and see if there were specific milestones or things that we're pointing to that are like what else helped you? That was massive for me. So this part will not be surprising, but obviously after what happened, I had no sex drive. Actually, you know what? Let me even back up just to say this is that always, I literally mean always. I remember from probably age 11 or 12 years old, my sexual relationship with myself has always been important to me, always. And then over the years, I don't know when I would have bought my first sex toy maybe 18, something like that. Over the years, I never had a lot. I think I had four or five that I had sort of collected over 10 plus years, but yeah, so obviously after what happened, I had no sex drive whatsoever including with myself, they was just... There was no interest in sex whatsoever. And then I started noticing I was maybe six or seven months in, it's like I was kind of thinking about what it might be like to rebuild that relationship with myself, but I noticed that when I looked at the sex toys I did have...

0:52:19.1 S2: I had two different thoughts that did not feel good anymore. One was, I didn't actually love the idea of using silicone or just... Yeah, products made a foreign thing, I don't know. I can't even quite find the words for it, but I didn't like the idea of sort of having plastic products anymore, and I don't know why it didn't feel natural to me any more or something, there was just kind of some aversion, I didn't want that. That almost meant I did not know what I did want because I didn't really know what else was out there at the time, but I would look at them and be like, I don't want something that is made of some unnatural material or... Yeah, is battery operated. I didn't want that, so I was kind of not interested in them anyways, but then the other piece of it was that now all of a sudden when I looked at the ones I did have, I had associations with past partners while this person... The person I had last been with had never seen any of those 'cause he was in Wales, I could think of past partners who had either touched them, use them or just seen them seeing me use them and I didn't want it. I just was like, I don't want these things that have any association with anybody else, I want them out of my life.

0:53:47.5 S2: And so I just got rid of everything. But then had nothing and was like I don't know what I'm looking for. And I wasn't even quite at that stage of I want to look, but I was conscious of the fact that I did want something different whenever I was ready, and then I remember seeing... So vividly, I honestly can still see it in my mind, this Instagram post that Claire Baker had put up, and I don't actually really know Claire's work, I know she's an educator and talks a lot about our cycles as the seasons of the year, but what she had done was created this image kind of like a circle, broken up into four pieces, the four seasons of the year so kinda like spring, summer, fall or autumn and winter, and she laid out her four sex toys, and which one she used per season of the cycle.

0:54:43.8 S1: Of the menstrual cycle?

0:54:44.7 S2: Yes.

0:54:46.1 S1: Okay.

0:54:47.0 S2: Yes.

0:54:47.2 S1: Fascinating, yeah, tell me more.

0:54:47.5 S2: So in this seven days, I use this one and these seven days I use this other one, and in the few days leading up to when I get my period, I use this one. And described why, and I will say I did not adopt this, but I had never seen anything like that. So all it did was opened my eyes to woah, here's another option, and also that's completely about her, and yes, her partner could use them with her and whatever but that's completely about her pleasure and what's right for her at different times of her cycle, and I was like, wow, this is fascinating. I've never seen anything like this. But what I did pick up, so I didn't adopt that, but what I did pick out was that there were two that were made of glass, and I was like, oh, is that a thing? I'd never seen glass sex toys before at that point, also 'cause I don't think I'd bought a new one in years, so I just wasn't in the market ever, but I saw these ones made of glass. And again, I didn't buy... I actually made about one that was the same as hers, but I didn't buy exactly what she had but it took me down this whole rabbit hole of, what are glass sex toys?

0:56:00.4 S2: And what I will say is that in the end, I was reading all of these kind of blog posts or different articles about not even about the products or what people use or why they kind of use them, but just... This took me down the rabbit hole of finding people who were talking about having more of a ritual around their time with themselves, and I've also been kind of looking at these products thinking these are beautiful, I want something beautiful I don't want the same sex toy that everybody else has, I don't want one... For me, I was like, I don't want something that's battery operated. I don't know if that will change in the future, but it still feels true for where I'm at right now. I'm like I don't want that but I want something beautiful. And so I ended up choosing two. One is made of just super clear glass, and the others actually made a paint coats, and they were the most expensive sex toy I've ever bought. [chuckle] But also a healing, I don't know. Healing journey sometimes you spend money, I don't know. But the thing that changed instantly is I slowed down with them. Everything about it shifted for me where I slowed down, I took my time, it became softer and more tender, the whole experience. And again, it's like that's not always true now and won't always be true in the future, but I really needed it then. That is something that helped me.

0:57:40.6 S2: I bought something that was just for me, had no association with anyone else except I thought it was beautiful and I wanted it. That was it. And then I took time with them, and it still took a long time, even now almost two and a half years in it's like I don't quite have the same sex drive that I used to, but almost. And I'm like that's interesting. And I do know a huge piece of it has been rebuilding my relationship with myself, first and foremost.

0:58:12.4 S1: Yeah, is there anything else that you can name that helped or helps you to nurture that relationship with yourself, the sexual relationship with yourself?

0:58:25.0 S2: Well, some of it is non-sex stuff. Some is... I feed myself really well. And this is gonna sound funny that actually started with some inner child stuff of I would ask myself this question of if I was my child, what would I feed myself right now? Which is such a different question when you sit down to eat breakfast, lunch or dinner. The habits I sort of picked up from that have all stayed, and so I feed myself really well, and it's nourishing myself, so it's like I take care of myself through food, through what I choose to consume, through different boundaries that I set, just in general. And yeah, I guess I do walk and I guess I'm more physically active than I ever used to be. But it's all from this place of I know this always makes me feel better. It's never a punishment. I'm like, I just know how good it is and that it gets me out of my head and into my body, and that if I'm taking care of myself constantly... If I'm constantly like, how can I get into my body? That, all of that work or all the different ways you can do it have slowly, continually led to me coming back to myself. And I guess there's some fun ones, I bought new bras and stuff like that, and you're like, I do that for me. It's not for anybody else.

0:59:48.0 S1: Yeah.

0:59:49.0 S2: But so there's some that's a little more sexual or a little bit more about your physical body, but the majority of it is, yeah, getting into my body and just taking care of myself in all kinds of ways.

1:00:00.7 S1: And feeling like that's a thing that you deserve and are allowed to do, even and especially when it's not as part of a partnership. It's not like I'm making this nourishing meal because I'm gonna eat it with someone else.

1:00:12.2 S2: Yeah, I know.

1:00:13.3 S1: Yeah.

1:00:13.6 S2: Yeah.

1:00:14.8 S1: Yeah. So I wanna ask about when you realized you were ready or at least open to dating again, but before we get there, is there anything from the healing process that you haven't spoken about that you wanna share?

1:00:28.3 S2: I don't think so. I think we've covered a lot. Yeah.

1:00:32.3 S1: Yeah. Okay, then tell me, when did you realize that you were ready to date again?

1:00:37.8 S2: Yeah, the only way to answer this is to say that I didn't know I was ready. It is truly just that I connected with someone and thought like, "Whoa, he is really interesting. This is really interesting." And yeah, I'd say this was maybe a year and a half in, and every part of me before that... No dating, no dating apps, I had zero interest. I hadn't had sex with anyone, anything at all. I had no interest in any of it, and still was not thinking, "Oh, I'm gonna look for someone. Oh, I'm

now ready," and then connected with someone, literally because... We now just joke, but it's true, he slid into my DMs. But from his first message, I knew... I was so intrigued from his very first message, and we just started going back and forth, within a month or something switched to WhatsApp, and we just started building this very slow and very intentional relationship that was built on... Right away, just trust, self-respect, respect for each other, there were really healthy boundaries, but we could talk about huge things, there was tons of empathy expressed between us, and it was just...

1:02:13.7 S2: It was so healthy. It was just unlike anything I've ever experienced. And I will say it was long distance, so there was this element where the healthy boundaries in some ways were easy, because there wasn't gonna be an opportunity for us to connect in person. The long distance actually probably really served a purpose, actually, in both the growth that we experience, but also in my own healing, because it meant that dating wasn't really on the table. Sex certainly wasn't on the table. I guess, technically, we could have escalated it to something where it was like... Obviously, you could have a sexual relationship through your phones, through technology, there's all kinds of things you can do. But to be honest, we never even really talked about it all that much. And yeah, it was just so healthy, it was so healthy and challenging for me. Because at the same time, I hadn't felt like I was at a place where I was quite ready, but I do think the distance really just helped with that.

1:03:26.4 S1: Yeah. It creates a container that wouldn't be there if they live next door, or whatever.

1:03:33.6 S2: Yeah.

1:03:33.6 S1: What has it been like to reintroduce partnered sex to your life again? What's different in your approach now?

1:03:41.6 S2: So technically, I've only had sex with one person. And different in approach, definitely has been being honest about what my experience was. Naming that consent is needed at every stage. And I don't actually think that'll be true forever, but just kind of in the beginning of if you're getting to know someone or whatever, consent feels super important. Yeah, and what I can say now is... So I've only had sex with one person. Things I feel grateful for is all of that was respected, it also was with someone I trust and I felt safe. I felt like taken care of.

1:04:28.9 S2: Everything about it was good. But there was something really interesting that happened for me where I realized even though everything was good, I was in my head about something I've never consciously been in my head about before, and I can really only describe this as performative thinking. So even though we were in it, and it was a really good experience. I was also in my head at times thinking, I should do this, I should do this, yeah and not that I wanted to do those things, but that I was thinking I should. And all that that's given me is some information because I'm not sleeping with other people right now, and we can talk about that, but it's like, I'm not having sex right now. So it's just given me information, I'm not acting on this information at the moment, but it's left me with this question of... First of all, it was like, Oh my gosh. How much of my previous sex life was performative? I know that I...

1:05:40.4 S1: Yeah or like script following where it's like, I should do this now, I'm supposed to do this now. Yeah.

1:05:46.5 S2: Yep. Or do it because he'll like it, or whatever.

1:05:50.8 S1: I do it because it makes me seem sexy or confident, or fun-loving or down for whatever, or... Yeah, that's so deeply relatable to me.

1:06:03.0 S2: Yeah and... But yeah, for me, it was the first time I've ever consciously noticed it, saw it happening in the moment, so it left me with the first question of just, Oh my gosh, how much of my past sex life was performative and then two, something I feel super grateful to myself for is that I didn't do any of those things. So all these performative thoughts I was having, I didn't do any of them, that also kinda left me in a weird head space, but...

[laughter]

1:06:33.0 S1: It's like, Well, then what do I do?

1:06:34.9 S2: Yes, so that also did a number on me, but...

1:06:41.4 S1: Like deer in headlights the sex edition.

[laughter]

1:06:47.3 S2: But it has left me now with I wonder what sex will look like going forward without anything that's performative? What is non-performative sex going to look like? And I don't know because I'm not having sex with anyone right now, but I will say it's so funny 'cause I'm kind of in this weird space right now where it's like I'm not really interested in dating, and I'm certainly not interested in sleeping with I don't know, people who are new to me, and casual sex doesn't feel like a thing for me or just, like it's just... But there's this part of me that is very curious of what non-performative sex could be and feels very excited to eventually figure that out when the time is right. Yeah.

1:07:37.5 S1: I'd love to hear it can be sex-related or not, or relationship-related, 'cause obviously you talked about co-dependency and wanting to choose different people who treated you better, are there a couple of stories or examples about specific growth moments in the relationship with this person who sort of catalyzed you into thinking maybe you wanted to date again? That you can look back on and be like, Oh, I can tell that I'm different, or that I've grown because X, Y, Z.

1:08:07.5 S2: The first answer that's coming to mind, I don't know if there's an exact moment, but the first answer that's kind of coming to mind is either I will want to find someone who is either securely attached, under the attachment styles, who is either securely attached or who has been one of the insecure attachments, but has done the work, understands what it takes to show up more

securely, and even under that umbrella, I think someone who has done some amount of work... You sort of see funny memes. I saw one that was like, Don't send me a dick pic. Send me your therapist bill or something like that. I'm like, Yeah, that's true. [laughter] Prove to me that you've done some kind of work on yourself, but mostly meaning I... Yeah, someone who's not afraid to go in and get help when they need it and want it.

1:09:12.6 S2: I also think that you don't need to have all the same interests as somebody, I don't need that, but I think that finding someone who shares some of these interests of... Maybe it's not personal development always, but at least kind of looking at yourself, being introspective. Honestly, the thing that I love most about this person in general is the way that his mind works, 'cause I would say, he's very much in my life still.

1:09:47.7 S2: The person that I connected with long distance, he's very much in my life, he is someone who I have a just like a big and loving relationship with, and it's totally unique and different than anything I've had because of all kinds of circumstances. But the thing I love most is the way that his mind works, and that... Honestly, I've met my match for someone who is as self-reflective and introspective. I was like, How have I met my match? I've never met someone who looks at themselves the way that I do, and it's... Yeah, it's like you don't need someone to be at the exact level as you, but someone who does have an interest in it is helpful because I think that that's actually a piece of me that I used to hide a lot. A very specific example I could give is I have clearly blogged and shared publicly for over a decade, 12 plus years at this point, and I have written two very personal non-fiction books, and everyone I dated in the time that I was doing those things, I hid all that from. I totally hid the kind of work that I did from.

1:11:04.1 S2: And A, I'm not willing to ever do that again, I'm never going to hide what kind of work I do or downplay it. I used to downplay it, and I can still joke and downplay now in ways of like, I wish my writing was better in this book, or blah, blah, blah, but that's just constructive stuff that happens as you get older and your writing does change. But I will never downplay the kind of work I've done and the fact that it's been helpful for both me and for other people, I'm never hiding that again, and so finding someone who, yeah, has some interest in all these things because I'm not interested in hiding that part of myself ever again.

1:11:43.6 S1: So it sounds like you are open to, curious about, hopeful for partnership in the ways that you've described, do you wanna get married?

1:11:51.4 S2: No, and that is something I've almost always known. Maybe in my 20s. I think someone else said this, Yeah, I'm a human in the world. I think it was your episode with Melissa, she's like, Yeah, I thought I would 'cause I'm a human in the world, and so of course, you think you're gonna get married one day.

1:12:11.6 S2: So yeah, I probably thought I would at some point. Yeah, at some point in my early 30s, I just knew two things, one was that I didn't wanna have kids of my own, and two was that I don't wanna get married, I very much can imagine a life where I am deeply committed to someone forever and ever, I can imagine that. But the legalities of it don't feel important to me, and I think I

even wrote about this in adventures, I'd be very open. If you had to get married "for reasons of Immigration" or something, like if it's living in other countries and it helps make it work or whatever, sure. Do the thing, but I don't place any value on it of myself. Yeah.

1:13:02.0 S1: So I would love to talk about the new personal project that you have embarked on, I don't even know if that's the right phrasing, but that you're thinking about called The Year of love, can you tell me what the idea was at first and how it's evolving, what is the Year of love?

1:13:19.0 S2: Yeah. It's a good question, [chuckle] 'cause like it's slowly coming to be something, and there's that piece of me that knows that ideas don't fully take shape until you're in them, but I threw it out, yeah, in February as just an idea, the way you just throw something on the table. Let's see what happens here. And what I said at first was this topic of love and all the different shapes that it takes in our lives is just really fascinating to me right now, but also that what I noticed very specifically was I am in a place where I am finally asking myself a lot more questions about I'd say romantic love specifically.

1:14:11.7 S2: Romantic love or partnership, which can be two different things, but that area specifically because... Not surprising, now, based off everything I've just shared, that is not something I ever used to do. I used to essentially just enter a relationship with whoever chose me.

1:14:30.5 S1: Yeah. That's relatable.

1:14:32.5 S2: And so I was not asking any questions of what I actually wanted in this, and even just questions like, What am I available for? And so I was never doing that. And I think, yeah, not surprising now looking at the journey I've been on, I am in a place where it's like I feel really solid in my friendships, really, really solid in my friendships, and kind of what kind of friend I am and what kinds of friends I want and what our friendships look like, that stuff feels solid for me. Family feels good, where it's at right now, and it feels like I actually want to start asking myself these questions now. So I just threw it out as I'm just gonna spend this year looking at this more, digging in, it'll be like maybe stuff I talk about in therapy or stuff I talk about in my social life more, ask more questions to friends and single friends and friends who are... Literally what you're doing with this podcast right now, but just what if it's the hot topic for me in 2022, let's see what happens.

1:15:38.2 S2: So I threw it out there. And something I've noticed though, and this is not surprising for me, is that I'm realizing an idea like that it's so vague, and I actually want to document a little bit, and so... Not in any kind of big way. But something I'm sitting with right now is, I think something I'd like to do is be more intentional maybe about the questions that I'm looking at, and maybe it's taking more notes 'cause I do journal about this stuff, but I journal about all kinds of things, and so it's maybe being a bit more intentional with the journaling and really focusing on some of this, and then maybe once a month or something, writing a newsletter about something I've been exploring, learning about maybe a couple of things I read or listened to that I really loved, so that it doesn't have to be this massive project per se, but doing a little something to actually document it, because right now it does feel too out there, it's too vague. And I need a little bit of something to actually grab onto because I am deeply interested in doing this for myself in and

actually looking at these questions.

1:16:55.7 S1: Yeah, and I don't know. I just think it's interesting what can happen when we bring something to the forefront, which doesn't mean our entire life becomes about it, quit everything and focus on questions of romantic love, but just bringing something out of the shadows, having a little bit more intentionality around it. We notice things, we gravitate towards different media. If we're taking the time to document it in some way, there will be a result of some kind, something will come from paying more attention to it even if you don't know what that is.

1:17:27.2 S2: Absolutely. I think we both know that probably from other examples of things that we have both done, but yeah, absolutely. And even already, it's been so interesting, I've noticed there's been a couple of books in particular I've been picking up and I'm pulling so much from them. Or the quotes I'm pulling from books or different things I'm listening to now, I'm really grabbing on to them, almost like the way you do when you're doing research for something. Whereas if you're just kind of casually listening to things, you're like, "Well, that was interesting. That was a nice conversation to listen to." But I'm actually pulling things and learning from them and letting them sink in. And so even that is already... Already something is happening.

1:18:11.5 S1: What are some of the questions you're asking yourself as part of this project this year?

1:18:15.6 S2: Well, one, actually, very much inspired by your conversation with Melissa, which is, "Who am I committed to?" That question, it's huge, and also it's so clarifying. Because I could write you a longer list of all these friends I really care about and wanna be there for and this and that, but who am I actually deeply committed to? That is a very short list. And it's been really neat to write it, to actually write that list, and...

1:18:56.0 S1: So you actually did that? You sat down and made a list?

1:18:57.0 S2: Uh-huh. Yeah.

1:18:58.9 S1: Okay, great. Tell me about that experience. Were you surprised?

1:19:06.1 S2: No, but I guess you're just surprised it's really short. It's really short, so it's like I have a lot of friends, so it's sort of like, I'm like, "I'm not gonna tell anyone who's off the list." [laughter]

1:19:21.5 S1: I'm not saying read me out your list out loud, but I appreciate the distinction that you're making between, there are lots of people that you care about that you would probably enjoy spending time with, that you wish them well, that you love when you get to be together. It's not like the people on your short committed list are the only people you have any sort of connection or interaction with, but it's differentiating between what does it mean to be in those sort of looser relationships versus commitment, which obviously the episode Melissa [1:19:47.9] that you're referencing episode one was so good. Just if anyone hasn't listened to it, go listen to it, Melissa is fantastic, but you can't be deeply committed to that many people at the same time. There's just not

enough internal or time-related resources for that and that we think of... When you hear the phrase like committed relationship, most people probably automatically think romantic relationship a kin to a spouse, something like that. And being able to step back and be like, "Sure, you can have a committed relationship with someone who does fill that sort of role, but you could also be committed in lots of other relationships." And what does that look like?

1:20:26.9 S2: Yes. And because it does look different. Because also just every single relationship you have is different, so of course it looks different. But what I can feel in my body... Actually, there's two things, one is that a distinction for me is not just, "Who am I committed to?" But they are only on the list if I also feel they are committed to me. And again, that goes back to the piece of how much I used to just do for others without getting anything in... And so it's not like it has to be equal give and take, it's not that. It's just like, "Are we committed to each other?"

1:21:00.3 S1: Is there reciprocity? Yeah.

1:21:00.6 S2: Yes. Are we both in this? And that is why that list is very short. It's like, "Are both people actually fully in this?"

1:21:10.7 S1: Yeah, ever since having that conversation with Melissa, which I know was impactful for you and I, because then we had a phone call to talk about the episode after you listened to the episode, so that's how meta I get with my own podcast. "Great, I had this conversation," I honestly think after I recorded with her, didn't I text you? I was like, "I've made a podcast for you. I have a personalized podcast episode for you." And then you and I talking about it and I'm interested in exploring what commitment looks like in a very, very tangible way. Does it mean that we're committed to being available for somebody's SOS phone call or texts, is that what we're committing to? Are we committing to some kind of financial resource sharing, actually not just saying like, "Oh yeah, I feel committed," but naming for myself and for that other person, what does that commitment look like right now? And for me, something I'm finding is really important is that in my committed relationships that we are both committed to as needed, working on the relationship and growth of the relationship.

1:22:16.1 S2: Yes, that and I would say a quality I've noticed of the people on the list is all of them are people who I feel have really healthy boundaries for themselves, which is really interesting, that's actually just all quality. It's like these are people who are really self-aware, do their own work, have really healthy boundaries. So it's like we will not cross each other's... Our own boundaries just to help the other person. It's like we still have boundaries and take care of ourselves and so it's like, "These are people I trust, they are taking care of themselves and though, if and when they do call me and say they need something or just wanna talk or whatever, I'm there for them. I'm there for them in a heartbeat."

1:23:01.8 S1: Yeah, that's a really important distinction that I don't know that I would have articulated but I agree completely. It's really important for me to trust that somebody else that I'm in committed relationship with will say no to me.

1:23:16.8 S2: Yes.

1:23:17.5 S1: Because if I don't trust that they would say no, then that means that I don't trust that their yes is genuine.

1:23:24.2 S2: Yeah. And also then think of how good the yeses feel when you know that they're genuine.

1:23:32.9 S1: When someone actually says, "Yes, I have capacity for this. Yes, I have interest in this. Yes, I'm available for this," that I don't then have to be like, "Well, did they really mean it? Am I a burden to them? Are they secretly wishing that I wasn't relying on them for this?" It takes away all of that because if I have an experience of that person either saying no or knowing that they would say no, it changes the tone of the relationship.

1:23:54.6 S2: 100%. I wouldn't have articulated that either, but yes, yes, yes.

1:24:01.8 S1: So the last thing about this Year of Love that I wanna ask you for now is how does romancing yourself fit into this project? I feel like somewhat recently, you mentioned on Instagram, either you had gone on a date with yourself or you use that phrase, "Romancing yourself," and I thought that was really lovely. It ties back into what we were talking about at the beginning of the conversation about alone time, about sexual relationship with yourself, but how do you think about that idea of romance specifically? 'Cause romance and sex can go together, but they also don't have to.

1:24:28.6 S2: Yeah, don't have to at all. Yeah, I think... Yeah, that one specifically that you're talking about, so that was a day where here... I had gone for my first haircut, which is also... It was a new thing, you're like, "Oh, it's my first time getting a haircut in a new country, some new hairdresser. I've used the same person for years," and all of that and had a really nice experience, just enjoyed it. Enjoyed letting someone take care of me for the hour, and then I came out of it and she had curled my hair and I just looked at myself like, "I look really cute right now," like, "Wow, that's interesting, alright." And I'm like, "I'm not gonna waste this on just sitting around the house today." That was just my first thought was like, "I feel really cute right now. I'm not actually interested in just sitting at home." And so I didn't have a plan at first, I just got in the car and started driving. I was like, "I'm gonna drive in a direction that I haven't really been in, and we'll just see what happens today." My thought was like, "Maybe I would stop somewhere just for lunch, walk around or something," and then I remembered that I really wanted to go to the York Art Gallery, and I kinda knew how to get there, so yeah.

1:25:36.9 S2: I was like, I'll figure this out. And so I went to the art gallery, spent two hours just walking around, mostly looking at ceramics by myself, absolutely enjoying every single minute of it, that it was just for me, nobody else. Took myself out for lunch after and just felt cute. I just felt cute and so I wanted to do something. And then I also though thought, "You know what, I always love when I go to the salon and they curl my hair and why don't I ever do that?" I've never been someone who's ever done anything with my hair ever, and was like, "I'm gonna buy a hair straightener

for the first time at 36 years old, and I am going to learn how to curl my freaking hair just because I like it. I like how it looks."

1:26:25.9 S2: So it's been little things like that so far. It doesn't always have to be spending money or anything like that, but so far it's been kind of little things like that that have just been... I feel good and I want to keep feeling good for me 'cause I'm just enjoying it. It's not about if anyone else is enjoying this.

1:26:49.7 S1: I love this. There's something about this feels really sweet to me, I just have the idea of something we could incorporate in our friendship, 'cause I'm like, "I wanna take myself on dates." Almost like self-date accountability of, "Your assignment is to take yourself on a day this week, report back what you did." [chuckle]

1:27:07.2 S2: I love that.

1:27:08.3 S1: That would be very cute.

1:27:08.4 S2: Well, I will also say... 'Cause of where I'm living right now, I don't live anywhere near... Or I couldn't walk to a hiking trail, which I used to be able to do in BC, and so I have to be more intentional now about going on hikes, and I did this... It was like two, two and a half weeks now, I considered a date for myself. I packed a really nice lunch for myself, lots of snacks, it was just kind of like a sandwich, but lots of snacks, and I put lemon and stuff in my water. I'm like, "I'm gonna make this a whole thing." I drove an hour and a half to the Lake District and went on this gorgeous hike by myself. I didn't listen to anything. I didn't listen to podcast, I didn't listen to music, I was just with myself for a three or three and a half hour hike, stopped and had lunch.

1:27:56.9 S2: It was actually cute. I didn't really see anyone on the whole hike, but then when I was eating lunch, a bunch of people walked by me and everyone's chatting me up, and I'm like, "This is really nice." And then I took myself for a coffee after, walked through a bookstore, and I was like, "This was a whole thing." And I remember finishing that day just being like, "This is good. I'm good. I've got myself. Life is good." It was just such an incredible day and I'm like, "I would really like to make that..." Especially because I do have to sort of go further to go hiking, but I would love to make every time I do that to be just a little more of an event, just a little bit more.

1:28:39.1 S1: I think that's a really beautiful place to wrap up this sentiment of, "I'm good, I've got myself." It feels hopeful. It feels empowered. It feels optimistic. If you could leave people with one affirmation of sorts based on this conversation, what would it be? What is your wish for everyone listening?

1:29:00.6 S2: Oh gosh, it's kind of a to-thought. The first is just to not limit yourself to what you think love is. This has been huge for me this year, thinking that love looked one way. If I had done what my instincts, my sort of anxious instincts wanted me to do, I would not be having the experience and the incredible love that I have in my life right now, and it's something I've never experienced. It's so unique, I've never experienced anything like this. And yeah, I would have really

lost out if I had done what I always do, I would have really lost out. And so just to keep your eyes open to possibilities, just what other kinds of love exist. Actually, I'm gonna share a little thing that could be kind of just fun for people. Something I've been doing for the past couple of years that I've only recently told a couple of people about, is I have in my notes app on my phone, I have a note that is literally just titled, love witnessed. And it is examples of love that I see that I have never seen before, okay?

1:30:20.9 S2: And so I'll give you a very specific example, if my friends ever listen to this, they will know it's them, but I love that. And it is friends of mine who've been together for over a decade at this point, and they have this beautiful practice that I've been able to witness a few times where when we go out for a walk or something. They like their coffee the same way, so they only bring one travel mug and they just share coffee and I'd never seen that before. It's such a simple one, but I'd never seen that before and so I wrote it down just thinking like, "That's so beautiful. That's so special. They just share a travel mug. They don't need their own separate things. They just share a coffee." And what I love...

1:31:07.5 S2: So I have tons of silly little examples like that in this, but it opens my eyes to all different kinds of things that I haven't personally experienced and then what I can say is, I had a very embodied experience a few weeks ago where someone that I was with and we take our coffee the same way, at the end of a walk, he pulled out a travel mug that I didn't know he had and it was filled with coffee. And he just handed it to me for me to go first, and I was like, "Whoa, this is so cool." It's such a simple thing, but I'm like, I'm having such an embodied experience of, "That is so cool." So yeah, it's a really fun practice.

1:31:49.6 S1: Obsessed. I'm holding myself back and being, "Read me the whole list." Yeah, it's fantastic for what it's worth, that could be like a blog post or a newsletter or a part of your Year of Love, because I think that there is something... Why else am I doing this podcast? There is something transformative about hearing the specific truths of other people's situation. Maybe you hear it and you're like, "That is an example of love witnessed, and I'm not interested in it," but either way, it expands what you believe is possible. It takes us out of that script. It breaks these molds that it has to just look this way, and I feel like the more that people are willing to tell the truth about their own love, their relationships, their healing, everything that you just did, it's really generous and it gives us all a sense of so much more is possible then, at least for me, than I was ever told it was possible.

1:32:40.5 S2: Absolutely. And I'll say, we're still not really told it's possible. My reflection of not dating for a couple of years is people still make comments of like, "Oh, when are you gonna start dating?" As though that's the pinnacle. It's like that's the thing to achieve, and going back to just what I said, it's like, my life is good. My life is filled with love. I'm okay. But we just do that. We still tell those stories, we still think it's only one way or only a couple of ways, and yeah.

1:33:13.1 S1: For anyone who wants to follow along on this Year of Love or just find you and say hi, what right now is your favorite way to connect?

1:33:22.5 S2: Instagram is the only place I hang out, so just there, and I typically will share anything I'm doing there. So yeah, if I'm gonna write a newsletter, I'll let people know there.
[laughter]

1:33:34.1 S1: So on Instagram, you are?

1:33:37.0 S2: @CaitFlanders, yes.

1:33:38.7 S1: Yeah, I will put that in the show notes. Thank you so much for having this conversation and sharing parts of your story.

1:33:44.7 S2: Thank you, friend. And thank you for all the work you did to prep for this. It means a lot.

1:33:57.3 S1: Thanks so much for listening to this very first season of the Pop-Up Pod. All of the intimate and honest conversations you'll hear on this show are 100% listener funded paid-for by my sliding scale Patreon community. That means no ads and no sponsors, just a couple hundred people coming together to ensure that everyone involved in making this podcast gets paid, that includes me as the host and creator, my sound engineer and musician, Adam Day, as well as every single one of our guests. The Patreon community also funds the creation of a full transcript for each episode, which you can find in the show notes to help make these conversations more accessible for all. Those are our production ethic here at the Pop-Up Pod, and if that aligns with your own values I would love to invite you to come check out our community at Patreon.com/NicoleAntoinette.

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