

Buffering the Vampire Slayer
Episode 0.39: Seeing Red + "The Monster Myth"

Kristin: Content warning. This episode will contain conversations around sexual assault, sexual violence and rape.

Kristin: Hey, everyone. Kristin here, and we're gonna get right into this episode. But I have something that I need to add at the beginning, at the top, before we get into it. Just so you know how our process works here, pretty much every episode of Buffering goes to the team of Buffering's ears. And that team is myself, of course, Jenny, Alba and Mack. If any of the four of us hear anything that strikes our ears in a way that doesn't feel right, we say so, and it is edited or changed or added to, et cetera. We're only four people, of course, but certainly, Mack and Alba, both women of color and Mack a queer Black woman, add perspective that is really, really critical. Mack listened to this episode a couple of days ago and pointed out that when Alba and Jess and I talk about the monster myth—this concept that we're going to get into in much more detail in-episode—we don't talk about the fact that often, the image that we have in our minds is not only of a man with a van who has creepy vibes, but also, that that man is so often imagined as Black.

And that is an entire conversation—I mean, that could be an entire episode, an entire podcast series. But certainly, it's important for us to note that in our conversation. So in an effort to let this episode go live, alongside our conversation on Seeing Red, we're acknowledging that here. And before this episode goes into the main feed, which is happening in October, we will make sure that we find a way to get into the interior of the conversation. A massive thank you to everyone who worked on this episode, and especially to Alba and to Mack for all that they do. For sharing their experiences with us, for being ears in this space, for helping us continue to be more responsible, as we bring these episodes to you all.

[CHIME]

Kristin: Oh, hello. It's me, Kristin, and I'm here in a very special space with two wonderful humans. Alba, hi!

Alba: Hi!

Kristin: And Jess Clark, hello, welcome back!

Jess: Hi. Thanks for having me.

Kristin: Yes! You all know me, I think. I think you know me by now. And [laughs] I think you know Alba as well, who's been with us for this whole past season. Jess was here with us in the episode for Dead Things. And so, we're gonna dig into Seeing Red and specifically, the scene in Seeing Red that has sexual assault. And so before we even jump off into the deep end, [Alba laughs] everyone. [laughter] I just wanna talk—

Jess: With a backflip and a twist.

Kristin: With—yeah. Absolutely.

Alba: Yeah, yeah, yeah, mmhmm. Olympics style.

Kristin: Well, that—yeah, actually, I'm gonna jump off the diving board. And before I land in the deep end with both of you for this conversation, I'm going to do a couple of backflips in talking about what we're doing here, and why we're doing it. So imagine me, in air, as I'm delivering this information [laughter] to you. Flipping—

Alba: What kind of bathing suit are you wearing? Do you have, like, that little—

Kristin: [simultaneously] I'm twisting—

Alba: [simultaneously] With the little flowers on it?

Kristin: Oh, I definitely have a cap. Definitely.

Alba: And like, the little puffy shorts? Yes, that's what I see.

Kristin: Puff—oh, puffy shorts? I wouldn't have gone there, but you've put me in them. [Alba laughs] So, it's your mind, you know? It's really...[laughs]

Jess: Vintage synchronized swimming outfit—costume, I think that's what it really is. Yeah.

Alba: [simultaneously] Exactly, that's exactly—that's what I'm picturing. [Kristin laughs] Kristin synchronized swimming.

Kristin: But no, in all seriousness, just a little bit of context into what we're doing, or what we're hoping to do, in this episode. The first thing that I wanna do is just frame this conversation. This episode is going live the same day as our episodic conversation on Seeing Red. This episode serves as a space to really dig into the

sexual assault scene in this episode. And our episodic conversation will not be digging into that. Of course, as we go forward in the seasons, there will be conversation on, like, what else happens in Spike's arc and how it relates back to that. We'll discuss that here, too. But this space, together here, is the place where we're gonna be really looking at those things in depth, as responsibly as possible. And with Jess and Alba's voices in the mix, we're getting perspectives that are really important to have when talking about this scene, and all that goes along with it. All of that, as context. Just before we go any further, I think—you know, probably many people have heard you talk in Dead Things. But for those who have not heard you there, or who aren't familiar with your work, can you just tell us a little bit about what you do and how you're gonna bring that work into this space?

Jess: Absolutely. So I'm the prevention manager at a place called Solace. We are the rape crisis center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. It's lovely, everyone should come visit. And doing primary prevention in sexual violence means that we're trying to prevent future acts of harm by changing the culture that perpetuates rape myths, rigid gender norms, systems of oppression, so on and so forth. So we do that through programming in the schools, working specifically with middle school students, working with adults in their life, doing policy change work. And then working with a couple of communities that are disproportionately targeted for violence. So at our center, that means working with immigrant communities and with LGBTQ++ youth. And so we do transgender education as a form of sexual violence prevention, which I think is a really cool thing.

So how I'll be bringing that into this episode is looking at how dominant narratives around sexual violence, especially as presented in media, have prepared us to think about violence in the real world in some really specific and harmful ways. And how this episode both upholds some of those narratives and really turns them upside in what I think are some really interesting ways. And gives us an opportunity to really confront those narratives with new eyes, with a new perspective, which I think is one of the greatest things about genre television, genre movies, is we get to look at things from a different perspective, while having some distance from it.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Yeah, absolutely. And the—I mean. If you listened to—if you're listening to this and you listened to our episode with Sarah Duncan, which took Normal Again and looked at mental health representations in pop culture, it's gonna be a little bit of a different nuance here because of some of the topics that you're gonna be talking about. But I do love the overlap of just continuing to really look at media.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And say, how has our day-to-day informed media and how does our media—how does our media continue to inform our day-to-day? And like, what is this—what is the damage here of the snake that is eating its own tail? Or what is the power? So, yeah. Just really excited. We will come to the conversation in many ways, but just so thankful to have you here, and Alba, to have you here as well. And I don't know if you wanna talk at all about the importance of you being in this space.

Alba: Mmm.

Kristin: You know, because you've talked a bit to us offline about why it's really important for you to talk about this specifically. And so, do you wanna tell our listeners a little bit about that?

Alba: Sure. I mean, I think—I was thinking this morning about why it's important to have different voices in spaces, and what my role is in a lot of places. And I think it's really just to allow other people who are more similar to my identity—you know, a woman of color—to feel seen and to feel like we exist and that our experiences are real. You know? And that we're not alone. Because I think that so much of media as we're talking about, you know, doesn't represent my demographic very much. And so often I felt very alone in my experience and my life. I felt like things were wrong with me or why am I experiencing this? Or am I crazy? You know, it's like a very...gaslit kind of society that we live in, gaslighting society that we live in. So for me to be here is really to give my own personal voice. Obviously, I'm not like every single person in the world. But it's so that people who have experiences similar to mine know that they are not alone.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: And I'm...what is my sexual identity? I don't know. Genuinely, I don't know. [laughs] But I tend to date men.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: And sleep with men, cis men. So—cis white men. [laughs] So, that's a real thing. And I have experienced an array of different things in relationships and interactions. And that's a really real thing that, you know, women of color and women have to deal with, is sleeping with men. [laughs] I mean, not everybody, but you know. A bunch of us.

Kristin: Well, but that—yeah—

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: And I think that that is so—because I—like, I have not had relationships with men. I have certainly had plenty of *experiences* with men. [Alba laughs] But I have not had, like, meaningful relationships—

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: With men. I've not dated men. And so I also think, from—I mean, you know, from all these perspectives, it's important. But I think that's a massive—

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Piece of experience to have in this conversation.

Alba: Yes.

Kristin: So, yes. Just doubling down on yes, that is also very, very important.

Alba: Yeah. [laughs] Thank you. And yeah, I mean, as painful as it is that I relate to Buffy, you know? Like, I get it and I get—I've never had anything so graphic happen to me or so overt happen to me. But there's so much nuance in—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: Sexual relationships and consent in, you know, these interactions that we have with each other. And unfortunately, often it's like, a very kind of like heteronormative dynamic of, you know, men, women, sex, blah blah blah. So I just wanted to be here and to participate in this conversation to the best of my ability. And to hopefully let people—I don't know. See my perspective, if you're not my demographic, and also feel seen if you are my demographic.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: So that's why I think it's important for me to be here, and I was like, I have to be here for this conversation! [laughter] So yeah.

Kristin: Yes! So we're all here and like, as you know if you listen to this podcast, like, we don't script our conversations. We have pretty loose outlines and we just

let the conversations take us wherever we might go. But Jess, you've spoken to us a lot offline about something called the monster myth. And I think—you'd know better than me, but I think it's gonna frame a lot of this conversation. So do you wanna just tell our listeners about what that is, what that means when we say "the monster myth"?

Jess: I would love to do that, it's one of my favorite things to talk about. [laughter] So I'm gonna frame this the way that we do with middle school students. And that's because most of us did not get any of this education in middle school, and so [laughs] we're doing a lot of catch-up now. So I want us to think about shows like Law & Order SVU. Yeah? Everybody has seen at least a couple episodes?

Kristin: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

Jess: It's a really useful show because it's been on for so—for approximately 500 billion years. [laughter] And—

Alba: It's as old as Spike.

Kristin: Yeah. [laughter]

Jess: It's as old—yes! [laughter] Law & Order SVU has—in the recent years, has really improved. But had many years up until that improvement that told the same story over and over and over again. So the questions I'm asking you, I don't want you to think about what you see all the time, or even once in a while, but what you saw on those shows most of the time. Alright. So on Law & Order SVU, the person who assaults another person, the person they call "the rapist," how would you describe that person?

Kristin: A large, violent man.

Jess: Large, violent man.

Kristin: Criminal.

Jess: Criminal.

Alba: Loner. Awkward.

Kristin: Probably has a van.

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: Yeah, so that would be next, yeah.

Alba: Hoodies. Hoodies.

Kristin: Oh, yeah! Yes, mmhmm.

Jess: [simultaneously] Wearing a hoodie.

Alba: Hoodie.

Jess: If you had just one word to describe this person, what would it be?

Kristin: Creepy.

Jess: Okay. So when we ask middle school students—

Alba: [simultaneously] Scary. Scary.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: “How would you describe this person?” The number one answer we get is “creepy dude.”

Kristin: Creepy. Yeah.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: Okay, and then the next question we ask is, what does creepy dude drive? And it’s a white van.

Kristin: [simultaneously] Oh, I already got it! A van.

Alba: [simultaneously] [laughs] A van.

Jess: [simultaneously] You’re already there, yes. You skipped ahead. So we have creepy dude in the van, and where does the assault take place?

Alba: Alleyway.

Jess: Yeah. Dark alley.

Kristin: Dark—yeah.

Jess: What kind of neighborhoods?

Alba: Low class.

Kristin: [simultaneously] Probably poor—yep, lower class—

Alba: [simultaneously] Yeah, working class.

Kristin: [simultaneously] Working class neighborhoods.

Alba: Yeah, or like, downtown. You know, like—

Kristin: Yes. Yes.

Alba: Sketchy downtown areas.

Jess: Abandoned buildings, all of these—yes.

Alba: Abandoned buildings, yeah.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Places where people are not, generally. So we have creepy dude in the van, in the dark alley, in the van, in the abandoned warehouse, the park at night. All of these places.

Alba: Oh yeah, the park.

Jess: [simultaneously] And the person who gets assaulted, what does that person look like? The person they call “the victim.”

Kristin: Probably, like, a white woman—

Alba: White woman.

Kristin: Uh, yeah...

Jess: What about her age?

Kristin: I would say, like, late teens to mid-20s.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: Exactly, yeah.

Kristin: Yeah. Vulnerable—

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Just like, very—a vulnerable age—

Alba: Yes, vulnerable.

Kristin: Definitely, like, a good kid. You know?

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: Yes.

Kristin: It's usually the good kids.

Jess: So let's hold onto that "good kid" piece—

Alba: [simultaneously] Right.

Jess: 'Cause that's about innocence.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: So this whole story that we see happen over and over and over again. And it's usually that she's kidnapped by a stranger and pulled into the van. All of this is so unlike what sexual assault looks like in the real world. But it's dictated what we believe sexual assault is in the real world. So we have this idea of this creepy man in a van, which acts as our kind of boogeyman under the bed situation. And this is the person we're supposed to be afraid of. This is really harmful in that, in reality, over 82% of the time it's people we know, not the creepy man in the van. And then we get into the monster word, and we get harmed in a couple of ways. So the first is it keeps us from recognizing harmful behaviors in others. So let's say there is a serial rapist and that person is caught. And the news station goes to that person's neighborhood and they start to interview the neighbors, and what do the neighbors say about this person? I'm holding up my—

Kristin: Oh, god—

Jess: [simultaneously] My imaginary microphone right now.

Alba: [laughs] Such a nice guy.

Kristin: [simultaneously] Oh, he was—he—I could have never imagined. He helped me all the time with the yardwork.

Jess: Exactly.

Alba: He was so normal.

Kristin: [simultaneously] He did this, he did that. Yes.

Jess: Wouldn't hurt a fly.

Alba: Friendly, yeah.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Oh, yes. Okay, that's because we've been trained to look for creepy guy in the van. We haven't been trained to look for everyday person in our life who, yeah, always helped me with the yardwork. But you know what, always helped me with the yardwork after I had said no four or five times—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: And was just so persistent that I just gave up. So keeps us from recognizing harmful behaviors in others. And then keeps us from recognizing harmful behaviors in ourselves.

Alba: Mmm.

Jess: So you ask a group of college men, have you ever held someone down in order to have sex with them? Have you ever gotten someone drunk in order to have sex with them? Have you ever drugged someone in order to have sex with them? Some percentage of college men will say yes to those things. But if you ask them, have you ever raped someone? What do they say?

Alba: No.

Kristin: No, absolutely not.

Jess: Absolutely not.

Kristin: Like, in a horrified way.

Jess: Exactly.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Like, *absolutely* not, I would never.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: And that's because we think of rape as "monster," rape as "evil"—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Rape at this caricature that—I'm not a creepy van. I'm a captain of the sports ball team. I couldn't think of a sport in that moment.

Kristin: Sports ball! Sports ball!

Alba: I'm a—[laughing] sports ball team. [laughs]

Kristin: You said sports ball. Okay. [laughs]

Alba: Also, like, straight-A student. Student council. You know...

Jess: Or just generally nice guy. Getting into the incel stuff that we were—

Alba: [simultaneously] Nice guy, yeah.

Jess: Talking about during Dead Things. "I'm a nice guy, I'm not a creepy man in a van. I'm not a monster."

Kristin: Right.

Jess: And so, it does those two things. But then it also, for survivors, causes gosh, so much harm in that because most people are taught that it's creepy dude in a van, when most people are in fact harmed by people we know and love, it causes a

lot of confusion, a lot of self-blame. It also teaches women lots of ways to stay safe, because it's all about strangers.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: And all kinds of safety tips—

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: That just make people's worlds small.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: They're all about: don't wear this, don't drink this, don't go there. Don't be in this neighborhood. What if you live in that neighborhood? So we do this in middle school classrooms. We ask them, what are the safety tips you've been taught? And it's "don't go out after dark," which we call the reverse vampire. Carry the keys in—it's the Wolverine hand.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Carry pepper spray. So they don't actually—these things don't actually work. But what they do is they do what—my brilliant partner, Alena Schaim. She runs a self defense organization and they're empowerment self defense, so it is not a victim-blaming self defense. It is looking at how people are actually targeted. And she says, no, these safety tips, they make people's worlds small. They act as a tool of social control, for folks who are already marginalized. The purpose is not to keep people safe. The purpose is to keep people under control, and keep people scared. Which I think is brilliant, and yeah, that's what they serve to do. And then, when someone is harmed—just as you were saying, Alba—is then it's, well, why were you in that neighborhood? Why weren't you wearing that drug-detecting nail polish? Which, ew, you're putting your finger in a drink—your dirty bar finger, disgusting.

Kristin: There's a drug-detecting nail polish?!

Jess: Yeah. Yeah, it exists. There's a whole world of anti-rape products.

Alba: [simultaneously] That's so fucked, but I'm like, I want that!

Kristin: I know, I know, Jess. But you were fully delivering it, like, “yeah, can you believe that shit?” and Alba and I were both like, “um...”

Alba: [simultaneously] I was like—I want that!

Kristin: [simultaneously] “I would love it!” [Alba and Kristin laugh]

Jess: I think you hit on something so important. That’s why I love empowerment self defense so much. So organizations like Impact, which—there are chapters all over the country and even the world. They do self defense that is not about criticizing what someone has done in the past, but giving them lots of skills to be in the world by themselves, without any of these products, without these safety tips.

Alba: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Jess: So that folks can—folks’ worlds can get bigger instead of smaller.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: ‘Cause the other thing about all these safety tips is they all assume that someone who’s gonna harm us is a stranger. I’m not gonna be there in my dorm room, rape whistle at the ready, like—

Kristin: Right.

Jess: No, that’s not how it goes. It’s—

Alba: No, yeah—

Jess: [simultaneously] These are all based on strangers, and so they don’t even impact the way that sexual violence typically happens. Which is—[crosstalk]

Kristin: Right and that gets to, like, the heart of it all. Which is, like, I’m assuming that, like, the core of the monster myth here is what we’ve been discussing. Which is, we are taught, because of media, that people who will hurt us are strangers who are creepy dudes.

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And we are also taught that if we get hurt, it is probably because we were doing something wrong.

Jess: Yes.

Kristin: Right? And so, like, I would just like to—'cause I know—I mean, we have a lot to talk about here. But like, bring us—take that, Jess, if you will, and bring us into this scene in this episode. Because it is...I shouldn't say this scene. Bring us into this arc in this television show, really. Because it begins with—it doesn't begin with this scene, actually. It goes before the scene. The scene is the moment of assault itself, and then it continues forward. So can we apply this—

Jess: And can I say one more thing about the victim-blaming piece?

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Which is, there's—and you said something really important, Kristin, which was that...this whole myth leads us to believe that good things happen to good people, bad things happen to bad people. Because good people don't do these things that they're not supposed to do, or they follow the safety tips or what have you. So there's—that's called just world theory. We believe that the world is just. Good things happen to good people, bad things happen to bad people. And therefore, if this happened to you, what were you doing to make this happen? And it acts as kind of a coping strategy for living in this world that is causing harm to so many people. Because it creates distance for us. Then we get to go, okay, well, this isn't about me, because I would never do that. I would never go down that dark alley. It's the thing when you're watching horror movies—Kristin, I know you love horror movies—is the moment where they're running up the stairs or going into the house or running out of the house and you go, "Don't do that!"

Kristin: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

Jess: 'Cause we wanna believe that we would make a different decision.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Which we're not able to do. Unless we're—we don't know all of the context of that moment. And we really wanna believe that we would make a different decision in that situation.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: And it's just scary for us to think about the people in our world causing harm, that we hold onto—

Alba: It's very scary.

Jess: The monster myth, we hold onto the victim-blaming, because it gives us *something*.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: It gives us the feeling that we can do something to navigate the world that is so scary for so many people. And so, I do wanna say that I will never, ever shame or blame someone for holding onto this stuff. We've been—we aren't given a whole lot of options otherwise.

Kristin: Yeah. Yeah.

Jess: And we do need to challenge it in a structural way. Not in an individual way, in a structural way.

Kristin: So, Jess. Now we know what the monster myth is, what it means. Probably a lot of us knew this without knowing the name for it. Right? Like, we have this sense that, like, [laughing] something feels off about the way we talk about these things. And obviously, an appropriate title for this, given the fact that what we're talking about in this television series is a literal monster, you know, committing sexual violence against our Slayer in this episode. But also, there was a past and there will be a future. So do you wanna talk a little bit about—'cause I know—this is just—I was saying this off mic, but just, like, this is your shit. This is, like, your favorite thing to talk about is applying the monster myth to what we see here with Spike and Buffy.

Jess: I do wanna say that it has both ends of things. Having Spike specifically, this literal monster, sexually assault Buffy impacts people in a couple of different ways. And those ways are really contrasting and they're—or conflicting, even. And they're both true at the same time. And we can't hold one over the other. Just many things have to be true at the same time and that has to be okay. So on one hand, having Spike, this monster, assault Buffy is awful in that Buffy's a straight-up superhero. If she freezes and her lack of fighting back—oftentimes a freeze is really a *freeze*.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: But her fighting back at the level that she did, I think, is *Buffy's* version of freeze.

Alba: Yeah, yeah.

Jess: 'Cause the thing about a freeze response is it's something that can be unlearned. We can work through the freeze response as humans—

Alba: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Jess: If we learn about it, we practice it, so on and so forth. But if Buffy freezes, what hope is there for anyone else to resist an assault? Which I think is just—really just demoralizing. [laughs] And I think it feeds into all kinds of awful narratives about women not being capable of fighting back in the context of an assault.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: The second is, Buffy is supposed to be anything other than weak. She's supposed to be everything that women and basically everyone except for cisgender men [Alba laughs] are told we should not and cannot be. And so, to take that away from us, to take that away from the audience, I think feels like a betrayal on one hand. And then, it's just really, really graphic. This is a terrible scene to watch. It's awful.

Kristin: [simultaneously] It's horrible.

Alba: [simultaneously] It's really, *really* rough.

Jess: I love talking about this episode, and I—I watched this last night and I visibly cringe. I jump up in my seat, because—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: I'm so pained by watching this. It's—from when she hits the side. I—I'm not even gonna go into it, but it's...awful.

Kristin: It's awful and I actually—I also watched it last night. And I—like, I—obviously all of us know it's an awful scene. But I sort of never have my expectation set where it needs to be to be ready to intake it—

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And what I realized also last night, watching it, was that not only is it just, like, really violent and really graphic, and really long. But on top of all of that, the words that she says—

Alba: Oh, god.

Kristin: The way that she—

Alba: No.

Kristin: The way that she cries out for help is something—

Alba: [simultaneously] Her *voice*. Oh my god.

Kristin: We have never heard her in that tenor—

Alba: No. No.

Kristin: Ever. Ever on the show, we've never heard her say—

Alba: [simultaneously] Like, the raspiness of her voice?

Kristin: Yes. Yes.

Alba: Oh my god. It's like, ugh!

Kristin: It's viscerally fucked up. And, like—and to your point, Jess, like, it's both things. Because, like, I wouldn't want a scene where, like, because Buffy is a superhero, she can just defeat this and be fine, that she isn't vulnerable, as a woman. You know, like, I wouldn't want to see that. But I also don't wanna see this.

Jess: Yeah.

Kristin: So I don't know what the answer is, but no.

Jess: Yeah, it's awful. And then we have to see it over and over again in—

Alba: [simultaneously] Over and over and over again!

Jess: Like, the flashbacks. And yeah, it's terrible. [Alba groans] So I do wanna start by saying, I hate this scene. I hate watching it. It's painful for me. I work with survivors every day, and this scene affects me in a way that working with survivors in real life and hearing about what they have experienced does not affect me. In this same way.

Kristin: That's powerful.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: And here's the flip side, is showing this assault acts as a counterpoint to the monster myth. That monster myth can tell people who have been assaulted by people we know that, oh, well, it wasn't really rape because this was my date, this was my partner. Well, it wasn't that bad. It wasn't like I was kidnapped by this creepy dude in the van—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Or what's wrong with me that I still care for this person?

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: What's wrong with me that I even still love this person? And then, why didn't I see that in them? What's wrong with me that I didn't see them? So that, by flipping it, we're then in the position to have survivors—for some survivors who've been harmed by people we know—instead see this, see Buffy.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: And go, okay, well, I wasn't alone. Yeah, this was someone I knew. This was someone I cared for and loved. But I'm very clear that Buffy—that that was sexual assault.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: And therefore, I can be clear that that was sexual assault for me.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Which means that I might be able to access the help that I need.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: It was that bad.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Right? Buffy fought him off, and still, it was that bad.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Right. Right.

Jess: If this could happen to Buffy, who is so strong, who's a literal superhero, maybe it wasn't because I was weak. Maybe it wasn't because I wasn't strong enough to fight this. What did I believe about myself that—it's not that I was believing that I deserved this.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: No, it's that this happens and sometimes people freeze.

Kristin: And you know, I'm just thinking of this in sort of real time, having just watched the rest of the season. It's—it also parcels out—I mean, listen. None of us are here to be like, we are so glad that this scene exists and that this is the way the writers chose to go. But this is what we've got, and so we're working our way through it. But I think that there's—maybe—something powerful also about the fact that Buffy—you had mentioned, like, right. Buffy still has feelings—cares for the character of Spike, even after this happens. But one of the first things that she does after this is she has—she doesn't know that Spike is gone yet. But she has Dawn go there, because she knows that Spike will protect Dawn.

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And I think that that's, like, a fucking fascinating piece of what you're saying, Jess. Because the character of Buffy Summers parses, in her mind, that the violence that has happened in that bathroom is a specific violence. A specific moment happened there. And that it does not automatically make Spike a creepy guy with a van. It's more complicated than that. And I'm not advocating for either—which way.

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: I'm just sort of thinking live that, like, there's—there might be some power there too.

Jess: Very much so. And it...I think it gives us this opportunity to have more nuance. And our response to this scene, I think, as Buffy fans, is really—it's really

complex and it's varied. Because our response to sexual violence, especially sexual violence by people we know, it is complex. It can be—not for everybody, but for many of us, it can be so complex. Like, we can be so clear that the assault was wrong.

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: And we can still have dissonant feelings. We can have confusing feelings about the person who harmed us.

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: We can straight up love them and still say, this wasn't okay. They can be even accountable for it.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: And for some survivors, that person can stay in their life. Right?

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: Like, for Buffy, where she's saying—

Alba: Right.

Jess: "Yeah, Dawn, go to Spike." Some people are harmed by their partner, and then have to do childcare the next day.

Kristin: Right.

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: And do the logistics of that. And what does that look like? And I think that one of the most harmful things that the monster myth does is it—for all of the folks that fall within that?

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Is it gives us nowhere to go with it. It—

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: There's no way to talk about it without then being blamed for—

Kristin: Ugh.

Jess: Still being with this person or loving this person. I mean, think about—have you ever broken up with someone and then your friend is like, “oh my goodness, thank *god* you broke up with them, they were the *worst!*” Yeah?

Kristin: Yeah! Don't do that, people. [laughs]

Jess: Don't do that! [Alba groans] So now add domestic violence, intimate partner violence onto that.

Kristin: Right.

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: And this person says, “oh gosh, they were so awful.” Which now makes the person who has been harmed be like, “Well, why didn't I see that? What's wrong with me?”

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Right. Right.

Jess: And then if they get back together with that person, they've just become further isolated, 'cause I'm not gonna go and talk to that friend anymore.

Alba: Right.

Kristin: 100%. Well, and that's the Xander of it all. Right?

Alba: Ugh, fucking fucker.

Jess: [simultaneously] That is the Xander of it all, yes. Yeah.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Yeah. Sorry, Alba, go ahead and then we can—

Alba: Yeah, yeah.

Kristin: Get into the Xander of it all. [laughter]

Alba: I just wanted to say, kind of an observation of Buffy and, like, her weakness, like, quote-unquote. And also her strength in that, you know, for me, I have, like, so much ingrained. [laughing] Problematic thinking. You know, my first response is still that, well, Buffy was weak because it happened. Right? She was weak because she got into the relationship with him.

Kristin: Mmm.

Alba: And that's not, like—I'm framing it in my mind. I'm like, live processing right now that like, she was in a weak moment to get into a toxic relationship with Spike, right? Like, she just came out of heaven and lost her mom and all this stuff. Like, it's not that she wasn't in a vulnerable place. And I think that that's okay, too. But that doesn't mean that you are inherently weak. It might mean that, like, you were having a hard time. I don't know if that makes sense or if that—I don't know what you think about that, Jess, if that's a problematic thing to say.

Jess: I think our culture has gotten kind of overly dependent on—or into framing vulnerability as weakness.

Alba: Mmhmm. Mmm.

Jess: One of those self defense classes I took, there was a woman who was—and these classes are experiential. So it's a guy in a suit saying terrible things and you're in a scene and it feels very realistic.

Alba: Ahh!

Jess: And it's the best and scariest thing I've ever done for myself. Absolutely transformative. But there was one moment in a class where a woman is in the scene and she broke down crying. And in that moment, I think so many of our instincts would be to stop the scene and say, "okay! Okay! Are you—ah!" and stop and take care of her. But instead, the instructor—the person who's helping her came up to her and she said, "You're still powerful when you're crying."

Kristin: Mmm.

Jess: And it gave this person the opportunity to go, [inhales] okay. And she cried through the rest of her scene and worked through it and came out talking about

how it was so fantastic that she got to reframe that for her—that it was reframed for her.

Alba: Fuck yeah.

Jess: When I'm crying, it's not that I am weak. When I'm crying, it's that this is one expression of being powerful and owning where I'm at in the moment.

Alba: Oh my god, that's so powerful.

Jess: So that.

Kristin: Yeah, it really is.

Jess: Yeah.

Alba: I'm gonna cry. [laughs]

Jess: Which is not weak! [laughs]

Kristin: [simultaneously] And you're still powerful! [laughter]

Alba: [laughing] I'm still powerful! [laughter] Fuck!

Kristin: I also think that there is something to be said about the fact that Buffy and Spike were in a toxic relationship.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And I will not go deep into the Conflict is Not Abuse bin over here. But like, I do think that it's—I think that we are starting to really get confused about the difference between a—like, a toxic relationship, a relationship that is unhealthy, and then moments of abuse, moments of assault, moments of—like, this is a moment of assault in what was an unhealthy relationship for both parties. And I think that that lack of nuance can also lead to not knowing when you're supposed to label something as—

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: "This is not okay" and like, "this could be better, should be better." But also, like, it is not this other thing.

Jess: Yeah.

Alba: Mmhmm. Mmhmm. That makes sense to me.

Jess: Same. Let's do the Xander of it all.

Kristin: Okay, great. Let's—talk to us about the Xander of it all.

Jess: Xander could just teach a master class on how to not respond when your friend has been sexually assaulted. Like, he does basically everything he's not supposed to do. He makes it all about himself and his anger. And he is expecting Buffy to respond in a really specific emotional way, which is not how trauma works. At the end, he doesn't even ask how she's doing. It is *all* about what he needs. It's all about what he feels and what Buffy has done to him by getting sexually assaulted.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: It's the Xander of it all. We could—yeah.

Kristin: And it feels like it bounces right off of the monster myth that we were talking about.

Jess: Oh, yeah. Exactly.

Kristin: It's like, because he did this thing, he is all these other things. And you cannot have any complicated feelings about this at all, because he's the creepy, evil dude in a van. And now you're, like, telling me that he's more than that? It's—like, Xander is just, like, living inside an episode of SVU, insofar as I'm concerned.
[laughter]

Jess: And it plays into his good guy thing. It's—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Xander, part of his good guy thing is being the savior of the categorically stronger women around him. [laughs] And he gets something from it. He feels powerful by trying to exert that over Buffy. Which is—just plays into the same stuff.

Alba: He makes himself the victim, right?

Jess: Yeah.

Alba: Of the situation.

Jess: Yeah.

Kristin: And the hero.

Jess: And the hero, yeah.

Kristin: Like, all at once. Can I take us on, like, a tiny detour?

Jess: Please.

Kristin: And if it gets confusing, we don't have to stay there. But like, having just watched the rest of the season, and having the room to be full of spoilers in this conversation. I think that there's also, like—we are talking about one specific moment, but also an arc of Spike and Buffy. But inside of this season, we also have Warren, who is—I mean, you've already been on Dead Things, so you've talked about that. And it's like, going through the—from this moment that we're talking about in Seeing Red till the end of the season. It's like, we have Spike, who has sexually assaulted Buffy. We have Warren, who has literally, like, murdered a girl, after attempting to rape her. And we have Xander, the, like, guy who really just doesn't feel like he's doing the right thing, even though *he's* not trying to, like, sexually assault women and he's whatever. And last night, I was just really having a difficult time parsing the ending of this season. Spike leaves to go fucking get his soul. We can talk about that. Warren has no skin. He's dead. He's poof, gone, bye—

Jess: [laughing] No skin.

Kristin: No skin. [laughter] And then, Xander saves the world! Like, I just—I can't figure it out. I can't figure out if we're supposed to get, like—I don't know. I just—

Alba: I have a thought. I have a thought that I've been wanting to tie in, actually.

Kristin: [simultaneously] Please. Help me, because I can't—yes. Yes.

Alba: And maybe this will make sense, maybe not. But as—so Jess, in our original conversation that we had, woof! Like, back in October. Or November of 2020. [laughs] Recommended these white pages for us to read—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: On sexual assault and sexual violence. And the repeated rape offender. And I was looking over my notes this morning and I was reading one of them for the first—and I, like, skimmed it. 'Cause I was like, fuck this! I just wanted to, like, burn the whole thing. But something that really kept coming back to me is this notion that these men are victims. That they believe that they are victims of women. And—or of masculinity or of society and they just really have something to prove. Okay, I need to say that both Kristin and Jess are nodding in agreement with me. [laughs] It's like—

Jess: We're doing the slow nod, too.

Alba: Slow nod—

Jess: It's not even the quick nod. It's the "yeah, uh-huh" nod.

Alba: [laughs] And it's—it's something else that I think that abusers—I've noticed this pattern. And also, I find this ties in really well to white fragility and racism is that people believe that they are victims.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: And they are justified in causing harm and taking what they want. And so, what I see in Spike and what I see in what happened with Warren and what I see with Xander is all of these men think that they are the victims of the events that have occurred. You know?

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: And that they were, like, somehow justified in doing—I mean, I know Spike, like—hard air quotes, "knows" he did something wrong. You know?

Jess: Yeah.

Alba: But like, he's also like, "I don't have a soul! I'm a victim of my existence [Jess laughs] and I have a chip and let me—I'm a—you know—"

Kristin: True.

Jess: Yeah.

Kristin: True.

Alba: "Let me go get a soul." Right? And when it's not just like—

Jess: Yeah.

Kristin: True.

Alba: Can you just get your fucking shit together, man? [Kristin laughs] Like, seriously. Can you just grow the fuck up? [laughter] I'm serious! And I say this to, like, all the fucking straight men listening to this podcast. Like, fuck you! [laughter] Get your shit together. It's not our responsibility to coddle you through your abusive behavior.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: Is it not.

Kristin: Fuck yeah.

Alba: So...

Kristin: Fuck yeah!

Alba: Stop! [laughter] Okay? Like, just fucking stop it. I can't be a man, I can't be a vampire. Oh, no!

Kristin: Yeah.

Alba: Let me hurt the person I love. And, like, kinda take accountability by getting a soul, but never actually really doing any reparations.

Kristin: Well, this is probably a great time—

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Alba, standing ovation. [laughter]

Alba: You should put in an applause for me. [laughter]

Kristin: Yeah, seriously. But this is a great time maybe to talk with you, Jess, about accountability.

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Because we have—we have the room in this episode to go past the scene we see. And we know that at the end—I mean, fuck the fucking writers on some of this shit. Because who knows if Spike always intended to get his soul? General consensus says maybe—

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Probably yes, but also, the writers certainly didn't wanna give us that idea. The writers gave us the idea that he was was like, "fuck Buffy, I'm gonna fucking kill her now." Just so we would have this big twist at the end where he gets his soul—fuck that.

Jess: Yeah.

Kristin: Don't fuck around—I'm sorry, but don't fuck around with, like, soul shit when you just had a character sexually assault another character. But all that to say, what is—like, what is your thought—and you can start on either end, right?

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: The reality end, which is like, you work with sexual assault survivors. You work with people who are still in partnership in one way or another with someone who has harmed them. So there's an accountability process that you witness on the day to day. And then there's, like, Spike's accountability process. And I wonder what you have to say about all of that.

Jess: So can I start by how we humanize Spike? Because I think it leads into this piece.

Kristin: Of course.

Jess: Okay. So Spike loves fighting. Spike loves fighting.

Alba: Mmm. Mmm.

Jess: He thinks that it is the best. He loves conflict. He's even straight up playful about it. So part of the way that we know that Spike doesn't have a soul is the casual way in which he murders people. Straight up.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: In this scene—and just to go into the scene to then go out again—in this scene, he's not having fun. He's desperate.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: I think this is part of how they humanize him. They take away the fun.

Kristin: Mmm.

Jess: And yet, Spike, for me, is more terrifying in this moment than he is in any other scene, no matter what he's doing. Even when he's killing the other Slayers, this scene is far more terrifying than anything he's ever done.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Which, going back to the monster myth, I think it's fascinating that, with this literal monster, what makes him the scariest is making him *human*.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Is *humanizing* him.

Alba: That's such a great point.

Kristin: Yeah. Oh my god, incredible.

Jess: And they have to take away the monster for the audience to actually fear Spike.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: And another thing with the show that I think is interesting is every time they portray sexual assault, either through metaphor or in reality, it's always done by humans. So with the demon lizard patriarch—with the frat boys?

Kristin: Right, it was the frat boys.

Alba: Right.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: That's a whole sexual assault metaphor, of course. That's a—

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Warren is a human, yeah.

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: Even the Lowell House, with that sexual abuse piece—

Alba: Oh, yeah.

Jess: Yeah, they were ghosts but it happened when they were humans.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: With the Trio and Spike, and so, it's either done by humans or then this vampire that they have to humanize in order to have him do this. Which I think is...I love that they do this, in that it really takes that monster myth piece—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: And flips it upside down.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: And that goes into accountability, because in order to have kind of nuance thinking around accountability, we have to believe that people who harm others, people who sexually assault others, are human.

Alba: Mmm.

Jess: And we have to kind of wrestle with our values around what we believe every human deserves, no matter what they do, which is complicated.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: So—and that’s because our brains love to categorize things. The pan is hot, I move away from the pan.

Kristin: Right.

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: We move away from pain, we move away from things that cause us discomfort.

Alba: [simultaneously] Discomfort.

Jess: Yeah, and that—

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: Goes right into this person harmed somebody, that I have pain around that. And so we distance ourselves, which serves a couple of purposes. It keeps us from recognizing the problem as a community problem and it makes it an individual problem.

Kristin: Mmm.

Jess: This person is bad, they’re sick, they’re wrong, they’re evil. And therefore, they need to be put in a cage. Instead of, what’s happening in our culture that made this happen? What’s happening in our culture that made—not this individual instance happen, but is making this happen on this grand scale? I think one of the magic things about Buffy is because so many of us rewatch it, we then have the opportunity to confront our conflicting thinking about Spike. And at this point, we can get into the—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: The audience reactions.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: To get into our feelings about Spike, we have to continue to confront our reactions to this scene, specifically in the context of Spike and his overall arc. Which is interesting 'cause it's—you know, what we as a society and especially in the sexual assault movement are starting to do with sexual assault—because if the only options after an assault are either absolute disposal, and this person is a monster, lock them in a cage. Or our only other option is this kind of collective amnesia.

Alba: Mmm.

Jess: So let's say a friend of mine is accused of sexual assault. Okay? My options are to cut that person off entirely and straight up monsterize them, or to pretend that it didn't happen and victim-blame.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Mmm. Yeah.

Jess: There's no room for real accountability in that.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: There's no room to witness the truth of it, which is that people we love can do awful things and should be held accountable, while still providing absolute safety for the survivor, but not necessarily thrown in a cage.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Where's the space for all those things? And this is the direction that some of the sexual assault movement is moving towards, which starts with listening to survivors who want an alternative to accountability and safety that's outside of the criminal legal system, that also hurts survivors. One of the biggest things I learned when I first started in this work, or most kind of shocking things, was that a sexual assault survivor in a criminal case, they're not anybody's client. They don't—they're not anybody's client. They are a witness to the state.

Kristin: [gasps] Oh, no! That made my whole body feel like—

Alba: [simultaneously] Whoa!

Jess: [simultaneously] Right?

Kristin: Jello. Yes, that is—that—wow! What the fuck?!

Jess: Yeah. They're a witness to the crime that happened to them. And to think about—

Alba: Oh my god.

Kristin: [simultaneously] Oh my god!

Jess: So there's more nuance around this than we have time to get into now.

Kristin: Sure, sure, sure.

Jess: [simultaneously] And there are more—better systems and all of that. But going back to Law & Order SVU. What we're taught on Law & Order SVU is that every survivor gets their day in court and they get to face the person who assaulted them. And they get to see them go to jail. That—and they get healing from that, most importantly.

Kristin: Right, right. [laughs]

Jess: We place healing in—all of the healing eggs in the criminal legal system basket. We fail survivors over and over and over again. Because the system is wildly flawed and often serves to just further victimize, further traumatize survivors in some really significant ways and not actually provide any increased safety.

Alba: Nope.

Jess: Out of every thousand rapes in the US, six people will be incarcerated.

Kristin: Jesus Christ.

Jess: So all of that, which is to say that oftentimes, people who are pro—who are leaning towards abolition of the criminal legal system and prison industrial complex, yay! Then the question goes, well, what about rapists though?

Kristin: [laughs] Yeah.

Jess: And my answer is, well, rapists aren't going to jail anyway. So. [laughs]

Kristin: Right. [Alba laughs] Right.

Jess: That's not the point—

Alba: That's not funny.

Jess: That's the thing.

Kristin: [simultaneously] No, it—totally. And this was—I mean, there's a million parts of this conversation—all of this conversation is important and resonant. And I'm so happy to be having it with both of you. From a personal standpoint, one of the things I was most excited about in talking to you for the first time, when we just talked off-air, was that for—like, since we started the podcast, you know, we've had people say, like—especially 'cause I came into the podcast being like, Spike is my favorite character. Spike is still one of my favorite characters. Anya has edged him out, but that's another story for another day. But I have had a lot of people—not a lot, but I've had enough people say, like, "You purport to be, like, this space that does all this incredible work and your favorite character is Spike? That's not—" like, basically like, you can't have that. Like, you can't do that, you can't—and not that this is the answer to that, what you just said, Jess. But I just have, from the beginning, felt like, I feel like it's a little more complicated than just, like, either I like the character of Spike and I'm a horrible person. Or I dispose of the character of Spike, because of this sexual assault arc that happens in Season 6, and so on and so forth. And so, again, I'm not, like, taking what you said and laying it just, like, flat over this. But I think that there's just something there that I needed. [laughs] To help me figure it out.

Jess: And I think you're exactly on it. And if we're thinking about listening to survivors, right? With Xander and Buffy, is Xander says, "No, this person is completely out of our lives." And Buffy is saying—Buffy—

Kristin: Mmm.

Jess: Who is the person who was harmed—

Kristin: Mmm.

Jess: Is saying no. Yeah, we need to create safety around Spike. And looking to Season 7, they straight up lock him up. They chain him in the basement, right?

Kristin: Right. Right.

Jess: They don't let him be alone with the girls. We need to create safety plans, for sure. And Buffy is the one who's saying, "No, no, no. I still want him in my life in this way. We're gonna have some distance."

Kristin: Right.

Jess: But I still want him in my life in this way." And I think it's a really interesting parallel to what some survivors do in the real world.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Which is, hey, this is the person who I depend on for financial stability. This is the person who I have all of these other memories with. Does this erase all of those other memories? Or does this act as one thing within the context, that needs to be addressed and needs to be addressed in a really, really serious way, and this person needs to be accountable to this. But for folks who perpetrate sexual violence, where's the room for being accountable if the options are—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: "I go to jail."

Kristin: And what—and I would imagine—again, just doing my own Kristin brain math. But like, I would imagine that if you're in that position, the likelihood of you being violent in increasing situations is just going to compound on itself. If there are not avenues of nuance for these things—

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Then you're just like, okay, well then, I'm bad. So—and again, not justifying this behavior, but these things are just not good for anyone.

Alba: Well, that's exactly what the reports that you sent us said—

Jess: Mmhmm.

Alba: Is that, like, the harm increases and people who have caused harm are likely to cause different kinds of harm. Right?

Jess: Yeah. Absolutely.

Alba: And like, [stammers] the graphs are very disturbing.

Jess: [smiling] I'm sorry about that, Alba.

Alba: [laughing] No, it's okay.

Kristin: So the papers that we're referencing also will be in the show notes, so that you can check them out. And you should, 'cause they are...if you feel up to it and able to look at them. They're a much deeper dive into the conversation that we're having here today.

Alba: [simultaneously] Yeah. They're really fascinating and very useful to know, I think.

Kristin: Yeah.

Alba: And information that is very, very important, I think, to know. I wanted to say about Xander and his reaction to Spike that I think Xander is also especially upset about Spike right now and wants him out of his life because he just watched him and Anya have sex, right?

Kristin: Yeah.

Alba: So again, it's like another question to his masculinity. And Xander never slept with Buffy, right? So like, who is this really about? And what is it really about that Xander is so upset about—I mean, of course, it's absolutely upset—so upsetting, what happens. But he's not making it about that anyway.

Jess: I think also the Xander of it all could have—if Buffy were listening to him—it could have prevented Buffy from getting what she actually wanted. Which was for Spike to—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Actually apologize, which he does, in Season 7.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Which so many survivors want, is "I just want you to admit that this actually happened."

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: "Stop gaslighting me."

Alba: Yes!

Jess: "And say that you are sorry."

Alba: And say that it was wrong and say you won't do it again.

Jess: [simultaneously] It was wrong. Yeah. And that you're gonna do something for yourself so that—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: And for others so that you stop harming people.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Yes.

Jess: And so few people actually get that, because it then takes the person admitting that they did harm. Which could lead to them going to jail.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Mmm!

Jess: And so they don't.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: So all of this is to say that...Buffy gets what so many folks don't, and that's because in her world, they exist outside of the criminal legal system, for the most part.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Spike isn't going to jail. My goodness. [laughs]

Kristin: Right.

Jess: That's not happening.

Alba: Well, the only person that goes through the legal system is the coded black person, which is Faith. So.

Jess: Yeah. Exactly.

Kristin: Right.

Jess: Yeah.

Kristin: So Jess. There's so many—I mean, there's so many branches of this tree. But I wonder, like...I think what I'm picking up is that your feelings about this arc in this show are both/and. Right? Like, it's like, there are good things, there are bad things, is where you stand with this?

Jess: Yeah. I mean, my feelings about most things these days is [Kristin laughs] getting just really comfortable with the both/and. That yeah, there are absolutely good things and absolutely bad things. I think it, for many people, felt like just this awful betrayal, to do this to Buffy. Because so many people, when watching the show, put themselves in the position of being Buffy—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: As imagining themselves as Buffy. And so it felt like it was something happening to the audience, not just to Buffy. And I think it flips the script on the monster myth in this really interesting way. And...

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: In making it anything but supernatural. They don't use—through not using metaphor in this scene, they make it so much more accurate to real life assault than non-genre shows do, in many cases.

Kristin: [simultaneously] Right. Right.

Jess: Which is just what the show tends to do when it's anything that is so closely resembling reality. When any time it's with guns, there's no metaphor.

Alba: Mmm.

Jess: And with The Body, there's no metaphor.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Right.

Jess: And interestingly, there's no background music, just like in *The Body*. In this scene—[Alba groans]

Kristin: Oh. Yeah.

Jess: [simultaneously] There's no background music.

Kristin: That's right, that's true.

Jess: There's nothing supernatural about it. Which means that we—which would have been really easy for them to approach this through metaphor. He is a literal monster. But they don't. Instead, they make it this moment where his most human thing that he does is sexually assault Buffy in this moment.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: Or the most human violent thing that he does is sexual assault—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Sexually assault Buffy.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: And it makes us look at it—just like in the other episodes—with just a different level of honesty and reality than we would have otherwise. Which—I mean, the nice thing about genre is that it gives us distance from an issue, so we can look at it without being so harmed. And then they took that away, which—

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: Is both powerful and harmful. All at once.

Kristin: Yeah.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Yep.

Alba: And they did, in the show, talk—like, do the sexual assault metaphor, I think, a lot in earlier scenes through the genre—

Jess: Mmhmm.

Alba: Like, a lot of the vampire biting is, like, very sexual. Or like, that scene between Buffy and Angel when she's like, "drink me" and he finally bites her is, like, another sex scene between the two of them, basically.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: I think that they strip that away for this episode is exactly what you're talking about. Like, it has been addressed before, but to have it so explicit. And through this—these two people who care so much for each other. You know?

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Yeah.

Kristin: I wonder...if we have a moment, just to talk about—because, you know, we've interviewed James. And we've talked to him about this scene. And we've talked to other people who know about the show, about this scene. And the kind of heartbeat of it all was, they couldn't get the audience to—I mean, it would be lovely if it was like, "we were really trying to upend the monster myth." [laughs] Great job! That wasn't it though, right? Like, what the—as the story goes, they were trying to get the audience to hate Spike and nothing that Spike did was enough for us to hate Spike. So they put this here so that we would have something other than positive feelings about Spike. And I just wonder if there's anything to say on that, before we...march off into the great unknown. [laughs]

Jess: I think they were effective in that way, in that, again, this is the one scene where I'm actually afraid of Spike, where I—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: I feel repulsed by him. And because they unintentionally but effectively produced so much nuance around his pseudo accountability process in Season 7, that—and because they have Buffy respond to him in a really specific way that challenges some norms around sexual violence. That it ends up making us repulsed by Spike and making us lean into his arc in a different way.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Because at the end of the day, we all still wanna root for—many of us still wanna root for him.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: We want him to get his soul, we want him to get better, we want him to—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: You know, many folks in Season 7 still cheering for Buffy and Spike, still shipping Buffy and Spike—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Is that the term? Shipping?

Alba: Mmhmm!

Kristin: Yes!

Jess: I'm a terrible—I'm a failed millennial. Failed, geriatric millennial. There we go.

Kristin: You did it! [laughter] I'm a geriatric millennial too. [laughter]

Alba: Are you guys millennials? Aren't you Gen X? Well, I don't know how old you are—

Kristin: [simultaneously] No, we're—we are geriatric—

Alba: Jess, okay.

Jess: [simultaneously] Geriatric or elder millennials.

Kristin: [simultaneously] We're geriatric millennials.

Jess: Yes. [laughs]

Kristin: Elder millennials, yeah.

Jess: And—

Alba: Okay. So we are the same generation then. [Jess laughs]

Kristin: Oh, well...debatable.

Jess: [simultaneously] Just barely.

Kristin: Yeah. [laughter]

Jess: And I don't know that any of that was intentional. And then we could get into what are all of the terrible cultural things that keep us rooting for someone who—

Kristin: Right.

Jess: Who assaults another person, right? We could go into that, too. And [Alba sighs] I like to exist not on either side of those things, but very much in between.

Kristin: Yes, and that is why I'm so excited about this conversation. Because that's it. That is it. It's like, every layer that you dig, it's the same answer, which is keep talking about it.

Jess: Mmhmm.

Kristin: It's nuanced. It doesn't get to just be—

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: That we put him in a cage or we forget it and it didn't happen. It doesn't just get to be any of those things on any of the levels that we're talking about.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Kristin: That like, the only way we progress as human beings is by talking about the real ways that we feel about things. Which is, I fucking like Spike! And I know he did this bad thing. And it's complicated 'cause there's also a writers' room and there's also—it's complicated so, like, unpack it. Let's unpack it, because there's learning to do in here. You know?

Alba: And James is a genius.

Jess: And James is a genius.

Kristin: A genius!

Alba: So. Yeah.

Kristin: And there's a whole—that's a whole other conversation [Alba laughs] of what it is to take an actor who has his own—

Jess: Trauma.

Kristin: Lived trauma, and having him do that scene, which was also massively—I mean, you know. If you listened to the interview with James—

Alba: [simultaneously] Yes. Awful.

Kristin: That we did years ago, he was in therapy about that scene for a long time.

Jess: Mmhmm.

Alba: Wow.

Kristin: So that's, like, a whole other—

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: That's a whole other side to this many-sided thing.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: There's a lot happening in it.

Jess: I mean, that's the whole thing about this podcast and us really loving shows with some seriously problematic pieces. Either we have to—we don't have to pretend that the problematic pieces aren't there, or throw it away entirely. We get to talk about—and through talking about the nuances and the complexities within, we're more able to see those things in the real world. I can say that looking at TV shows I love and highlighting the problematic pieces about them, those things have made me better at being accountable when someone says that I've done something awful. When someone says that I've harmed them, I'm better at not seeing myself as either a terrible person or saying that they're being dramatic or making it up or whatever. This is practice. This is how we get better at being in the world as fully human folks who make mistakes and also have to be accountable to them.

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Yes. Ugh.

Alba: And harming people and being harmed by people, of course, on a varying scale is a human thing. You know?

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: You can't really go through life without doing both. To some degree.

Kristin: Right, without harming and without being harmed.

Alba: Being harmed. Yeah.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: Yeah. And I just wanted to say, I was—I just rewatched *The Harsh Light of Day*. And Spike and Harmony's relationship is absolutely horrifying. Like, absolutely horrifying. And I was watching it through a new lens this time. And I was like, this is the most triggering thing I've ever seen. [laughs] Like, other than the, like, rape—like, the sexual assault that happens in Season 6. The relationship between Harmony and Spike is so normalized and it's so sexualized—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: That it is just, like, so absurdly fucked up. And their power dynamic and everything is just like, how trivial it feels. And we see her harmed, but how trivial it feels in the show. And how—it's taken me until I'm 28, and I've been watching the show since I was 12, to even, like, recognize that there's a problem here. That he stakes her and, like, how fucked up that is, is so problematic—how desensitized, like, I have been as a person. I'm sure many, many fans have been.

Kristin: A thousand percent, and her—you know, they give us—they give us the tools that we want, perhaps, to have to not look at it as harm.

Alba: Mmhmm!

Kristin: Because it is very sexualized, also. And so, you know—like, it's like, well, she is enjoying the power and the submission that comes with Spike. But then, where is the fucking line? 'Cause definitely, it is crossed. But if you don't wanna necessarily look too close, you can just be like, well! It was just a—

Alba: It's hot!

Kristin: Yeah. Right, it's hot—they had hot sex and like, she's a vampire. So like, him staking her is different than if she was a human. I mean, her fucking name is Harm. [laughs]

Jess: And they camp it up, so that—

Alba: Yes.

Jess: The relationship itself becomes almost a caricature. The relationship becomes a caricature—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jess: Where we get to think that it's silly and absurd and so—

Kristin: And Harmony is—I mean, you know—

Jess: Yeah.

Kristin: The—there's so much to be said about the fact that both Harmony and Buffy are white women, because—

Jess: Mmhmm.

Alba: [simultaneously] White, blond, blue-eyed women. Yeah.

Kristin: White, blond women because they have a higher likelihood of being believed just by the nature of being white blond women. But on top of that, there's another layer which is that Buffy has a lot better chance of being believed than fucking Harmony. Because Harmony is just—walks through the world in a way that so many people perceive as like, she's stupid. She's not smart, she's not intelligent, she's not trustworthy. She's got her head in the sky, she just loves unicorns. Like, she's the person who really would not be believed, between the two of them, when we're talking—again—about two white women. But still. It's like, Harmony...nobody's gonna take Harmony seriously.

Alba: [quietly] Yeah.

[pause]

Kristin: Anyway! [laughter]

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Thank you. Both of you. For being in this conversation. It's just been so powerful to hear both of you talk about this. And Jess, to get your expertise from a place where you dialogue about sexual assault and accountability every day. And I know that it will be so resonant for so many people who wanna dig in and, like, really wanna see the many facets of this thing. 'Cause it is not just an either/or, at all. So thank you just so much for sharing your time with us.

Jess: Thank you so much for having me.

Alba: [simultaneously] Yeah, thank you so much, Jess. Thank you so much. And for all the work that you do in your life—

Kristin: Yes.

Alba: That you have, like, dedicated to doing. It's so incredible. And it's very, very comforting to know that there are humans like you, doing this work. Truly.

Kristin: Working with—right, like, working with young people, to—like, imagine. Like, if you're listening to this and you are also an elder millennial, or a regular millennial. [Alba laughs] Imagine what your life would be like if, when you were a kid, you were thinking about this. Because I sure wasn't, at all.

Alba: No.

Kristin: And I'm learning it now, as somebody who's 40, and it's still powerful. But how it will shape the trajectory of the world, to have young people understanding this stuff now, is—it's immeasurable. So yeah, I echo Alba. Thank you for what you do.

Jess: And working with young people is so hopeful. Most of my job is really hopeful. Because the way that—they're starting at J, where we've—we're starting at A. They're just starting so much further down the line—

Kristin: [simultaneously] Mmm.

Alba: [simultaneously] Right, yeah.

Jess: In understanding, which is brilliant. And it makes me think about where I've—where we've come, in the sexual violence movement. And what so many folks did for so long, just to be able to say the word "rape."

Alba: Yeah.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: That brought us to this point. Angela Davis, I saw her a couple of years ago. And she said this thing. She said—the interviewer asked her about activists today and how she feels about young activists. And she said, "You know, they stand on our shoulders."

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: "They couldn't do what they do today, were it not for what we did then. But because they're on our shoulders, they can see things that we can't."

Alba: Mmm.

Jess: And that's what I think about any time I'm with middle school students, and with their teachers, who, by and large, regularly say, "I wish I would have had this when I was a kid."

Kristin: Yeah.

Alba: Yeah.

Jess: Is thinking about how much I'm gonna be learning from those young people today and ten years from now.

Kristin: Yeah. Yeah. Agh! Well, as always, all of Jess' information—and Alba's—will be in the show notes. And as part of today's episode, we're supporting an organization. Jess, do you want to talk a little bit about the organization that we're supporting? And maybe our listeners, if they can, can also support?

Jess: We're gonna be supporting Survived & Punished, which I thought was really appropriate because Buffy fights back. I also don't want us to miss the fact that Buffy fought back.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: Mmhmm.

Jess: And she got out of it. She stopped it.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Alba: Hell yeah.

Jess: Which gets lost a lot.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jess: Buffy can fight back not only because she's a superhero, but because she's a young white woman. And she fights back and somehow, police are called, she's likely gonna be believed that it was her that was being harmed. That's not the case for so many, especially people of color, especially women, trans, nonbinary people of color, people with disabilities who, when they fight back against the people who are causing them harm, are—instead of being believed—instead, they are incarcerated. And are left there for sometimes many, many, many years. And so I thought that was a really appropriate organization to support.

Kristin: Yes. Yes. And again, links to that organization will be in the show notes. We'll be donating and if you can, you should too. Jess, Alba, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Jess: Thank you.

Alba: Thank *you*.

[CHIME]