

Buffering the Vampire Slayer
Episode 0.38.02: Unbury Your Gays

Kristin: Hey there. This is your warning. This episode contains spoilers through the end of Season 7 of the show, Buffy the Vampire Slayer. If you haven't watched it yet, [whispers] wait. Come back after you have.

[CHIME]

Kristin: Hi, everyone. Are you sick of hearing my voice in your ears yet? This is episode four inside of one week, and I have been talking on all of them. This episode is really very special to me. As many of you already know, I'm real queer. [laughs] And as you probably know if you listen to this podcast, the work that I did and still do, aside from talking about Buffy the Vampire Slayer, is working with and for LGBTQ+ communities. So in approaching Seeing Red, obviously it's a daunting task. [laughs] And it's a really hard episode. And there was a lot of thinking that Jenny and I both did, and then we did with a larger team as we got closer and closer. But something that I always knew was that I wanted to do something very special for Tara, and in talking about the loss of Tara Maclay. Being queer and working in queer community means that I have been very aware of the Bury Your Gays trope for a long time. And I've known for a long time that Tara was and is one of the most talked about losses in that narrative. But I wasn't sure what the episode would look like, what I would dig into, who I would speak with, and on and on.

And some of that got answered for me this June, when a listener of ours, whose name is Emma, wrote me an email. I'm just gonna read—it's short—it's a short little email. But I'm gonna read it to you, because it's kind of how this all began. Emma said, "Hello. I'm not sure if you already know about the Kitten Board. I can't remember hearing you mention it before. Forgive me if I'm telling you something you already know, but it was the only place to be for a Willow and Tara fan back in the day, and had a very Buffering vibe. It was a safe space for the gay Buffy community and also the best destination [laughs] if you wanted hot, hot fanfic." Some things have not changed. "It's also where I met my wife, so it holds a particularly special place in my heart. Obviously, the community was devastated as Tara's death and Willow's emergence as the big bad played out, so much so that the following FAQ was born and became, in my opinion, one of the most important pieces of writing on this issue." Emma then links to the Kitten Board.

Now, let's just stop here before I finish the last couple of sentences and just say, at the top. So here's the deal with the Kitten Board. If you were alive in the 90s and the early aughts, you were aware of the fact that we did talk on the internet at that

time, but we certainly did not talk on the internet like we do now. There wasn't social media. There was just a brand new ability to email each other, most of us didn't get it. [laughs] And then there were chat rooms and message boards. And you've heard us talk about message boards and forums and all of those things in the podcast before. The Kitten Board, as Emma said, was where many, many, many, many people who saw Willow and Tara on their television screens and either celebrated that relationship or knew that it meant something to them but they weren't quite sure what went.

Emma finishes the email: "If you haven't read this post," and I'll talk about the post a little bit more in a second, "I really hope it will feature in your coverage of these episodes, because it was so important at the time. We board members also raised money and donated it in Tara's name to the Trevor Project, something that at the time was out of the ordinary, and pretty hard with no social media to help you go viral. Anyway, thanks so much for listening, and as I said, I hope you'll consider including this, as to me, no discussion of this point in Buffy's history is complete without it." [laughs] Emma had no idea that not only would we include what she had sent, but also that I would email her back and be like, can you *please* talk to me? Tell me.

I am not a historian. I am not an anthropologist. [laughing] I think I refer to myself as an anthropologist at some point in this conversation. But I have such a fascination with queer history, with the history that, like, queer communities have written down and recorded along the way, have gathered—this episode now being a part of that—by sitting down and talking to people who were there then. And so, Emma was just this incredible light that was there for me. Like, "I was there, I met my wife in this place, I have stories, I have—" and I know so many of you are probably like, "I was on the Kitten Board too!" Right? We have a lot of people who were there. And I was just so, so excited to find Emma.

Before I talk a little bit about the FAQ, just to set us up before we jump into these conversations. I will say that yes, there are two conversations here inside of this episode. And that's because, if you have listened to our episode on The Body, you already have met Jen Malkowski, a brilliant, brilliant human, who is not only queer and was also on the Kitten Board, but is a university professor who focuses specifically on the portrayal of death in media. So we spoke with Jen on The Body and truly, to date, it is one of my favorite conversations that I've ever had and ever had the privilege and honor of being able to share. And so, I also knew that I wanted to have a conversation with Jen, both on their experience as another member of the Kitten Board. And also to dig a little deeper with them on some of these tropes and some of these themes and some of the things that we're talking about when we say "bury your gays," or, as the FAQ post was titled, "The Lesbian

Cliche FAQ.” Of course, the link to the Kitten Board’s post, The Lesbian Cliche FAQ, is in the show notes, because I certainly cannot read the whole thing to you.

But the summary of what’s contained in here, and what I’m gonna talk about with both Emma first, and then Jen second, is the idea that for the longest time in the history of media, queer characters have died. And at the start, part of the reason that those characters were killed off in one way or another was also attached with them being an evil character, a sick character, a character who there was something wrong with them. And so, they needed to go away. The death of Tara, of course, doesn’t fit into the pocket of Tara being a character whose queerness was painted as bad, as inherently bad. We’ve seen an incredibly beautiful relationship between Willow and Tara. But the fact that Tara died still fits inside of this narrative.

And so this whole FAQ post that we’ll reference and talk about is answering the most commonly asked questions. Like, “what is the cliché?” “Can we *never* kill off a queer character?” “If Tara lived a full life and was a fully developed character, how could it still be the cliché?” “It’s just one character. Why is it that big of a deal?” “Shouldn’t you just be grateful that they gave you gay characters at all?” I could go on and on. But that’s the idea, and you can click on the link and read this post. It’s a really brilliant post. And the authors’ usernames—this is a post written in 2002—are Kyraroc and Willowlicious. And you can see, you know, of course, their usernames and this whole FAQ in the link.

The structure of this episode will be a conversation that I had with Emma, and it’s mostly Emma. I’ve taken myself out of a lot of the conversation. Because I really do look at it as this beautiful, brilliant capture of history that is really important. And also, a brilliant, beautiful capture of the story that should have been listened to at the time, ‘cause people were talking about it. And also, the story that still needs to be listened to. Something fascinating to me about talking with both Emma and Jen is that both of them knew what was going to happen at the end of this episode. There are a lot of ways that you’ll hear that queer community took care of each other after this loss, and made themselves feel heard and seen in ways that the show was not doing and the writers of the show were not doing. And I just think it is really stunning that one of those ways of taking care of each other was to say, I need to tell you about this, because you can’t just see it happen in real time. You can’t be surprised by this. This—it’s important. So both Emma and Jen—and we’ll talk about this—knew what was going to happen before they saw the episode. The first—Emma actually read the transcript of the episode before ever watching it.

You’ll also hear in the conversation with Emma a light reference to a quote from one of the writers of the show. So before you go looking it up, don’t worry, I’m

gonna actually read the whole quote to you once I get to the conversation with Jen. So I'm going to leave us here. I will say, clearly and this is in the show notes, this is a spoiler-full conversation. I hope that you enjoy. I hope this is meaningful to you. And also, please, please, please, write to us, reply to us, comment on this post if you're listening to it on Patreon. Tell us your stories if you were on the Kitten Board. I think it's a really brilliant thing to continue to collect our histories, in a lot of ways. And this is one.

[Buffering theme plays]

Kristin: Hello.

Emma: Hello, how are you?

Kristin: Good, how are you?

Emma: I'm good, thank you.

Kristin: Welcome to the podcast. I want to start us off with the Buffy boards, because that's, like, a thing that I know a lot of our listenership did.

Emma: Yeah.

Kristin: I did not, obviously. I only started watching the show recently. But I would just love to hear your experience, like, finding that board and, like, what was that all about? What was that like?

Emma: Yeah, so as I said in my email, this is 20 years ago and I am now 46. [laughs] So the memory is not the best.

Kristin: Sure.

Emma: But—so I was only on the Kitten Board. I didn't go on any of the other Buffy boards. And obviously at the time, there was no social media, so like, forums were where it was at. And I don't know how I stumbled across it. I was probably—'cause I was—like, I was closeted at the time and hadn't really accepted that I was gay. I knew I was, but I hadn't really kind of—it was just something that I kind of pushed to the side.

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: So I was probably telling myself that I just liked to—[laughter] the aesthetic of Willow and Tara and it had nothing to do with being gay.

Kristin: Sure, sure, sure.

Emma: So yeah, I was probably just, you know, googling—well, yeah, I'm pretty sure you could google at that time. I don't know. And just looking for Willow and Tara content, I guess. 'Cause they'd just struck such a chord with me, and again, probably didn't really accept the reasons why at that time. And yeah, I think I just stumbled across the board and was like, oh wow, this place is amazing. [laughter] Yeah, it just felt immediately like a safe space. And that kind of became where I accepted who I was and my online persona and was still very much in the closet in real life.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Emma: So that was where, you know, family was, I suppose.

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: You know, that found family. You know, you could just be who you really were. So yeah, I mean, it does remind me very much of Buffering. Just really supportive community. You know, lots of kind of threads around, you know, oh, I'm about to come out, I'm about to tell my parents, like, can I have encouragement? You know, all those kind of things and there was always a daily thread and it was like, "It's talking to Kristin day, MKF." So like—for Miss Kitty Fantastico. [laughter] Or like, "It's Insane Troll Logic talking to Kristin day," something like that. And there were like, different levels of members. So like, the more you posted, you moved up a level. So there would be an Insane Troll Logic level. There was Willow Hand. [laughter] Sassy Eggs was another one, for the jigging booby eggs. [laughter] So it was kind of like, you know, you were furiously typing posts, I suppose, trying to move up a level. Yeah, so that was kinda fun, so there was little stuff like that.

Kristin: And were you—like, on the boards—I mean, I know, obviously, in the Buffering group specifically there are all these subgroups and people, geographically, can also, like, find each other. Like, people who are located in the same cities or close to each other. Was that also part of the board experience that you had? Like, did you meet up with people ever?

Emma: There was actually a Kitten Board convention in Las Vegas. [laughs]

Kristin: Oh my god! Did you go?!

Emma: I sure did. [laughter]

Kristin: Wow, you really buried the lead there, Emma. [laughter] As the anthropologist? I don't know, what am I? A detective? I don't know. But I just wanna know—I wanna know what was happening! Anything you can share.

Emma: I remember that we went to a club and we stupidly did not bring our passports. 'Cause we were like—

Kristin: Used to being—only having to clear 18, not 21.

Emma: Yeah, yeah. Like, you know, if you got carded here, it'd be like, why?! [crosstalk] [laughter] 'Cause it would just never happen. So I remember we had to sweet talk the guy at the door to let us in. And I remember we played pool. I think it was us and then one other person who came from the UK, and everybody else was either American or Canadian. And we were playing pool and I remember there being some dispute or some discrepancy between the rules between the—

Kristin: Oh! [laughter]

Emma: Europeans and the Americans. [laughter] And I can't even remember what it was. And then, the cushions are very different, the pockets are different. So like, every time—like, balls were bouncing out everywhere. And then eventually, we were like, okay. So this is the difference, like, the—you know, you need to [inaudible] this way. And then everyone thought that we were hustling because we suddenly improved, [laughter] once we worked out the difference between the tables. But no, we—[laughs] they thought we were pretending to lose. [laughter]

Kristin: Oh my gosh. And so like, was it—it was like a meetup. There weren't planned—it wasn't like there was an agenda. It was sort of like, we're gonna go to a bar, we're gonna go play pool, we're gonna, like, hang out wherever, kind of casual?

Emma: Yeah, so there were certain things planned. Like, some people went to see, like, Cirque du Soleil. We couldn't afford it, 'cause we'd obviously had to pay for flights to come from England. [laughter]

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: And there were certain, like, restaurant meetups and things like that. There wasn't a Willow and Tara agenda. I know that, like, there were certain times where we had, like, sort of like a conference room booked out and everyone would sit around and sort of discuss things and chat about stuff. And talk about people's fanfic and, you know, that kind of thing.

Kristin: Oh my god. Just sliding fanfiction under the table to each other.

Emma: [laughs] Yeah

Kristin: I guess over the table, because it's a Kitten convention. [laughter] So you met your wife—you met your wife on the board. That was how you connected. But she didn't live in the place where you lived, she lived farther away?

Emma: So yeah, there were sort of threads where you could introduce yourself and like, say where you're from.

Kristin: Right.

Emma: And I think there might have been ones for, like, you know, European—like, a thread for European kittens or whatever. She was living in Ireland and I was in England. And she followed the same football team as me.

Kristin: Uh-huh.

Emma: So she was kind of, A., close by. B., followed the same football team and also loved Willow and Tara. [Kristin laughs] So it's like, okay, now I'll reach out to this person. And then—so we used to chat on the board a bit. And then that kind of moved to Yahoo Messenger, which was—

Kristin: Oh, wow. Yeah.

Emma: Yeah. [laughter] And then, yeah, so we kind of talked quite a bit on there. And she sent me mixed CDs and Indigo Girls CDs. I mean, it was classic. [laughs]

Kristin: Ahh! [Emma laughs] Oh, you're killing me, you're killing me! [laughter] Just so, like—so beautifully nostalgic, you know? [Emma laughs] And like, I know that—I'm sure you don't have to be, like, a lesbian of a certain age to get the idea. But like, certainly if you are a lesbian of a certain age, you are just tipping over with the nostalgia of—[Emma laughs] like, just thinking of the two of you sending mix tapes and finding each other on message boards for Willow and Tara.

Emma: Yeah.

Kristin: Oh, what a beautiful love story. Okay, so continue. [laughter]

Emma: So we chatted on Yahoo Messenger for a while and via email and stuff. And then eventually, we were like, oh, maybe we should call each other. Which was, like, you know, a big scary moment.

Kristin: Ugh, yeah. I got nervous for you, 26 years later, so. [laughter]

Emma: So yeah, she was—she was, like, on a family trip to a different part of Ireland and called me from outside a pub. [laughs] We just kind of hit it off. And I was like, wow, her Irish accent's amazing. You know, like, sucker for an Irish accent. [Kristin laughs] Yeah, and then, it—you know, obviously then it was just like, phone calls kind of every night. And eventually, in the January, we met up. It was like a confirmation of everything that you've sort of built up over a period of time.

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: So it doesn't feel like, you know, like you're on a first date or anything.

Kristin: Sure, sure, of course.

Emma: 'Cause you've already had that kind of—you've already built up a relationship. And then after that, it was just kind of like, however often we could afford to fly, I suppose. But yeah, so we kind of did a few trips backwards and forwards. And then, like I said, we went to Vegas in February. I moved to Ireland in the June or July of that year, I think. Yeah, and then we lived there for, like, a year or two and then came back to England 'cause that was—it was—we came over the year before civil partnerships came in here.

Kristin: Okay.

Emma: So that was kind of like a big reason why, 'cause we knew we would have rights here.

Kristin: Yeah, yeah. So talk to me a little bit about the fact that you knew what was going to happen. You had read the transcript of this episode before it aired.

Emma: For a really long time, there had been rumors that a Scooby was gonna die.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Emma: So obviously, everyone was really worried about who it was gonna be. And then progressively, it became: we think it's gonna be Tara. It's definitely going to be Tara, this is when it's gonna happen. And then, you know, you'd be waiting for the episode synopsis to come out. And then obviously when it came out, and it was, like, confirmed. But then, there was still that kind of like, okay, well, it doesn't mean she's gonna stay dead.

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: But there was already kind of rumors that the arc was gonna be, Willow is gonna go evil.

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: She's gonna wanna destroy the world, et cetera. So you kind of thought Tara's not coming back.

Kristin: Right. I can't believe that your first—like, that the way that you intook that information for the first time was reading it. Through, like—I'm just imagining a bunch of Angelina Jolies hacking into feeds, like, getting...[laughter]

Emma: Yeah. It's kind of mad now, when I think about it. I guess it helped. A., to be spoiled, because you really wouldn't wanna just see that. Because, like, I actually can't imagine watching that episode and not knowing what happens at the end. Because you would just be so blissfully happy. You never had that content, that Willow and Tara content, before. Really kind of properly being treated like any other couple. You know, the scenes in bed, just the banter between them. Like, you know, those little moments. You just—and then to have all that taken away, you know, and not see it coming.

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: You know, thankfully [laughs] I knew exactly what was coming. It didn't make it—

Kristin: You knew and—

Emma: I mean, it still hurt. But—

Kristin: Right. Well, and you—not only did you know in advance, but you also were surrounded by, I imagine, a community that was very upset and grieving and all of those things together.

Emma: Yes.

Kristin: Which I would imagine is helpful?

Emma: Yeah. Yeah, for sure. I mean, I just would spend endless hours on there. Like, as soon as I came back from work, I would be straight on the Kitten Board. And you know, joining in the conversations and reading what other people had said. And being immersed in the whole thing. Because it was just...they were so unique at that time. There wasn't really anything else that—it was the first time I'd ever been invested in a relationship like that before. I'm not saying it would have been easier for—like, if it happened now, if we were in 2021 and Willow and Tara were on TV and that happened, I'm not saying it would be easier for fans now. But back then, I think the proportion of people who weren't out or weren't living their best gay lives would have been higher.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Emma: And I think that that made it really hard to deal with for people, because they were like their kind of beacon of hope. And especially being in everyone's living rooms and kind of having those kind of representations on TV in front of your family and that sort of thing. I think it was a really, really hard time for a lot of people.

Kristin: Yeah. Can you talk to me a little bit more about the FAQ thread? That's sort of how you and I came together, is that you shared that with me. What was—what was happening at that time?

Emma: At the time that it happened, obviously, there was a lot of processing and there was a lot of talk about, you know, this is part of the cliché and there were people who didn't already know what that was. So there was a lot of kind of more scholarly people, you know, sort of talking about the history of gay representation on TV and cinema and that kind of thing. And then it kind of morphed into, there needs to be something written around how Willow and Tara fit into this. And you know, their place in the world and why they were important, and the damage that it's caused. And how we kind of feel as a consequence of what's happened. The authors were pained to point out that they didn't feel like anyone at Mutant Enemy was homophobic or anything like that. But you know, kind of quite critical around things that had been said prior to Tara's death around, you know, "she's not going

anywhere, she's a big part of the show." I don't know whether at the time, they knew what they were gonna do.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Emma: But it's ill-advised to kind of say anything. And I think the biggest thing for me about that was how much they mixed up, you know, the lesbian relationship with magic. And then the magic becomes dark and evil and addictive.

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: And that whole mixed metaphor. And then, you know, the two kind of crashing together in Seeing Red in a really horrible way. You know, the lesbian sex that was metaphor in that episode becomes literal, and that is the moment when Tara is killed. And it just feels like, how could you not have seen that?

Kristin: You had to. Right? You had to. I was thinking about this today in a totally different context. But like, people will do backflips, literally, to justify getting what they need. Right? It's like, if they needed this device, they needed Willow to become the big bad of Season 6, they needed—whatever they needed to tell their story—

Emma: Yeah.

Kristin: Was more important than listening to a community, fully there, fully present, fully—there's a whole community of people who could have talked to you about their feelings on this—

Emma: Yeah.

Kristin: That was disregarded. And like, that's just because what they wanted was more important, right? Like, right?

Emma: Yeah, and that kind of—it's frustrating, for a number of reasons. Because it's like a, what? A three-episode arc? As Willow as the Big Bad? So you've done all of that just for a three-episode arc to make her the Big Bad of Season 6.

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: This is where myself and my wife diverge, because she will not watch it. She won't watch Season 6.

Kristin: The whole season?

Emma: She—yeah. She likes elements of it, but she certainly won't watch Seeing Red, 'cause it upsets her too much, or anything past that. I've just done a rewatch with our son. I've got to the point where I'm still incredibly angry and upset about Tara. But I've got to the point where I can appreciate the insanely camp nature of [laughs] Dark Magic Willow.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Emma: You know, her whole, "fly, my pretty, fly!" [laughter] And the wagging finger, "shame on you." Like, it's so camp. And I think if this was like an alternate universe, we would love Dark Magic Willow as much as we love Doppelgangland Willow.

Kristin: Yeah.

Emma: Because she's great and she's funny. But you can't really separate—it's hard to separate it out from the rest of what happens. I just—I try and compartmentalize it. [laughs]

Kristin: Yeah, for sure. Emma, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you wanna share? Anything that you've uncovered on your journey down Kitten Board lane?

Emma: I did find some posts of mine when I was doing some research for this. [laughs] So that was quite fun. My signature on there was "Bite me, Harris" which just made me laugh so much. [laughter]

Kristin: Ohhh, see?

Emma: Sums up probably how I was feeling at the time.

Kristin: That's some credit that you get for, you know, 2003. [Emma laughs] You know, well ahead of the Buffering the Vampire Slayer opinions on Xander Harris. [laughs]

Emma: Yeah.

Kristin: Ugh, Emma, this has been so freaking great. I can't thank you enough. This is just, like—this is, like, really the Venn diagram of me. [Emma laughs] Is like, you know, here I—I do this podcast and I love the show and I love to talk about,

you know, all the things that happen and it's super fun and it's super problematic and like, yadda yadda yadda. But like, this is, like, the other huge piece of me and my work, is to like, really get to talk to somebody who can tell me, like, first person, some of the experience. And I know you're just one person, but it's just—it's just magical to have this in the, like, library of information that we're collecting. So—

Emma: Yeah. Well, I'm more than happy to talk about Buffy and life and gay stuff, any time. [laughter]

Kristin: Amazing. That's my motto, so. [laughter]

[CHIME]

Kristin: Oh my gosh. Hi, it's me, Kristin, again. We're about to go over to further this conversation with Jen Malkowski. And before we do, I just wanted to tell you a couple of other things I learned about Emma and the Kitten Board that didn't make it into the main interview. The first thing, which I think is really important to note and which Jen and I will talk about more, is that after this episode aired and that processing on the Kitten Board happened, this thread—this FAQ thread—went up. And at that time or around that time, the rule on the Kitten Board became that the reality on that board of Tara and Willow stopped before the last few minutes of Seeing Red. And didn't include any of Season 7, didn't include the rest of Season 6. This was what they would talk about on the board, and if you wanted to talk about anything past that, you could go to one of the threads that was designated for that purpose.

And the last thing is just this very cool full-circle thing, which is that Emma has a son who is eleven years old. And she told me when we talked that he is a massive fan of the music of one Jenny Owen Youngs, and goes to her online shows, and even has put in a few requests that Jenny has played. It's just—it's just nice, you know? So I'm just putting some nice things in your ears. And now, let's go and talk to Jen Malkowski, who is simply brilliant and always a delight to listen to.

[CHIME]

Kristin: Wow. What—just, you know, the most hopeful thing of all time is when we get to bring you, Jen Malkowski, back to the podcast. [laughter]

Jen: Someone has died. Call Jen Malkowski. That's my bat signal.

Kristin: Yeah, yeah. I'm like, oh, call the death expert. [laughter] I referred to you as a scholar of death in a recent conversation. So...

Jen: Yeah, I guess that's accurate.

Kristin: Right? It felt legit. Welcome back.

Jen: Thanks so much for having me back again.

Kristin: Oh my gosh, always a delight to have you on the podcast. Truly. Like, I say—I joke about, like, oh no. If we have Jen back, [Jen laughs] that means someone has died. But really, I mean, you're...I don't have to put too fine a point on this, because all of our listeners know this as much as I do. But your conversation that you had with us on The Body—all the conversations you've had with us. But especially the conversation that you had with us around The Body was just so massively impactful for so many people. And it's just really, really rad to have your voice and your experience. And in this case, really coming at this from a few vantage points—

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: As a queer person and also, like I now will call you forever, a scholar of death. [laughs]

Jen: Right, yeah, it's true. A scholar of death and I did, you know, watch this episode in real time, when it aired, as an out queer person who had been very invested in Willow and Tara. So yeah, I do have a couple of angles on this one. You know, I think that, like, queer women's community was—[laughs] not all queer women in 2002 watched this show or cared about these characters. But there were a lot of people who were, like, really upset and really hurt and really grieving this TV character, who were seeing all of this pushback, invalidating their feelings and saying, "well, the Buffy writers aren't homophobic, so what's the problem here?" And just the lengths that they had to go to to defend this position of like—that's basically saying, I have a right to be hurt by this. You know, I have a right to think that this was unjust, what happened on this show, and unfortunate.

Kristin: Truly, there's so much in that FAQ where they are saying, we would like to be very clear, we do not think anyone at Mutant Enemy is homophobic. Like, let us first take away your fear—

Jen: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Kristin: Writers, that we are calling you bad or homophobic or whatever. And now will you listen?

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: To why this has harmed us and hurt us?

Jen: Definitely. I think it's kind of neat to look back at that thread and realize that, as much as it feels sometimes like things don't get better in representation, there are still so many problems, you know, with all kinds of representation, you know, of marginalized folks. We have so much more language now. We have so many more precedents for how to talk about: intent isn't the same as impact. How to talk about—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: Harmful tropes, like, the power that media has, all of that. But in 2002, I think it was harder for people to listen and to have this kind of conversation taken seriously.

Kristin: Yeah. Yeah, and—yes, and also, you know, I've—obviously, as a queer person myself and as somebody who has done a lot of research and work in queer history and what have you. Some of these things I have been aware of, but I've also uncovered a lot of specifics as I've dug. For example, I knew that Tara was one of these dead lesbians—

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: For lack of a better turn of phrase. But I also knew that Lexa from The 100 was a really massive character in this same trope.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And when I was reading about them, not only did I not realize that Lexa was 2016, I think. So like, we're talking 14 frickin' years [Jen laughs] after this outcry is documented and has happened. But also, that—'cause I didn't watch The 100. I read "cause of Lexa's death: stray fucking bullet!" Are you kidding me?! [both laugh] So, not to scream, right at the top. But like, I just...as much as I wanna give, like, some measure of credit—

Jen: Mmm.

Kristin: To it being 2002.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: I'm just not sure how much credit is deserved—

Jen: Right.

Kristin: Given the fact that 14 years later, now having these, like, reams of posts [Jen laughs] clearly illustrating why this is harmful. And having the writers say, "Oh, we didn't know. [Jen laughs] We're so sorry, we didn't know." Like, if we give them that credit, then what about the next crew, and the crew after that?

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And the crew—so.

Jen: It's almost as if...[Kristin laughs] the people writing these shows...are not queer women.

Kristin: [sarcastically] Hmm! [laughs]

Jen: And...haven't done any research. [laughter]

Kristin: HmMMM!

Jen: Maybe there's a common thread. [laughs]

Kristin: Right, and—

Jen: Linking some of these problems.

Kristin: I want to talk—so there's two things that have immediately jumped to my mind. But one is, we're talking about Bury Your Gays, we're talking about all of these, like, lesbian and bisexual women specifically that have been killed off. And you shared—you shared something with me, before the start of this call, that kind of made my brain explode in two ways. So do you wanna talk for a second about what you shared with me?

Jen: Yeah. So I just wanted to bring into this conversation a really important book that was published in 1981 by Vito Russo. And I don't—

Kristin: No relation.

Jen: [laughs] That's right. So I—you know, I don't have all the background on, you know, this as a research project or him as a historian. But basically, you know, he was a queer man who wrote the first—I think—the first published history of representations of homosexuality in film and television that was really comprehensive. It was—it's, like, a thick book. It's just anecdote after anecdote after anecdote. It's pretty encyclopedic. And he's writing about this history of representation up until 1981, which basically is mostly bad. [laughs]

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: Like, it's mostly bad, in all the ways that bad might resonate—

Kristin: [laughs] Yeah.

Jen: For us today. Not that there wasn't anything of value, not that people didn't find, you know, representations that meant something to them in that time. But he ends the book with an appendix called The Necrology. And this is just a straight list of all the films in which a queer character dies, the character who dies, and the cause of death. And there's a lot of films on this list. And you know, so out of about—I don't know, maybe like, 30 films here. It's straight down the line, suicide, suicide, suicide, murder, murder, murder, murder, murder, murder. And—

Kristin: That's the sound—that's the audiogram for this episode. [Jen laughs] It's just you saying "suicide, suicide, su—murder, murder."

Jen: Murder, murder, murder. [Kristin laughs] Yeah, so it's really powerful to me to look back on this document, you know, published in 1981. And you were saying, oh, it's like the list that Autostraddle put up. You know, their comprehensive cataloguing. And it's just, I think, comforting to see, you know, that our queer history is full of, you know, people like you, who are paying attention [laughs] to what's going on in media. And who are having these conversations and cataloguing and pushing back against representations of our community that are, like, not for us, by us. You know?

Kristin: Right.

Jen: And not in our interest, in a lot of cases.

Kristin: The cataloguing is—like, it makes—I feel like probably the closest I've come to weeping in any of the tapings surrounding this episode is just thinking

about the cataloguing. Especially when you showed me this Vito Russo—sort of like, the way that the book was completed. And I just seen—I knew that there was a cataloguing of—and on Autostraddle, to be specific, it is simply dead lesbian and bisexual characters on TV. And how they died. And right now, there's 214.

Jen: Mmm.

Kristin: The list begins in...1976. Let's see who it was in 1976, let's see who our first was. Julie in a show called Executive Suite. She was hit by a car. Her love interest had just walked into traffic after realizing her lesbianism—

Jen: Mmm.

Kristin: And Julie was chasing her. So—

Jen: Right.

Kristin: It's all there for—we got—that's like the—

Jen: [simultaneously] Well, that's a—yeah, that's a suicide attempt and—

Kristin: [simultaneously] And a—

Jen: I guess an accidental violent...[laughter]

Kristin: Yeah. Yeah.

Jen: Um, death, yeah.

Kristin: But yeah, it's just—it's—I think it's just—it makes me emotional to think about. Because I mean, you know, Riese on Autostraddle cataloguing this now is of course very different than Vito Russo cataloguing it in the 80s. But it's still, like...how many people even know that these catalogues exist until there's a reason to call on them?

Jen: Mmm.

Kristin: And then they're there. It's like—

Jen: Right.

Kristin: Doing the work that we know will, like, carry more value later.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: Even if it's not in our lifetime, kind of a deal. And it makes me very...emotional. Because I think it's powerful.

Jen: I think the tough part, you know, in terms of what you're saying there, how many people know it's there? You know, and we need to call it up when something terrible has already happened, you know, in media, to characters we've invested emotions in—is you look back at some of the kind of archived responses from the Buffy writers. And you know, they said out front, “We realize how important Tara is to everybody. We're not gonna do anything to her. She is gonna still be on the show. She and Willow are happy.” And they're saying that all the way through. And you can see that the fans are anxious, right?

Kristin: Yes.

Jen: Because of what has happened to them every single time...[laughs] you know, they've invested in a queer woman in media, or so often, right? And this show, just to emphasize, like, Buffy did a great thing by having a regular, you know, every week, you know, lesbian couple on the show, for two seasons. That was unprecedented. It wasn't anywhere else on TV at that time. It meant so much to people. And the fans were forecasting to the writers, like—

Kristin: Don't—

Jen: [simultaneously] “This matters to us. Please don't.”

Kristin: Yes.

Jen: “Please don't do this.”

Kristin: Please don't! Like, we have—it's not even like we're saying, I wonder if the queer people at the time were worried. [Jen laughs] Like, we literally are here, in this space. I have at least two of you saying—

Jen: [laughing] Right.

Kristin: We were there! We were saying it! We have a record of it because of these forums. Like, it's—it was there and...and I've seen—you know, I've been sort of hanging out on the boards a bit from the past. And I saw somebody say basically this, which is just, like, it's almost worse.

Jen: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Kristin: It's almost worse that you did it so right—

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: And then still did this than it would have been if you had just done it wrong. [laughter] Because like... 'cause we cared so much about them.

Jen: Yeah. And I think that—I mean, I think that something that I would imagine—I don't think the writers grasped, like, what those characters meant to the community, in the way that you grasp it when you've lived it. Right?

Kristin: Yeah. Yeah.

Jen: Like, maybe they knew, but they probably didn't *know* know.

Kristin: They didn't know enough to not say, "but..." I'm just gonna—so I'm gonna read—if I may, Jen—

Jen: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Kristin: Just a small bit of a writer's quote that—this is from 2002 or—

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: It's from after it has already happened and there has been an outcry from fandom. But—from fucking fandom who was like, "Please—" like we just said, "Please don't, please don't, please don't." And then this happened, there's an outcry. I'm not saying the writer's name, because I—like, you can find it, if you want to. I'm not about to take somebody down by name from 20 years ago. But the quote is important.

"In my experience, people who cite the dead lesbian cliché in reference to Tara do not understand..." [laughs] I'm sorry, I'm already upset. [both laugh] "Do not understand the cliché itself." Let me clear that this is a white man, okay? [Jen laughs] A white, straight man. To my knowledge. "Presentations of lesbians in film and television have historically presented these women as troubled, twisted and desperate." This is true. Like, this is me offing the quote now—off of the quote now. But like, you know, yes. In the earlier representations in television, we saw—just

like I read that—the first lesbian to die on TV, according to Autostraddle. It was like, oh no, I’m a lesbian, that’s horrible—

Jen: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Kristin: So I should definitely die. “They were not accepted by society and the only appropriate ending for them was either to be killed or to commit suicide, thus denying these characters any chance at happiness. And also, providing for the audience a rather clean solution to an embarrassing problem: how to get rid of the lesbian. In the character of Tara, we carefully constructed a young woman who was vibrant, alive, self-sufficient, funny, sexy, compassionate, strong, and learning to stand on her own two feet. We wanted you to love her so that when we took her away—” I can’t, with some of these sentences! [Jen laughs] What?! “The audience would feel her absence as something painful, just as Willow did, and absolutely not as relief, as the cliché holds. The character was, in my opinion, in stark contrast to and the exact opposite of the old lesbian cliché.” Uhh...here comes—are you ready?

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: “In characterizing Tara’s death as yet another in the string of clichéd lesbian deaths, you indicate you do not see Tara as anything but a lesbian. You do not see her as the unique character she was, but rather just as a woman who had sex with women, and, in—” It’s, like, almost impossible for me to read this.

Jen: [laughs] You can do it, Kristin.

Kristin: “And in doing so, you reveal your own homophobia, your own prejudice and, more than anything else, your own lack of understanding of what we did with that character.” [exhales]

Jen: Don’t forget this person closes, “Thanks for the opportunity to say so.” [both laugh]

Kristin: I couldn’t do it. [Jen laughs] I needed—I needed an assist with the last line. This quote was posted, I wanna just say, on a board that was not the Kitten Board, okay? This was not—the only reason that it was ever put on the Kitten Board is because somebody from the Kitten Board saw this was posted on another board and brought it into the Kitten Board—

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Fold. So I just read a quote that hurt me deeply, [Jen laughs] and I'm just gonna let you talk about it for a second, Jen. [laughs]

Jen: Yeah. I mean, you know, I was reflecting back on this and thinking, I think some progress we have made since this time is that TV writers would not...[laughing] say something quite like this anymore. [laughs]

Kristin: No. Even if they thought it, they definitely wouldn't say it.

Jen: Even if they thought it. [Kristin laughs] I mean, the gall of—you know, because who was saying, "You shouldn't have killed Tara—"

Kristin: Yes.

Jen: "This is part of this cliché." It was queer women. [laughs] So he's saying, queer women, this is your own internalized homophobia manifesting. You know, you didn't see Tara as a person. I mean, the whole thing is a contradiction in terms.

Kristin: Yeah. Yeah.

Jen: If you didn't see Tara as a person, you wouldn't be upset about this.

Kristin: Right.

Jen: If you're upset about this, [Kristin laughs] you obviously didn't see Tara as a person. [laughs] But you know, the part that really strikes me—and that I think reveals something that's underlying a lot of the show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Which again, I love. I love this show. But you know, this person says, "We wanted you to love her so that when we took her away, the audience would feel her absence as something painful." You know, this is a show with great writers, and writers who really know how to, like, get you to invest. And then they, like, stab and twist the knife real good.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: And there's something, I think, you know—those of us who like the show can own about, like, yeah, maybe I enjoy those kind of emotional contortions that the show creates. Like, I love the end of *Becoming Part Two*. I love *The Gift*.

Kristin: Yes.

Jen: I love how sad those episodes make me—

Kristin: Yes.

Jen: And how powerful they are. But there's, like, kind of a hint of, like, a sadism here, that's not like a fun, sexy sadism. [laughs] That's kind of about having power over your audience, having power to, like, hurt your audience—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: In a certain way that I'm not saying is the intention of, you know, this writer in the way he's framing this. But I think is an undercurrent from, you know, a lot of the framing of difficult moments on the show.

Kristin: Totally. Totally. And it's just—I mean. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the...I think you used the word "gall"?

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: To not—not only not listen to the reasoning, but to think that you know better.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Right? 'Cause that's really what it is, is like, you'll get—you'll get where—you'll get to where I'm at. You just need a little more time with it. And also, that like, I can't ever go back in time and be inside that writers' room. But it sure as hell seems like they knew that Willow needed to turn and be the big bad of the end of this season. And what could cause—like, that they just couldn't come up with another idea that would do it. So even though they knew they shouldn't kill Tara, even though they knew that it would harm a community, they—like you said—didn't understand the level or the depth of that harm. And they also just said, well, it's the easiest way.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And as a writer, that is like, yeah. I mean, certainly.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: Willow cares so much about Tara. I mean, there's a whole other conversation there about, like, how then Willow tries to destroy the world with her grief.

Jen: Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. [both laughing] Makes logical sense for that character. [laughter]

Kristin: Oh, god...

Jen: But yeah, I mean.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: And you know, yes. It's narratively the easiest way to push a character over the edge and make them do something really extreme. You know, if you're writing a script—is to take away a person they love in, like, a horrible, unjust, violent way. Coincidentally, it's almost always women. [laughter] That like—you know? I mean, this—like, people have written all over the place about fridging and, like, the—you know, the trope of killing off, you know, a female, usually romantic interest to motivate usually a man, you know, on some kind of quest or vengeance or pursuit or whatever.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: That I think, you know...I mean, it frames the character as disposable. And that's something—I think when we get into talking about the actual scene—we see the ways that the writers signal, "Tara was a disposable character." Unfortunately, to them.

Kristin: Yes, let's talk about the scene.

Jen: Yeah. So the—you know, I think there's the narrative context for this scene, and then there's the aesthetic realization of the scene. Right? You know, in terms of narrative, like, how do we see that, like, Tara is used as a disposable character? You know, one way we see it is that her death is collateral damage. Right?

Kristin: Right.

Jen: This is a stray gunshot wound—[laughs] there's kind of no bigger, like, F you to a character—

Kristin: Truly.

Jen: Than to be like, you're just gonna die by accident.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: When you think about other characters who have died on the show, there's been...always, like, a...you know, a kind of, like, messaging, a kind of arc, a kind of drama to it, right? Like, Jenny Calendar is killed by Angelus. You know, she has, like, deceived the gang and this is kind of like a comeuppance in a way.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: But it's also tragic because she's on the cusp of, you know, her penance and figuring out how to restore him. Like, that's a *story*.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: That's a story about Jenny Calendar as a real character. Right? You know, Angelus dying at the end of Season 2. Obviously, there's like, ten episodes of framing to that, and much more than that, if you think about his back story.

Kristin: Absolutely.

Jen: Even Joyce, who dies of natural causes, right? There's been, like, a season trajectory about her illness. And there's so much done with that death, in terms of, like, how do we grieve? How do we suffer loss?

Kristin: Yes.

Jen: Like, it's just—it means something beyond the event itself.

Kristin: Yeah, we were still seeing it even when we were in *Normal Again*. You know, like, we're still unpacking the loss of Joyce. *Normal Again* is how—like, 20 episodes ahead of, you know, *The Body*.

Jen: Right. Right, so these other deaths are put in, like, a really carefully constructed narrative context that demonstrates why that character mattered and kind of gives them, you know, an ending that means something. But Tara is killed, like, as collateral damage by a stray gunshot. Her death scene is super fast. If you actually look at the time codes, it's like—you know, from the moment that Tara is alive to the moment that Willow has, like, you know—"Okay, she's dead. Now I'm gonna be evil"—is not much real time or screen time. And the main thing, you know, that I notice about that scene is that Tara's, like, death—which you recognize she's dead at the end of the episode. It's not a cliffhanger to next week—is intercut

in this very, like, equal way with Buffy's gunshot wound, and Xander being worried about Buffy. If you're a viewer, [laughs] of any television show—

Kristin: Right. Right.

Jen: [laughs] You know that the protagonist of the show is not gonna be killed three episodes from the end of the season. There's no suspense about, is Buffy gonna die?

Kristin: Right.

Jen: I mean, obviously, she's not. She's already died this season. [laughs]

Kristin: She's literally died twice. Like, if they were to pull that hat trick one—a third fucking—[Jen laughs] that's enough. Yeah.

Jen: Yeah, you know they're at least gonna save it for a finale, if she's gonna die again.

Kristin: [laughing] Right.

Jen: She died last season, but resurrected this season. [laughs]

Kristin: Right, right. Season finale of 1, season finale of 5. [Jen laughs] And, uh, season finale of 6? Sure.

Jen: Right. Three episodes before the end of Season 6? [Kristin laughs] And then Sarah Michelle Gellar just won't be in it for the last three episodes? So it's just—like, it's—I mean, it's ridiculous. It's saying we're, like, gonna give this fake suspense about “is Buffy gonna die?”, that's put—in terms of how it's edited—the editing is signalling to us that these are equally important events that are happening. Like, downstairs, Buffy is hurt. Upstairs, Tara is dead. Right? And I think certainly, also—you know, just like, the really graphic staging of it. You see the bullet hole. You know, Willow is, like, splattered by her dead girlfriend's blood.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: You know, there's nothing palatable about it.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: It's really graphic. And I think it plays into this pattern in *Buffy the Vampire* [sic] as a show. This is a show that really leaned hard on character development happening in response to violence and trauma. Right?

Kristin: Right. Right. Yeah.

Jen: You know, that's like, a little bit of just the nature of a horror action show. A lot of violent things are gonna happen. But I think just looking at this moment again, I just continually feel like this doesn't have to be the only way that people can grow and change. Right? You don't have to, like, torture your characters with horrible emotional losses, over and over again, to create that. And I say that fully cognizant that, you know, *Buffy Summers* is a character who goes through loss after loss after loss. And her arc is really interesting, right?

Kristin: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

Jen: I mean, I love seeing the way that *Buffy* as a character grows and changes, you know, and finds resilience in response to all those moments in her life. But this one, you know, it just—everything we're getting from the show is signalling that this is a character who can be thrown away, without much careful treatment, you know, in terms of how the scene is staged. You know, for an arc in the show that isn't gonna have long lasting consequences, really. You know?

Kristin: Well, right. That's the thing and that's, like, part of the conversation with *Emma* was—you know, she said, like, her wife won't even watch the season—

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Because this happened. This happened, and the arc that results is truly three episodes long.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: I mean, it's a big arc for *Willow*. [Jen laughs] But it's three episodes. And that is another—like, I think it's just a lot of slaps in the face, you know?

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: It's like—not—I don't think there would be any justifying killing off either one of these two queer characters, given the representation that they had embodied on the show.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: But all of what you've just said about the creation of the scene, the editing of it, the way that we see it happen in real time. The fact that we know it results in an arc that is literally three episodes long.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And then, like—perhaps not icing on the cake is the fact that Tara—Amber Benson had never been in the credits before.

Jen: Oh gosh, yeah.

Kristin: Ever! And then they—as a gift to Amber—put her in the fucking credits in this episode.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Do you have memory of this experience—'cause we're having a conversation right now—

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: As, like, two adult people, [Jen laughs] looking back from 2021—

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: But talk to me about tiny Jen. [laughs]

Jen: Yeah. Tiny Jen—I mean, honestly, I am so thankful that this episode happened in Season 6 instead of Season 5, just for my own personal history. Because you know, Season 4 and 5 of Willow and Tara, I was, like, a closeted, unhappy high school student, you know, figuring out my sexuality, coming to terms with that. Willow and Tara meant so much to me. I mean, I look back and it's a little embarrassing, like, how much they meant to me. [laughter] But I didn't really have, you know, many queer friends. And I—you know, I did have a queer friend, but like, I wasn't out so I wasn't talking to that person—

Kristin: Right. Right.

Jen: About my sexuality. I didn't have community. And, you know, this was my outlet for that part of myself that felt really big and important and unresolved. So I

would watch Buffy every week, and like—you know, I'd tape the episodes. I'd, like, memorize all the Willow and Tara scenes, like, the lines in them. I'd, like, doodle them in my notebook in class. [Kristin laughs] You know. I mean, I was *really* invested. I was one of those people who, you know, was really invested in this representation that got taken away. Thankfully, for me, I went off to college—

Kristin: Mmm.

Jen: You know, the summer before Season 6 started. [laughs]

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: So by the time this happened on the show, I, like, had a girlfriend. I had queer community. And I was in, like, a place where I was like, wow, this really sucks, but this isn't my whole life any—you know?

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: Like, this isn't, like, where this part of myself is invested anymore.

Kristin: Yeah. Yeah.

Jen: But you know, I'm sure—you know, there were tons of people who were a year behind me and were still in that place of really needing—

Kristin: Yes.

Jen: The couple that was on the show. I mean, you see that all over the way people responded to this event.

Kristin: Well, and that's what it—like, I think when we talk about listening and like, the writers—like, of course, like, cis, straight writers are not going to be able to, like, *understand*. I mean, like, no one would expect them to literally understand the experience. But I think that most people sitting down and hearing you say what you just said or hearing Emma say what Emma says in our conversation would be able to understand it as a thing bigger than what they thought.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: But it was sort of like, the lack of listening to all of these—I mean, also, at the time, a lot of the fandom were young, closeted—

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: Queer people.

Jen: Totally.

Kristin: So like, yes, we have this incredible FAQ that we talked about and we have, like, the Kitten Board and what have you. But for every one person on the Kitten Board, posting anonymously—

Jen: Mmhmm. Mmhmm.

Kristin: A lot of them. There are how many people [Jen laughs] who don't know about a Kitten Board? Who are watching at home and—

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: Who didn't even have that community to—

Jen: Oh, totally. And who, like, didn't even know what this episode was gonna be when they sat down, [Kristin groans] on Tuesday night. You know?

Kristin: Did you know? Did—like, 'cause Emma knew.

Jen: I—so my girlfriend at the time said, "I know you hate spoilers. But I just wanna tell you, like—"

Kristin: Wow.

Jen: "Something bad might happen on Buffy this week." [laughs] I can't—

Kristin: How did she know?

Jen: She loves spoilers. [laughs]

Kristin: Oh my god, so she was, like, one of—

Jen: [simultaneously] She was also a huge Buffy fan, and she would read all the spoilers every week. She was like—

Kristin: All the spoilers.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: Oh my god.

Jen: But that was good. I had a little warning. But yeah, I think the really ironic and tough thing, too, is that if you are a show in 2002 that has a lesbian couple on it, the moment that begins? All the lesbians are now watching your show.

Kristin: Right!

Jen: Right? So there were people who didn't care about Buffy before—

Kristin: Right. Right.

Jen: And then they heard from a friend or on the internet, the little baby internet, that the show had a lesbian couple. I mean, you know, at that—you remember, Kristin. At that time—

Kristin: I do.

Jen: [laughs] It's like, you would watch anything. Anything. That had...queer characters in it.

Kristin: [simultaneously] Yeah. Six seasons, seven seasons of The L Word.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: I'll watch it. [laughs]

Jen: Exactly. Exactly. [both laugh] So—

Kristin: But yes. That is—was—

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: Incredibly true of that time. And I mean, I still think, like, there's some truth to that now. There's just so many options.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: Every time I see a show repeated several times in my feed, I'm like, who's gay? Who's gay? [Jen laughs] It's in my Twitter feed so many times, somebody's gotta be gay. But—

Jen: I remember—I remember feeling, like the first time I knew that a show had queer women on it, and I was like, ehh, I don't know if I'm gonna watch that. [Kristin laughs] It was a moment, you know? That was a moment where you thought—

Kristin: Right!

Jen: Oh, things have kind of changed.

Kristin: Oh, yeah. Because back here, when we dial back to 2002, if you were somebody who wanted to see queer people on television, you watched *literally* anything.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And it was easy to do.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: There was, what? Three, four—[Jen laughs] you know, there's not a lot—

Jen: [simultaneously] [laughing] You didn't have to watch much.

Kristin: In 2002.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: And, like you, I mean, I was not watching this in real time. But in 2002, I was 22. You know, I had graduated from college. I had already had my first horrible breakup—

Jen: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Kristin: And was about to get into my second relationship. I had—I was living in New York City. I would go out to Henrietta Hudson's and Meow Mix and—

Jen: Oh, yeah.

Kristin: [crosstalk] You.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: You know, so I had, like, a community on the ground—like you're saying you did in college—to catch me. And that—had I been witnessing it in real time, like, I would have had community to fall back on.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: And I—like, to give credit to the Kitten Board, like, that is also what that is. It was a place...I mean, Emma talked about how there was, like, a rule established on the Kitten Board. After, you know—

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: It's like, when something horrible happens and you don't actually understand what you need until, like, a little while has passed. Whatever that time was for the Kitten Board. Then this rule was made that unless it was on a designated thread, no—nothing would be talked about past the last five minutes [Jen laughs] of Seeing Red. And like, it's just really beautiful to me?

Jen: Mm, mmhmm.

Kristin: Like, it's—it's like a community just taking care of each other, the only way they know how. Like, we had this nice thing, and the bad people took it away. [Jen laughs] But we can still have it here, goddamnit! You know?

Jen: Totally.

Kristin: Like, they carried each other in that space.

Jen: It's actually funny because there's a line about Willow, later on in Buffy, in Season 7. Someone says about Willow, "Oh, you always stop the movie Moulin Rouge, like, 20 minutes before it ends so that you don't have to, like, acknowledge, you know, what happens at the end." And it's—that's what people did for her character, right?

Kristin: Whoa.

Jen: For Willow and Tara, they just said, we're gonna live in a world where things ended right here.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: And I think that's—like, that's a great testament to, you know, the power of fandom and, you know, the power of audienceship. The thing—like, the TV show, the movie—isn't done when it goes out into the world. Like, the reception of it and how you choose to watch it and how you choose to encounter it is part of the offering of it.

Kristin: Mmhmm. Queer community.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Like, not fucking around. You know? [Jen laughs] Queer community: not fucking around since 18—I don't know. I don't have a year, I'm not a historian. [laughter] But yeah. It all threads together, in my heart. Like—just like Vito Russo, writing the book and Riese, making her list, and the Kitten Board, like, creating all of these, like, safety systems and mechanisms—

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: To have compassion and care for each other. Communities—I mean, I saw your face light up, Jen, when I mentioned Meow Mix.

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: We know what these spaces are.

Jen: Right.

Kristin: Like, they—you can't explain them to other people. That's what we get as part of queer community. You know?

Jen: [simultaneously] Yeah, totally. And let it not go unsaid that, you know, you and Jenny and everyone on the team makes Buffering that kind of space as well. You know, I think it's really apparent in the way you run the podcast that you are aware of the things that might be hard for people to encounter. That you, like, create a lot of different ways to engage with your content in a way that feels safe and like you're in community.

Kristin: Thank you. I feel like no matter what I do, you always find a way to say something nice about me [Jen laughs] while we're talking. [laughter] But yeah,

reading—I mean, going back to the Kitten Board. And like, just sort of, like, digging through some of the threads and what have you. I was also really struck by how similar it was to, like, our Facebook group.

Jen: Mmhmm. Yeah.

Kristin: It's just such, such a similar community of human beings, talking and taking care of each other in such similar ways. Which again, just really—it's just very powerful to me.

Jen: Absolutely. Makes you wonder if, you know, back in the 19th century, there were little, like, letter exchange clubs that were, like—

Kristin: Oh, no.

Jen: Reading subtext-y, queer—you know—novels.

Kristin: Oh, no.

Jen: I hope so. I like to imagine that.

Kristin: [simultaneously] That's too exciting for me. Yes!

Jen: [simultaneously] I like to imagine that.

Kristin: I'm simply—I—just like, I panicked. I was like, I may be too delighted about this idea to continue on the conversation. [laughter] Nothing would make me happier than, like, [Jen laughs] the queer penpals of yesteryear.

Jen: I'm sure—like, you know what? There's some, you know, queer studies historian who's already published on that. And your listeners will go out—

Kristin: [simultaneously] Mmhmm. Who's probably paused this episode and is emailing us right now.

Jen: [simultaneously] Yes, exactly, is emailing you right now.

Kristin: Hell yeah.

Jen: And your listeners will go out and find that book and you will tell everybody about it. And we can all be delighted by—

Kristin: Ugh! So great.

Jen: Queer letter exchange clubs in the 19th century.

Kristin: So...one more thing that I wanna touch on. With you, Jen Malkowski. And that is that I have been sort of banging my fists on the screen for the duration of the relationship between Willow and Tara. Because we've either seen their sexual relationship portrayed as magical, or we've seen it in, like, loving, romantic ways, and not sexualized ways. And this episode—the last episode ended where Tara was like, "Let's do it!" Her actual line is, "Can you be kissing me now?" but we all know what she means.

Jen: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Kristin: And we see them in bed, naked! They are so overtly having sex for the first time ever. And then, one of them simply must die.

Jen: Yeah. I mean, they're not only, like, in bed, naked. But the only thing they do for the whole episode is talk about how they're just staying in bed naked all day. And they're not, like, gonna do anything else.

Kristin: Scene upon scene upon scene! [Jen laughs] It's like, we pass through much time in the episode of, like—they're in bed, then they get out of bed, then they're doing research but naked and in bed. You know?

Jen: Yeah. I mean, it's basically like the fanfic of Buffy that [laughing] all of the fans were writing the whole time.

Kristin: Yes. Yes.

Jen: They're still doing research, but they're naked in bed.

Kristin: But they're naked—[laughter]

Jen: Yeah, I mean, the sexuality ramps up so much in this episode. And this is—like, Buffy is not a show that has a good track record to fall back on in saying, like, "we wouldn't punish women for their sexuality. No way! We wouldn't do that."

Kristin: [laughs, makes gulping noise]

[laughter]

Jen: I mean, it's like a show that has revealed its own kind of, like, inner turmoil about what women's sexuality—or maybe just sexuality in general—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: Actually means and whether it's good and natural and right. Or whether it's a thing that needs to be followed by violence and retribution and horror.

Kristin: Yes.

Jen: And so the fact of so much very literal sexuality between Willow and Tara in this episode being immediately followed by Tara being killed. Again, I don't—you know, I don't believe—and I don't think anyone was saying at the time—you know, these writers are homophobic. They're just trying to punish the lesbians. But this is a kind of really, like, beyond the pale negligence about putting something on screen that plays into a lot of really harmful tropes that you claim to be aware of, you should have been aware of.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: And yeah, the sexuality bit is another big piece of that.

Kristin: There is such a history of, like, the lesbian being ashamed of her sexuality and either killing herself or being killed. And the writers knowing that they were doing that and doing that intentionally. But the thing is is that when there's, like, a history of that, you not only need to be aware that it is bad, but you actually have to make your decisions to, like, upend that.

Jen: Yeah. Yeah.

Kristin: Like, you can't just say, like, "Oh, well, but we weren't doing it for that reason." That's not helping. It's just—

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: Whether or not you meant it or not, right. You talked about the fact that now we have this language of, like, intent versus impact, et cetera. It doesn't matter if your intentions were to give Tara a full life before you killed her. [laughter] The fuck? What matters is that there's a history and—

Jen: Mmhmm.

Kristin: If you wanna subvert that history, you simply cannot kill Tara. Not yet. Maybe we could kill Tara in 20, 25 years. Perhaps that would be open to us.

Jen: Yeah.

Kristin: But in 2002, that door was not fucking open [Jen laughs] and I'm sorry to say, it's not really open now in 2021 either.

Jen: It wasn't. And I mean, that's, I think, the reality you have to accept if you're gonna do groundbreaking work in representation.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: And it's not exactly fair, but you have to realize, you know, we're telling a story that this community needs and doesn't have. And because of that, it's more important for us to take care of that community than to do whatever we want with the narrative. And I think some people who kind of wander into these representations, I don't know that—I'm not aware of any queer writers on Buffy who were really invested in having a queer couple on the show.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: You know, I think they were well-intentioned people who kind of just ended up—

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: Being the ones breaking this ground.

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: But you kind of have to accept certain limitations, if you're gonna—

Kristin: Totally.

Jen: Be reaping the benefits—and let's be real, the viewership benefits too—

Kristin: Yes. Yes!

Jen: Of offering up that kind of representation.

Kristin: So Jen, is there anything that you would like to bring to the conversation that we haven't touched on yet?

Jen: You know, I just—I'm thinking about that policy on the Kitten Board. Like, unless it's in this thread, Willow and Tara's storyline ends ten minutes before the end of Seeing Red. And the way people kind of create those alternate universes for themselves. But I think there's something—you know, there's something that always sticks with me. There's something that a scholar of film noir named Janey Place said about femme fatale characters in classic film noir. So film noir is, you know, detective movies from the 40s and 50s. And the femme fatale was this, like, total badass woman, who was kind of, like, deceiving men and out for herself. And you know, kind of outsmarting everybody and really independent in a way that no other characters on screen were, who were women, at that time. And because of that, she always had to be punished. [laughs]

Kristin: Of course. I was like, that will not stand. [laughs]

Jen: Right. Oh, no. Not even just in, you know, script writing convention, but actually in Hollywood's own system of self-censorship called the Production Code of America. Movies couldn't practically be released to make money if they didn't get the stamp of approval from this thing. And that code, you know, said, crime doesn't pay. You can't, like, have a movie that ends with criminals getting away with things. Like, combine that with misogyny. [laughs] And the femme fatale—

Kristin: [simultaneously] No thank you! [laughter]

Jen: The femme fatale, in the end, she was always dead or she was going off to jail. Or sometimes she got married, and that's how you knew she had been redeemed.

Kristin: Mmm. Oh wow, yes. [laughter]

Jen: But what Janey Place says about that character is, you know, these resolutions happened in the last two minutes of the movie. But when you think back to Double Indemnity or when you think back to Out of the Past, it's not, like, the woman in handcuffs being taken off to jail that you remember. It's this, like, incredibly powerful character.

Kristin: Mmm.

Jen: And all the stuff she did before that—

Kristin: Mmhmm.

Jen: That makes this indelible mark on you, right? And I think we can say that about Tara as a character and about Willow and Tara's relationship, too.

Kristin: Yeah.

Jen: That, like, this is where it ends. But even if we don't forbid ourselves from thinking or talking [laughter] about, you know, this death. It's like, what most of us remember about Willow and Tara isn't, you know, the last scene of Seeing Red. It's like, what—how this couple grew and evolved and what they meant to us. And, like, the stupid renaissance faire dresses that they wore. [laughter] And some of the ridiculous moments, too, but—

Kristin: Levitatilingus. Let us never forget.

Jen: [laughs] Levitatilingus. [Kristin laughs] They were so much more powerful than the way this story ended.

Kristin: Yeah. Yeah.

Jen: You know, and I think, like, that's what we remember, when we look back. Even as we have to also, like, encounter and reckon with, you know, this violent ending.

Kristin: Absolutely. [sighs] Well, Jen. I think we may have done it again. I think you may have done it again. [Jen laughs] Thank you for sharing your time with us and sharing—what I love about this is, like, we get so many things from your personal history—

Jen: Mmm.

Kristin: And also your knowledge base. And it's just been a real treat, and I think really important, also. Like, I—not—I mean. Obviously, talking about Joyce and how we saw death in *The Body* was important, for entirely different—and some overlapping—reasons.

Jen: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Kristin: But for me, as someone who has spent so many years, like, rolling around in queer history and seeing its impacts, it just means so much to have had you here. So thank you.

Jen: Absolutely. It was a real pleasure to be here. As always.

[CHIME]