

Twice Married

[00:00:00] **Jesse (Producer):** None of the voices in the series are ongoing patients of Esther Perel. Each episode of *Where Should We Begin* is a one-time counseling session. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, names, and some identifiable characteristics have been removed, but their voices and their stories are real.

[00:00:26] **Her:** Honestly, I don't really know where it began. Um, it's such a torrid love story, just the back and forth.

[00:00:41] **Esther Perel:** *They've been married to each other, not once, but twice.*

[00:00:46] **Her:** Um, we ended up married in 2008 and then divorced in 2010 and we ended up finding ourselves back together again, just eight months later and we got remarried and we've been really trying to nail down this relationship thing since then. And it's just been difficult.

[00:01:08] **Him:** It's an emotional struggle and I just wish it wasn't so hard and always feeling like I'm walking on eggshells, walking on glass.

[00:01:18] **Esther Perel:** *She came into the marriage with her two children and they had two more together, four in total.*

[00:01:28] **Her:** It's a lot of go go go. Lately, I've been trying desperately to get my husband to just do more in the relationship.

[00:01:38] **Him:** I want arguments to come with joint solutions, right. Not only solved by the unilateral actions of one person.

[00:01:46] **Her:** Um, most recently I asked him to, you know, close the closet door because the cat had gotten in there and he told me nobody likes me. Um, anytime I suggest that he could take responsibility for something that he's done, it's turned around and it's made about me or my inadequacies. I don't want to ask him to do anything because I'm afraid of what he'll say.

[00:02:14] **Him:** You know, I can be reactionary and defensive, but I don't want my kids thinking that the way to deal with conflict is my wife ignoring me for two plus weeks on time, cause she, she got angry at me and couldn't couldn't handle it. And I don't, I don't know how to make it better.

[00:02:31] **Her:** I'm just terrified. And I can't, I can't really shake that, that feeling. Um, it seems so silly, cause it's just words, right? Like it's just, it's just words that you say, but they hurt and, I want to be able to communicate to him in a way that doesn't pique his fears, either.

[00:02:53] **Esther Perel:** *They've asked for a session because they have not stopped fighting. They fight over chores. They fight over domestic roles, who can tell who what to do. And that's what they think they're coming for.*

Tell me a little bit, if your relationship told its story, what story would it tell me? Where does it start?

[00:03:25] **Her:** Well, we were, I was 22. It was 2006.

[00:03:31] **Him:** Yep.

[00:03:31] **Her:** We met on my space, actually. It was, I guess, the millennial's Tinder. Um, I had just separated, um, and was in the middle of a divorce with my ex, who was the father of my first two children, my older two. And he reached out to me as his, pseudonym, JackRockstar. JackRockstar contacted me.

[00:03:59] **Him:** Yes, I did. I was using it to, to meet girls because I had, I had enlisted and I was looking for some fun before I left, nothing serious. So I was...

[00:04:09] **Esther Perel:** Before you left?

[00:04:10] **Him:** Before I left to, to join the military. Nothing serious, nothing keeping me down, just a couple of flings and have fun. And move on.

[00:04:19] **Esther Perel:** Okay. So two people meet online with the stated purpose of just having light fun.

[00:04:26] **Him:** Yes .

[00:04:27] **Her:** Yes.

[00:04:27] **Esther Perel:** And some good recreation and sex.

[00:04:29] **Him:** Yes.

[00:04:30] **Her:** Yes.

[00:04:31] **Esther Perel:** And then?

[00:04:33] **Her:** I don't know what happened. Um, we went out on our first date, I guess I somehow made an impression I...

[00:04:42] **Him:** She was intriguing, right. Um, I came from a very. I'd say a very cloistered, very clannish kind of family. Um, oldest of three boys and sort of the black sheep of my family, I'm the one who left. I'm the one who went away, carved my own path

[00:05:06] **Esther Perel:** What, can I just ask you something. What was it that made you want to leave the clan?

[00:05:16] **Him:** I wanted to be my own person. Right. I, I didn't really feel like I could be my own person in my clan because it's very patriarchal. And so my dad is the head of the clan, right.

[00:05:30] **Esther Perel:** And your dad has the authority?

[00:05:32] **Him:** And my dad is the authority.

[00:05:33] **Esther Perel:** And he makes other people do according to his will.

[00:05:37] **Him:** Yes.

[00:05:37] **Esther Perel:** That's where you honed your chops.

[00:05:40] **Him:** I would say that I modeled after that. Um, and I just didn't, I wanted to do my own thing, I wanted to live my own life. Even that decision was, was co-opted by my parents because you know, my dad gave me a call and he was like, man, I'm really, a couple of years later, I'm really impressed that you went off and did your own thing, you know, when I was young, I went off and I did my own thing. You're just like me.

[00:06:06] **Esther Perel:** And how does that land?

[00:06:09] **Him:** It's like being choked, right.

[00:06:12] **Esther Perel:** And it strangles me, and when it strangles me, I want to...

[00:06:20] **Him:** I just want to get out.

[00:06:24] **Esther Perel:** I can't get from under his clutches.

[00:06:27] **Him:** Yeah. I, I just, I it's, so it's funny because one of the first things that we both recognized was how much my family did not approve of her at all.

[00:06:54] **Esther Perel:** *When someone is talking about how they needed to run away from their family because they were choking because it felt so suffocating or oppressive and they could proceed with a sentence that starts with it's funny, what follows is rarely funny. What follows is an illustration of his rebelliousness. Here, I was falling for a woman that was nothing my family would approve. Now I could begin to think that I'm living my own life.*

And the issue was, race, age, culture, religion?

[00:07:46] **Her:** The wrong side of the tracks.

[00:07:47] **Him:** Wrong side of the tracks was what my dad said.

[00:07:50] **Her:** I think it was always about the class. Uh, like his dad ran his own company and things like that. And my mom was, uh, she was a drug addict and an alcoholic. And, um, you know, we grew up with just my mom and my two brothers and we grew up in poverty. If it wasn't for my mom's social security and disability and her widower's benefits, and the death benefits from my dad passing, we wouldn't have had any income. She couldn't hold a job. So it was homeless shelters sometimes, it was moving from place to place because we were evicted, so we were moving like every year. We were in a different place, different schools. His father did not approve. He never really approved of that. Um, even now I've, I feel like they've just convinced themselves that I'm not the same person that he met. That I'm someone else.

[00:08:45] **Esther Perel:** He has civilized you.

[00:08:46] **Her:** He has civilized me, yes.

[00:08:50] **Esther Perel:** *At this moment, I'm going back and forth. I'm highlighting the hidden commonality and the specificity of each. So back to his father, now.*

You know, I listen to you and I'm really touched, you know, it's like, I see you organized by your defiance. Your defiance drives you. Nobody will tell me what

to do. Started with your father, who I am imagining in order to get his will across, was ready to use all kinds of means.

[00:09:32] **Him:** You know, it's interesting. Um, emotional manipulation came from my mom. Um, my mom of the two is the more emotionally manipulative. My father just knows how I think to, I think they make a very good pair. I think they work very well together. I think that is a good way of putting it, I suppose.

[00:09:58] **Esther Perel:** How did he get his will across to his three sons? How did he establish his authority?

[00:10:06] **Him:** I mean a lot of lectures there was, and it's, it's odd.

[00:10:10] **Esther Perel:** They start with, "Son"?

[00:10:12] **Him:** Yeah, right. What are you going to do with your life, right? Where are you going? You're not thinking things through. That's not the way that I raised you. You have a responsibility, you have a duty. You're the oldest. And therefore you have to set the example for your brothers. You have to be that paragon of what I want you to be, right. And so it was a lot of sitting around.

[00:10:35] **Esther Perel:** So while he's talking to you and you're feeling that pressure on your chest and on your throat,, cause he's ramping it down your throat. He's not just using words. He's not just lecturing. He's doing some, there are more things that you experience in that moment and somebody says, what are you doing with your life? You are embarrassing us.

[00:11:10] **Him:** Yes, that was a big piece, you're embarrassing us.

[00:11:14] **Esther Perel:** You're not living up to your, to my expectation. You're not making me proud.

[00:11:20] **Him:** Right.

[00:11:20] **Esther Perel:** I feel contempt for you. And I humiliate you and I instill doubt in you that you ever do anything. And part of you says, I'll show you.

[00:11:43] **Him:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:11:44] **Esther Perel:** And part of you wonders, will I succeed at it, but you can't even allow yourself to have that doubt because the drive of the defiance burns you.

[00:11:58] **Him:** Yeah, I think that's pretty good.

[00:12:04] **Esther Perel:** *As he repeats the words of his father with his hand on his chest and his throat, it's as if his body is remembering re-experiencing in that very moment the choking sensation, the belittlement, the humiliation that he used to feel. And so when I add a few of those sentences, he just says yes, that too, that too, and his lips are quivering and the tears appear in his eyes they don't stream yet, because behind the rage there often are tears.*

Have you ever thought of how similar the two of you are? Both of you needed to leave in order to have a chance at creating your own story, your own life. So you leave your drug addicted mother. You leave the chaos, you leave probably children who needed to attend to everything. Are you the youngest or the oldest? The oldest too, you must be the oldest.

[00:13:26] **Her:** I am.

[00:13:26] **Esther Perel:** You are the oldest, right. So both of you are the oldest and in some version you raised your younger siblings because they looked at you and you probably raise them more concretely. If she wasn't getting up, you had to get up.

[00:13:44] **Her:** Yeah.

[00:13:44] **Esther Perel:** Right. The first thing that jumps at me is that the two of you had to run away or leave or, leave not just in the physical way live so that you could begin to create your own story. And then he puts you down. When you fail, it's your fault. When you succeed, it's because of him. You own nothing. And somehow I think that that's part of why the two of you fight. It's all right there. When you fight with her, you fight with that defiant drive with which you fought him and you confuse the people, but you have so honed your own protective mechanism. And here you meet her and when you say they don't like her, and so that reinforces your, your defiance even more. But when you say I want you and she actually welcomes it, that is like irresistible, irresistible, psychologically irresistible. I'm not talking just sexually, but if she wants you sexually that too, then it's kind of the antidote to the shame because that will establish that masculinity, which he was like siphoning out of you. And then I'm imagining that she was very encouraging for the things that you wanted to do.

[00:15:25] **Him:** Yeah. I mean, uh, I think for the first time in my life, I was able to talk, things that I was interested in, that I wanted to do.

[00:15:36] **Esther Perel:** So when she encourages you in the things you want to pursue, you can welcome it because she's able to tell you, go do this and you know that it's for you and not for her. But when she asks you come help me with home. You can't hear that. And all you hear is that it's for her. And then the button is immediately pushed and off you go, nobody's going to tell me what to do.

[00:16:08] **Her:** That's what I was thinking of. Like when I ask him to pick up his shoes.

[00:16:17] **Esther Perel:** Okay? (They laugh.)

[00:16:25] **Him:** I don't, I don't know. I don't know.

[00:16:28] **Esther Perel:** It's a thought and we're going to explore it together. It's not like, I, I, I know, but then I see the way that your whole body changes, if she says move your shoes or whatever, I mean, I just picked up the one that she just mentioned, you know, and then both of you, then you will tell me what you do, what happens?

[00:16:50] **Her:** Well, I was just thinking that that's a really fascinating perspective because there are times where I am all for it. I'm saying, you know, go, go do what you need to do to excel in your field, to excel in your, your passion, what you're, you're interested in, in your profession. And he doesn't receive it that way.

[00:17:09] **Him:** Because it's not that easy.

[00:17:11] **Her:** It feels like you struggle to really hear that you have that freedom.

[00:17:16] **Esther Perel:** Just the fact that she says go do your thing. How does that land on you?

[00:17:23] **Him:** Oh no, no.

[00:17:30] **Esther Perel:** No, what?

[00:17:30] **Him:** No, don't go do your thing.

[00:17:33] **Esther Perel:** Really?

[00:17:34] **Her:** That's what I'm met with. So he says I really want to do this. This would be, he tells me...

[00:17:38] **Esther Perel:** Yeah, yeah. I get it.

As the conversation unfolds, they discuss a different situation. In this one, he wants to make a change professionally and she's all for it. She's right behind him. And she supports him. And he's at a loss. He knows better, how to react to someone who says no than how to react to someone who says, yes. When somebody says, no, the defiance fills him up with a false sense of confidence. But when someone says, yes, it makes room for his insecurities, his uncertainties, his doubts, his questions to actually come out. And that brings a whole other wrinkle to their relationship.

[00:18:37] **Her:** I want him to know that I hear him as well, and that I see him and that whenever I say those things, where I say, I want you to go do the thing or have the things that you want, it's not glib, but that I had pure confidence in the both of us to navigate that together. If that's what he wanted to do, whatever it is.

[00:18:59] **Him:** That terrifies me. Oh my God. Confidence is tiring, right? I'm constantly plagued by self-doubt. Oh my God. So when you say I have the supreme confidence. Wow. Like what, what if I'm wrong? And I mean, like, don't get me wrong. I know that you, you are very, very capable of telling me that I'm wrong, right. But like, but what if I am, what if I'm making the wrong decision for us?

[00:19:28] **Her:** Well we can figure that out too. We've navigated so much that...

[00:19:33] **Esther Perel:** You don't need to convince him right now, because he's actually honest in a way that he's not often. Because that self-doubt is what crept under his skin, all the while he was being defiant and defiance is a certain type of confidence, but it's not really confidence. Because confidence as my very good friend Terry Real has taught me is the ability to see yourself as a flawed individual and then still hold yourself in high regard. I hear you when she says, go for it, you say I'm scared. Because when your dad would say, you can't do this, you had to say, yes, I can. And you had to stifle all the fears. When she says, go for it, it actually allows the full person to respond, the one that wants, and the one that's afraid. When you say, go for it. And he starts to reason,

or to basically express his reservations, his concerns, his doubts, et cetera, it's actually a very good thing because...

[00:20:55] **Her:** I'm learning that.

[00:20:56] **Esther Perel:** He could never express any of these things since he had to be ultimately sure, because that's the only way he could stand up to his dad.

His defiance has given him a false sense of confidence and his self doubt is his hidden truth. Earlier on, he mentioned that while his relationship with his dad was very challenging, the emotional manipulation came from his mom.

[00:21:39] **Him:** You know, it's interesting, my mom of the two is the more emotionally manipulative.

[00:21:45] **Esther Perel:** *So think it's time to inquire about his relationship with her as well.*

[00:21:50] **Him:** Okay. Um, my mom falls in line with my dad. And they're very much on the same page. Is really good at guilting, the disapproving, like that all came from her. The emotional guilt came from her, a lot of crying, um, like I, I was letting my, I was hurting my mom. I wasn't hurting my dad. I was letting my dad down, but I was hurting my mom.

[00:22:22] **Her:** I would always ask him like what it was like growing up, like, you know, you know, what is she like? And he was like, I don't, I don't know. I just remember her crying a lot in my teenage years. I, from what I remember him telling me, his dad was the one that was saying, look, you, you made your mother cry, right? Like, why are you making your mother cry like this? And...

[00:22:41] **Esther Perel:** So you tell me, you both have a lot of insight about the original story. And so this, for both of you, let's, you know, very much what are your triggers? The fact that you disagree on all kinds of things is utterly irrelevant. If you experience it as I'm a disappointment, I'm adequate, I'm being told what to do. I'm being told I'm not good enough. I'm being scrutinized and being monitored. That's what you're going to be fighting about. And if he doesn't respond and he doesn't collaborate with you and you feel like you're talking to the wind, then the trigger is going to be, I'm always alone. I've always been alone. Nobody's there for me. It's all on me. How am I going to do it? I can't handle this anymore.

[00:23:49] **Her:** I don't know how she does it. It's really spot on.

[00:24:00] **Him:** Okay. So, so what do we do?

[00:24:11] **Esther Perel:** The first and foremost thing you're going to do is not to talk about what you think is the issue as in, the tasks or the chores or the, you know, do yourselves a favor. And really repeat what you just heard. And actually repeat it in your own words first, before we go into what do we do? Because this is what you're triggered by, and this is what you're fighting and you're fighting it with the same passion that you were at home. So put in your words, what's the voice that fights?

[00:24:58] **Him:** The voice, the voice of fights in my own head, you know, what I'm fighting against is, um, shame, inadequacy, um, being told what I have to do and, and not having my own say that it's a lack of, um, autonomy, it's taking away, right? It's it's taking a part of me away and demanding that I, I do something else.

[00:25:25] **Esther Perel:** What goes in the ears?

[00:25:28] **Him:** How dare you? How dare you, tell me what to do. That's not your place.

[00:25:32] **Esther Perel:** What do you hear her say, give me a line.

[00:25:37] **Her:** Most recently, I, he was blaming our five-year-old for leaving the bedroom door open and the cat got in and used his closet as a litter box. And I said, well, but you could keep your closet door closed. And that might be helpful.

[00:25:49] **Him:** That's not, that's not.

[00:25:51] **Esther Perel:** That's enough.

[00:25:52] **Him:** You don't get no, that doesn't make any sense.

[00:25:54] **Esther Perel:** Now, what did. I want to hear, what's...

[00:25:57] **Him:** That's....

[00:26:00] **Esther Perel:** Why are you putting this on me?

[00:26:01] **Him:** Yeah, why are you putting this on me? This has nothing to do with me. Like, like that's not helpful, is not helpful. And now, now, now I'm angry about it because you're trying to blame me for something that like, why are you getting in my face about it? That's what I'm hearing. Right, right.

[00:26:19] **Esther Perel:** Right. You think you're talking about a litter box and a cat. There's no cat in his story.

[00:26:25] **Her:** There's no cat in his story.

[00:26:26] **Esther Perel:** There's no cat in his story, but of course he doesn't say that in the moment. In the moment, he says something about the cat.

[00:26:36] **Her:** That was when he said...

[00:26:37] **Him:** That's when I said nobody likes you.

[00:26:39] **Esther Perel:** Oh, okay. He went straight, he went straight into it. So he went into the part of him that felt a little ashamed and his protection mode is then to say, you're not lovable. And what do you do when you says that? You have a comeback?

[00:26:56] **Her:** No, I just didn't. I told him that was very mean and hurtful, and then I didn't talk to him for two weeks.

[00:27:02] **Esther Perel:** Oh, and that's a comeback.

[00:27:04] **Him:** Which by the way, it was a really shitty thing of me to say. And I'm really sorry.

[00:27:10] **Her:** You've told me a few times.

[00:27:11] **Him:** I know.

[00:27:13] **Her:** Thank you.

[00:27:13] **Him:** I hold you in way higher regard than that, and I love you. So it's completely untrue and bullshit, and I was angry and, I'm sorry.

[00:27:22] **Her:** I forgive you.

[00:27:24] **Him:** Okay, thank you. And I, I know, I know a lot of the times, like, it sounds like we're just, we're arguing about mundane things, but those mundane things add up for both of us.

[00:27:36] **Her:** Um, and if it's a trigger, if we're constantly triggering each other, that's that's every day. Another thing and another thing, and it's, it's death by a thousand cuts.

[00:27:46] **Esther Perel:** Every day, the same thing.

[00:27:47] **Her:** Every day, the same thing, right. But it may be in a different trapping, but it's the same thing.

[00:27:51] **Esther Perel:** And that's why you're not going to stay on the things that you argue about, but you're going to help each other.

[00:27:57] **Him:** Right.

[00:27:58] **Her:** By recognizing what was just, just was a little step on a wound.

[00:28:03] **Him:** Yeah.

[00:28:12] **Esther Perel:** *They are convinced that they fight about a lot of different things, but what becomes very clear is that in fact, they mostly fight about the same thing over and over again. He goes to his childhood and experiences again, the sense of inadequacy and incompetence and disappointment. And she experiences the aloneness and the burdens that were put upon her as a child. Most of their arguments are about that. It's not about the cat, it's about their vulnerabilities and their deep seated wounds and fears. And this translation from the supposed issues, to the feelings and the emotions that live inside of us is a major transition for many couples. It becomes the place from which empathy, compassion, and understanding for themselves and for each other can rise.*

[00:29:34] **Him:** That makes sense.

[00:29:35] **Esther Perel:** So when the two of you fight, your bodies may be in this room, but your memories, your nervous systems are hijacked. You fight about our core vulnerabilities. You know, when you argue. Do one now. Pick one now. One of your arguments and...

[00:30:11] **Her:** Uh, the chore chart.

[00:30:14] **Him:** Okay. We're role playing one of our arguments now.

[00:30:17] **Esther Perel:** Yes. Yes.

[00:30:18] **Him:** Awesome, cool. Ugggh.

[00:30:21] **Esther Perel:** It's hard to get in, but you will see once you, once the triggers go, she just, one of you just, yes, it's a fantastic flicker.

[00:30:30] **Her:** So, in doing the chore chart, we wanted to have the teenagers.

[00:30:40] **Him:** I know what we wanted to do.

[00:30:42] **Her:** Okay. So we wanted to create a chore chart, so there was routine and structure and discipline. So the teens could earn their allowance and, and learn some discipline on their own.

[00:30:56] **Him:** And then you went and got, and you went and did it by yourself.

[00:30:59] **Her:** Well, the conversation was, I had created this chore chart and there was a cycle and everyone had their two chores every night and that you were not fulfilling yours.

[00:31:16] **Him:** But the challenge for me here, the problem that I have is that you, you made the chore chart up. You, you, by yourself, you put it behind this, I'm not going to say a paywall, but you're the only one who could edit it. You were the one who decided the criteria that went into it. I didn't have any input into the process whatsoever. And so I, I tried and I'm very bad at it and I got angry about it and then I just stopped, but I didn't stop on purpose. I just, I'm exhausted by the end of the day. And then, and then, then you took me off the chore chart without talking to me about it first, you just went and did it. And then when I came to you and said, Hey, maybe a compromise. Maybe I can, I can get some buy-in back with the kids and build some trust with them. Then you went and accused me of trying to like circumvent the entire thing, because I just couldn't hold to doing chores every day. When I came with a compromise for you, so I, I didn't feel, I don't feel like I've got any input at all. None. You just made it all up and you're running the show by yourself, because that's what you want to do.

[00:32:28] **Her:** Okay. So that was a lot, um, because I, I had sent you the chart, you actually had the editable version beforehand before I've published it to Google Docs and shared it with the teens.

[00:32:42] **Esther Perel:** Okay.

[00:32:42] **Her:** You had it.

[00:32:43] **Esther Perel:** Okay. You're about to go into the item and the chart and why you did what you did.

[00:32:54] **Her:** Yes.

[00:32:55] **Esther Perel:** You could do that, but I can spare you. And let you know, upfront it's predictably going to land in the bad place.

[00:33:08] **Her:** I can see that.

[00:33:10] **Esther Perel:** So everything he just said was about how he hated not being able to fulfill the expectation. And he didn't particularly like the fact that the expectations were mandated to him without being involved. And because he felt I'm at the twirl of your finger and you're going to do with me, whatever you want. He already told you this is a trigger. I'm made to feel dumb, inadequate, and now I'm probably with embarrassed in front of my kids.

So there are two levels. There's a lot of levels, but the first one is there is something that if people argue while they actually touch each other. The arguments completely change. And since touch is extremely potent and in a good way, for both of you, you have got to use it. That same speech you just did, or the one you're about to do when you actually put your hand on the knee or the shoulder or the lap, something different will happen.

[00:34:36] **Her:** I like this plan.

[00:34:38] **Him:** I do not, but I understand like, okay, okay. I feel like I said my piece and we should, should we allow you to... okay. All right.

[00:35:00] **Her:** Okay. So what I'm hearing you say is that you don't want to feel embarrassed or inadequate to the teens.

[00:35:19] **Him:** I think it's more than that, right? I want to, I want us to make these decisions, not even make them together, but figure out a way to make them together.

[00:35:32] **Esther Perel:** Okay. Did you notice a difference in your body? Do you notice a difference?

[00:35:38] **Him:** And I don't feel like bleghh, right?

[00:35:42] **Esther Perel:** Right.

[00:35:42] **Him:** Like tight.

[00:35:43] **Esther Perel:** Yeah. Yeah, that's it.

[00:35:46] **Him:** I'm still sort of talking about what I want to talk about.

[00:35:48] **Esther Perel:** Yes of course, of course the arguments, there's an argument you're allowed to argue and you're allowed to disagree and you're allowed to fight and you're allowed to be angry. Change comes with anger, but what you both do is different.

[00:36:04] **Her:** Yeah.

[00:36:06] **Esther Perel:** You see, she makes decisions alone because that's what she learned. Not because she's intentionally trying to put you on the side, but when there's a big issue, the first person she turns to is herself.

[00:36:24] **Him:** Yes.

[00:36:27] **Esther Perel:** And you, who admire how well she can make all of these decisions alone.

[00:36:33] **Him:** Sure.

[00:36:34] **Esther Perel:** As long as it doesn't make you feel excluded and minimal and diminished by it. Your experience is no longer, oh, I admire this woman who can handle all these complicated things. It suddenly becomes this woman is putting me down. She doesn't think I'm competent. Her self-reliance is my incompetence.

[00:36:59] **Her:** It's interesting.

[00:37:04] **Him:** I do want to go on the record saying that I admire your self reliance and autonomy.

[00:37:12] **Esther Perel:** Yes, ok, but It makes me feel like an idiot.

[00:37:15] **Him:** Yes, it does. Of course.

[00:37:17] **Esther Perel:** And in those moments I'm hurt.

[00:37:19] **Him:** But it doesn't have anything to do with you at the same time. It doesn't have anything to do with you.

[00:37:24] **Her:** But you're hurt.

[00:37:25] **Him:** But I'm hurt, but I'm hurt. It hurts because who wouldn't want to be able to be on the same team as someone like you.

[00:37:43] **Esther Perel:** Because I admire you. I want to be on the team with you.

[00:37:50] **Him:** Yeah, absolutely. Um, I'm lucky. I know that. And I want you to know that. And I, I want you to, I don't just be like, I want you to know that, that I'm lucky, but I want you to know that, you know what I mean?

[00:38:10] **Her:** Feel it.

[00:38:15] **Him:** Yeah, sure. Um, I don't know. I just, I want you to feel lucky that you're all mine.

[00:38:26] **Her:** Very lucky.

[00:38:30] **Him:** I part of being on the same team, isn't just, Hey, we're going to do awesome things together. But to me, it's also, Hey, can you be understanding when I don't know what's going on or I need help or I don't get it the first time. That's part of it, I think.

[00:38:57] **Esther Perel:** And when you think he is thin skinned, or you need to walk on eggshells because you can't tell him anything. You have to remember everything he just said.

[00:39:11] **Her:** Yeah I do.

[00:39:15] **Esther Perel:** There's another piece of research, I find very interesting and it may be good for you too, because indeed, you know, your bodies have another language that is reserved for good times, that your words don't always match. And that is, it's, lay down on the floor, both of you.

[00:39:33] **Him:** Lay down on it? Ok.

[00:39:37] **Esther Perel:** And lay down next to each other. Now try to have a fight now.

[00:39:49] **Her:** I don't think I can.

[00:39:50] **Him:** This is weird.

[00:39:51] **Esther Perel:** Right.

[00:39:52] **Him:** Okay.

[00:39:54] **Esther Perel:** See if you can.

[00:39:59] **Him:** Um, the chore chart. (Laughs) can we work on it maybe?

[00:40:11] **Esther Perel:** I said, a fight! (They both laugh.)

[00:40:12] **Him:** We're trying.

[00:40:14] **Esther Perel:** You see, it's very hard.

[00:40:17] **Her:** It's completely disarming.

[00:40:18] **Esther Perel:** Right? And the bodies won't let you, a fighting body cannot lie flat. A body that is in an argument cannot be lying flat. So when you go and you escalate, lay down and if you can lay down, even when your kids are in the room, because you'll start to laugh and you'll tell them that shrink we met gave us this bizarre piece of research, you know, it will calm everybody. It will diffuse it. You cannot continue the screaming match when you're lying.

[00:41:00] **Him:** That's fair.

[00:41:02] **Esther Perel:** Most of the time, you really need to know your screaming match will not lead you to anything.

[00:41:07] **Him:** I feel like I'm going to be lying down a lot.

[00:41:09] **Esther Perel:** You just say let's fight lying down. Let's continue our fight lying down. See what happens.

[00:41:17] **Her:** I think even saying it is like in a way, it, it, it disarms the conversation, even just thinking about the concept of laying down. I can't imagine that would, it wouldn't make things worse, that's for sure.

[00:41:35] **Him:** I mean, I don't know. I'm skeptical.

[00:41:40] **Her:** I mean, what would you do if we were in a fight and I just laid down.

[00:41:43] **Him:** I'm not thinking about if we're in a fight and you lay down. Cause I just going to lay down with you. I'm thinking about what happens when I lay down and you just walk away.

[00:41:53] **Her:** Well, I think that's a commitment that I'll have to make.

[00:41:56] **Him:** Right.

[00:41:58] **Her:** And that's on me. That's not on you.

[00:42:04] **Him:** Okay, that's fair.

Hmm.

[00:42:10] **Esther Perel:** Say more about that. You would be laying down and that she...

[00:42:16] **Him:** I think what I meant is like her, her natural reaction when we get into fights and when we start escalating, she mentioned she didn't talk to me for two weeks, this is not like an uncommon occurrence, right? We argue there is a, the fight. And then there is no more fighting. It's all silence.

[00:42:33] **Her:** Silence.

[00:42:35] **Esther Perel:** And how do you come back?

[00:42:40] **Her:** I usually tell him that I'm ready to talk and...

[00:42:46] **Esther Perel:** In your head, the voice that, that controls the stonewalling says what?

[00:42:59] **Her:** It depends. It depends on the magnitude of the fight. Sometimes, it's should you leave before he does? Or, you know, at some point, at some point he's going to get tired of this at some point it's it's going to hit a threshold. And it's always a little self-deprecating, it's rooted in worthiness worthlessness. So, you know, you, weren't deserving to begin with, why is he still here? You know, it's going to hit a point. It's always going to hit a point. It's constantly in the back of my head and that has nothing to do with him.

[00:43:56] **Esther Perel:** I just had a thought.

[00:43:58] **Her:** Okay.

[00:43:59] **Esther Perel:** Um, that is exactly in the same register as the touch.

[00:44:07] **Her:** Okay.

[00:44:07] **Esther Perel:** So you stonewalled him, you are thinking, I don't know how to come out of this, this is where I've always gone to protect myself. I'm in my bunker, but he's not going to last because he's going to leave. So now I'm trapped between staying in my bunker because it's safer. And then being afraid that if I stay in my bunker he's going to go. Meanwhile, he thinks he's being punished and he's being excluded. And so each one of you goes to those places and it would be wonderful if, when she stonewalls you and she gives you the silent treatment, you got a costume. And basically came in exactly with that laughter that you have here, whoever you like to be. Do you have any fantasies you can think of at the moment? You know, do you have any of these characters that you would love to be surprised by, but you see the more you are afraid and the more she thinks he's not going to be able to take this anymore. And the more she thinks he's going to leave me and the longer her silence. It's a crazy thing.

[00:45:13] **Her:** Spot on. That's exactly right.

[00:45:15] **Him:** Yeah I mean...

[00:45:16] **Esther Perel:** She's in a no-win situation.

[00:45:18] **Her:** And to that point, like, uh, my default way of dealing with it is being like, okay, see you later.

[00:45:26] **Esther Perel:** That's right. So now it's two people pretending that they can do without the other and they don't need the other, fuck you. You, if you can, because she's too trapped to do anything at first, she has no flexibility, but if you can remember anything from here and just remember, this is the time to go freaking get your costume, your mask. It's very good, a mask.

[00:45:54] **Him:** So I just, it's just you saying that the act of showing my own vulnerability, like just being vulnerable and open.

[00:46:01] **Esther Perel:** The act of not being scared about it. Like, I'm not at the mercy of this. And how many days am I going to sit in the jail?

[00:46:09] **Him:** Okay.

[00:46:09] **Esther Perel:** You have a key to the jail, get out. She's trapped. You have to know that she would love to be released, but that coping style that she perfected over years is the leader at that moment.

[00:46:28] **Him:** Okay.

[00:46:31] **Esther Perel:** What kind of character do you like?

[00:46:37] **Him:** Oh, it doesn't matter. It's going to be crazy. I'm getting a banana costume. I'm doing all kinds of stuff.

[00:46:42] **Esther Perel:** Don't tell her anything upfront.

[00:46:44] **Him:** Of course. So, you know, it's not going to be a banana costume.

[00:46:50] **Esther Perel:** It's gotta be disruptive, discontinuous. Nothing to do with...

[00:46:55] **Him:** Oh I'm good at being disruptive.

[00:46:57] **Esther Perel:** Have fun is what I'm saying to you, have fun.

[00:47:01] **Him:** Yeah.

[00:47:05] **Esther Perel:** Costume, lying flat, touching, as you fight. To, to give you a sense of being able to control the way you fight, not what you fight about.

[00:47:25] **Him:** Okay.

[00:47:25] **Esther Perel:** So you let me know?

[00:47:27] **Her:** Yeah.

[00:47:28] **Him:** Oh, absolutely.

[00:47:29] **Esther Perel:** Would love for you to write to me within two weeks..

[00:47:32] **Him:** Two weeks. Okay, okay, yeah. I'm going to be doing some shopping for some sexy costumes.

[00:47:42] **Her:** I just hope he doesn't find my box of lingerie.

[00:47:51] **Esther Perel:** *The letters they sent were very encouraging. And one of the things she writes is that something changed about the way I thought about our differences, having some knowledge about the various psychological constructs that impacted our reactions were never framed in such a way that resonated deeply with me. But this time it has softened me in a sudden and unexpected way seeing the true vulnerability in my husband changed how I hear his reactions and experience the more difficult parts of his personality. It gives me a new perspective to take into my responses and reactions to him as well. I suppose it was the kick in the teeth that I desperately needed along with some much needed insight and perspective.*

His letter was also very important for me to read because he had been very reluctant to join his wife for the session. He was a self-proclaimed skeptic and his opening sentence of the letter said just as such. As always even coming out of the session, I remain a skeptic, but one thing we definitely took away was having actual conversations with each other. There have been a couple of times when it looked like things could flare up, but they immediately died out and withered. In one of those instances, I initiated the touching that was recommended in the session and it killed an argument immediately. I will say that as a result, our five-year old, who is very emotionally attuned to us has become way more manageable and agreeable recently. On my end, I'm still struggling with the notion that I have to find novel ways to help my wife come out of dark places when we hit rough patches and to be vulnerable when I feel vulnerable, that is still all a work in progress.

I was touched by what I read. It was a lot of takeaways for a one time, three hour session.

[00:50:34] **Jesse (Producer):** Esther Perel is the author of *Mating in Captivity* and *The State of Affairs*, and also the host of the podcast and How's Work? To apply with your partner for a session for the podcast, or for show notes on each episode, go to whereshouldwebegin.estherperel.com. Where Should We Begin? with Esther Perel is produced by Magnificent Noise for Gimlet and Esther Perel productions. Our production staff includes Eric Nuzum, Eva Wolchover, Destry Sibley, Hiwote Getaneh, and Julia Natt. Recorded by Noriko Okabe. Kristen Mueller is our engineer. Original music and additional production by Paul Schneider and the executive producers of Where Should We Begin? are Esther Perel and Jesse Baker. We would also like to thank Lydia Polgreen, Colin Campbell, Clara Sankey, Ian Kerner, Alma, Courtney Hamilton, Nick Oxenhorn and Jack Saul.