

Twilight in Quarantine: Chapter 9: Theory

V: Chapter 9: Theory. “Can I ask just one more?” I pleaded as Edward accelerated much too quickly down the quiet street. He didn’t seem to be paying any attention to the road. He sighed, “One,” he agreed.

I’m Vanessa Zoltan

M: And I’m Meredith Goldstein

V: I can’t even get through reading a sentence of this book without laughing, I’m sorry! And this is Hot and Bothered: Twilight in Quarantine.

[Into music]

V: Meredith, I am so excited to have you on this podcast today. You are the host of Loveletters the podcast and the writer of Loveletters the column on the Boston Globe. You are an author, I have read two of your books, are there only two?

M: There are three-

V: There are three!

M: But one I wrote a long time ago. One came out in 2012 so, there is no homework, you don’t have to read all my books.

V: Well I love the two that I read so I should probably read your third. I read and loved Chemistry Lessons and Can’t Help Myself. What’s your third book that I haven’t read?

M: I wrote a book called The Singles which came out in 2012 and it was very much based on my many years of going to weddings by myself. And it’s about five single guests at a wedding, and what is relevant now that I’m saying it is that I named one character Rob because, at the time, a person who was on my mind a lot was Robert Pattinson, and it all comes back to a book called Twilight.

[Both laugh]

V: So I will say, you are the person who opened my eyes to the possibility of Twilight being more than just, a true guilty pleasure. So do you mind telling everybody a little bit about your relationship to this book?

M: Sure, I mean, so I came to Twilight actually through the film because my mother, my late mother, who was a piano teacher, all of the piano students came to her at one point and said, “I

want to play Clair de Lune,” and they wanted to know more about Debussy. And my mother called me and she said, “There is this movie and book called Twilight,” and she called it “piano teacher porn.” And that was our joke, which was that these kids were so excited about playing piano because a very cool vampire was playing piano. So I saw the movie, I fell very in love with Catherine Hardwick’s adaptation of the story, I loved what she did. And then I read the book. And, y’know I know there are a lot of people who have negative feelings about Twilight, some of them I completely understand and agree with, but I was really just so delighted and charmed by this story of this family, right? It’s like this chosen family and the Cullens were really interesting to me. And as my mom was diagnosed with cancer and got sick and things were really difficult, not shockingly, the romance novel we turn to, because that’s what you do, you turn to romance novels, was the whole Twilight series and we found a lot of comfort in it.

V: Yeah, and that’s the question that I keep asking myself, because these books are so problematic-

M: Yes.

V: The question I keep asking myself is, “What’s the fantasy here?” And then sometimes I don’t need to ask myself the question, I just totally get it. I’m just like, “Oh, the fantasy is that you can just walk down an alley, and even if you run into a gang of rapists who are hurting you, you will be saved.”

M: Yes.

V: Even though I’m sitting here being like, “Ugh this is so problematic, like why is she always falling?” There are moments where I’m like, “No, I totally get it and I love it.”

M: I mean there are guilty pleasure things I love about it and then there are not-so-guilty pleasure things I love about it. There are certainly a lot of problematic, controlling- I mean Edward is really- that line between stalking and caring is very blurry in ways I am deeply uncomfortable with. I think at first my mom and I, well liked Robert Pattinson’s hair, but after that, after the superficial stuff, we loved the idea that at a moment when my mom was sick and all we were desperate for was time, that here were people who had lived for hundreds of years in some cases, and could learn to play the piano, or read a bunch of books, or become a doctor because they had all the time in the world. And we also like the idea that someone who felt Imposter’s Syndrome in life could find a world where she found her people who brought out the best in her. And that’s the sort of positive spin I can make, you know, reading this book, and actually listening to you guys talk about Bella, her way of speaking about her peers, young women in her class, even the young men in her class, where she’s sort of eye-rolling and ungrateful for their attention, some of that just drives me up the wall, but my mother loved the friendship with Alice and Bella. I think, for my mother, she had trouble making friends when she was younger, she was like the first mom to get divorced on our block and that made her a little bit of an outcast. And the idea that, well maybe none of these people are right for me but if I

could find an Alice then I'd have a BFF right? So we would take these pieces from the book that we loved. I think also it was the first young adult book I had read in a long time where the heroine of the book was like, "I find him super attractive, I want to make out with him, I am into him," and there was no shaming of that. I mean Edward has got all sorts of baggage about that but she is just unabashedly attracted to him without apology and that I was interested in too.

V: Yeah, I really appreciate a lot of the reframing that you're doing for me because I think that I have been really put off by Bella's sense of exceptionalism, of like saying, "I'm different, I'm different, I'm different," but it's okay to want to find really proper fits for yourself, I think is a healthy reframing.

M: And I think it's a young person's experience too right where you're like, "No one understands how weird this is," right? She lived in Phoenix where she didn't feel like she belonged there, she is suddenly in a place where she also feels like she doesn't belong. Like I remember walking through high school being like, "No one gets it. No one is experiencing my internal pain." And in fact literally everyone including the teachers were experiencing that same pain. So I think there's like an adolescent exceptionalism of, "no one gets it" that can be pretty common, and you get over it and you go, "Wow, we're actually going through this together."

V: I love that, that's really really helpful.

[Music break]

V: So now the most important question that I have for you is do you want to go first in the 30 second recap or second in the 30 second recap?

M: I wanna go second, I'm so intimidated.

V: I will bravely lead the way.

M: Courageous.

V: And you are gonna find that you go very fast, like Edward's driving. [M laughs.] I will start in three, two, one.

So basically the two of them just drive, Edward is driving her home from Port Angeles and I think it's supposed to take them over an hour but it takes them 20 minutes because he goes 100 miles per hour which she really doesn't like. She, like, gets to ask him all these questions, he admits that he's a vampire, he tells her, "But I don't wanna drink blood- human blood, but I'm very tempted to drink your human blood, you should stay away from me." But she's like "I'm not gonna stay away from you." She's really- he's really tempted to touch her but he withholds and then she goes home to Charlie.

[Buzzer]

Ugh. Okay, are you ready?

M: I'm ready.

V: Don't be nervous.

M: Okay.

V: As long as you don't fall flat on your face you're doing better than Bella.

M: [Laughs] You're right.

V: Okay. On your mark, get set, go.

M: Somehow knowing that her stomach is completely full of mushroom ravioli, Bella asks a lot of questions of Edward: Are you a vampire? Are you a vampire? And he finally is like, "Basically." But then he's like, "But I don't wanna be bad and that's why I eat animals." And he basically confirms every single secret that she so astutely Googled previously. And he's like, "Stay away from me, stay away from me, *don't* stay away from me, stay away from me, stay away from me." And then they get home really quickly because he could not adhere to human laws like a speed limit, and her dad's a cop.

V: You did a nearly perfect job, the only thing I would correct is that she didn't Google, she Asked Jeeves.

M: She did Ask Jeeves! I stand corrected. Early days of internet searches, you are totally right.

V: I mean, not to teach the teacher, but-

[M laughs]

Excuse me.

M: I loved this chapter because it's just like that first date car ride where you're just like, "What do you like?"

"No what do *you* like?"

It's far more important than that obviously. I will also say that the last lines of this chapter and the lines that made it to the back cover of this book.

V: Oh, yes!"

M: At least my copy. So I was so excited to do this chapter because, y'know, she ends this chapter by saying, "I know this guy is hot, I know this guy's a vampire, and I know I'm completely in love with him." That's not word-for-word, she doesn't say, "this guy's hot," but she's basically like "Whatever it is I don't care, I'm all in." And that was so significant that it's on the back cover of the book, from Chapter 9.

V: That's so interesting that you outlined that because I hated those last three lines, but what I did love in this chapter, I loved a couple things. One: I loved when he says to her, "I followed your scent." I was like, "That's so weird, and I'm so into it."

I love that Bella asks for what she needs, she's like, "You should call me. I also missed you." She asserts herself in this chapter in a way that I haven't seen her do in the previous chapters and I was like, "Good. She's starting to feel comfortable around him and demand things of him and say like, 'You promised you would answer this question.'" She tells him that his driving makes her uncomfortable.

M: I love that, I think you're totally right. The agency she takes in this chapter is really different. I mean she goes from trying to look cool to everybody to be like, "Whatever, I like you, slow down, and please call me."

V: Yeah. I guess I also really love the moment where she doesn't take his jacket, it made her seem in control of herself. I just remember, a boy lent me his jacket when I was in high school and I was simultaneously so embarrassed to wear it home in front of my parents because I knew they'd ask, and yet I could not get myself to not wear it home. I remember being like, "I should leave it in my locker so my parents don't ask," but then I was just so touched that Adam had given me his jacket that I couldn't not wear it home. So I just had such respect for Bella to be like, "No, take it, I don't want Charlie to see."

M: I think there's also this fun thing, and it is in romance novels in general, where authors describe the perfect way someone smells. And I notice in romance novels it's often like, "Smoke, but also this kind of food," or "Oh. there was a hint of masculinity, but also with a pear." And in this it's like, "No, it just smelled exquisite." I can't remember the words she uses but if I could bottle whatever I think Stephanie Meyer thinks Edward smells like what would that be? What does this jacket smell like? And I remember for the Globe, I did a story about the actress who plays the girl werewolf, Julia Jones, who's actually from Boston, and I looked at her and I said, "What does Robert Pattinson smell like?" This was like so many years ago, and she said, "Why?" and I said, "Well I know he's not really Edward Cullen, but you talk about Edward Cullen and what smells-, and I just like, what does he smell like? What does the actor smell like?" And she sort of paused and she said, "I don't know, like cigarettes?"

And I was like, "Oh." I mean this was years ago, maybe he doesn't any more, but especially as someone with allergies and doesn't smell that well to begin with, I want to know, what does that hero smell like. That jacket must smell like pure heaven.

V: It is funny the way that romance novels can treat men's smell like wine, right?

M: Yes.

V: Like the way people are like, "It's oaky."

M: [Laughs] He's a little oaky, he's rich.

V: So the last three lines of the chapter though are where my piece of advice comes in and I'm just gonna read them, but I'm gonna read them of the back of the book because, here there are. They're the thesis statement of the novel. And it's:

About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there was a part of him- and I didn't know how potent that part might be- that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.

And I guess my piece of advice is, this sounds like it could be an abusive relationship. My understanding, my cursory understanding of abusive relationships is that they are basically predicated on the abuser being unreliable and the abused being completely reliable. Right, so the abuser's gonna be nice to you sometimes and mean to you other times, withdrawn from you sometimes, effusive other times. And what is more unknowable than if he is going to thirst for you so much that he kills you? And I think the rest of his behaviour is really all over the place, right? Where he disappears for days and then it turns out he's following her. Where he talks to her and then stops talking to her for 6 weeks, but then he can't help but to talk to her. And so I want Bella to be in conversation with as many people as possible about this relationship because I love the idea of really passionate love, but I don't like the idea of unconditional or irrevocable love. I do think there should be limits, right?

M: Absolutely. And I think that having people in her life who aren't him, that's the most important thing. You see how isolated she is in this moment. She's not gonna tell her friends about him, not really. She's going to keep this away from her father, at the moment she speaks to no one about what's actually happening in her life and that's a really scary thing. So I totally echo that advice and I also have a little bit of advice for Edward.

So, it's really difficult to read this chapter and not get really frustrated for a number of reasons. This weird routine he does about, "Stay away from me, don't stay away from me," at this reading, and it's been years since I really sat down with the text in this way, the fact that he so casually insults her, in some ways he is seeing her as an equal, he can't get around her mind, right? On the other hand he's constantly like, "You're a mess, you can't stand up straight." And he basically criticises her ability to protect herself. And not like a man of a 100 plus years really should, like, learn the lesson that if you're going to pursue someone, stop telling her she's bad at things. When a woman looks at you and tells you I don't like that you drive 100 miles an hour, instead of saying like, "No I'm cool with it, I get it," hear her, respect her, and don't make a joke of it. So I find that Edward's humour about her fragility, I find it to be super patronizing and troubling.

V: And inaccurate right? She's kept herself alive for 17 years, he's the most dangerous thing in her life.

M: Yes! And she's actually despite being, kind of, not the most enticing heroine character, you know, you look at her and you say, "Oh wow, you have been forced into some adult decisions that other kids your age don't have to make." And instead of recognizing and praising that in the right ways, I think he does know it. He knows it when he talks to her about that kind of thing after the lab scene. He doesn't celebrate it to her, her sort of, what's that concept, like "negging," right? Like, "I'm just gonna like cut you down a little bit and that making you feel that much more vulnerable and into me." And that's abusive too right, so I think here's a character on Edward's side who's really wrestling with an attachment and love for someone that he's deeply afraid he's gonna hurt and that he doesn't handle it well. And with all vampire characters, whether it's Stephanie Meyer, Anne Rice, all these authors who take this on you always wonder does the maturity freeze too, is this going to be a 17 year old boy forever? It's hard to say with this, there are moments where Edward seems like 100 and there are other times when you're like "Dude!"

So that's my advice, Edward get over yourself, put your foot on the break, believe the woman who's sitting next to you, and stop telling her she's bad at things.

V: So my second piece of advice is also about Edward's driving. I just feel like he doesn't understand that he's part of a greater society, he's forgotten. So just because he knows that he won't get into a car accident, doesn't mean it's okay that he's driving 100 miles an hour. If you see someone driving 100 miles an hour and not getting in trouble you are more likely to speed. And I don't think that he understands that he is in an ecosystem where even if his actions don't directly cause an accident, they are making Bella uncomfortable, they are still making the roads less safe. It's like he believes that because he is a vampire and because he and the Cullens live a separate life that he is not having an impact on the world. And I also feel like that comes across when he jokingly calls himself a vegetarian. I'm like, "No, you're super not. You're killing a lot of animals. I like get it, but no."

M: No you're totally right, if I saw somebody speeding to that level I might even call law enforcement and, in a way, that takes people's time and energy, that they shouldn't take.

V: It's just like so dumb. I feel like he needs to read some Kant. You know like Kant's idea that you shouldn't cross that grass because then it creates permission for everyone to cross the grass, and we will all trample the grass. Edward does not seem to have any base understanding of that.

M: Once again after 100 years, you'd think he would know.

V: Right? Like in all this time that he's been Clair de Lune hasn't he had time to read some moral philosophy? Like, read some moral philosophy dude! Watch The Good Place.

M: Yes, yes.

V: Moral philosophy has been made fun. What is your second piece of advice?

M: My second piece of advice is for Bella. You know the irony is that Edward can read minds except for Bella's, Bella can't read minds and yet she is constantly trying to get in the heads of everyone else. And she is looking at him and saying "You dazzle people." She is constantly concerned about how other people perceive her or him, and she's probably wrong. There are many points in this book where I'm like, listen, you're with some guy and you're like "I'm like with the hottest guy ever, everybody wants him, I'm not good enough," and it's like, "No one's looking at you."

So this is just sort of a general piece of advice for Bella which is that what's important to you might not be important to somebody else. For some people Emmet is the hottest Cullen and that is the end of this story, right? So just to get a broader picture of what's happening here and to never get so far into the weeds of Edward being the center of the universe. He's one of five Cullen children- and Hale children.

V: Oh my god, I love this advice so much. I have a friend who always thinks that people are into her husband and I'm like, "Just say it, you're into it." Like, people aren't into your husband all the time and you get off on thinking that they are. And I feel like Bella just needs to admit she loves feeling exceptional, she loves feeling exceptionally klutzy, she loves feeling exceptionally Phoenix, she loves feeling like an exceptional reader, whole libraries and bookstores aren't good enough for her, and she loves thinking like she got the most exceptional guy that literally everyone wants. This waitress might just be annoyed in the previous chapter that someone's taking up her table and not ordering food, and therefore she's not gonna get a good tip, and that's why she's staring at him. She's like, "Dude, order."

M: I love the idea of that waitress leaving the restaurant that night and being picked up by her girlfriend. That's always what I imagined.

V: [Laughs] Yes! She's only, like, pissed. She's like, "Another frickin' rich white dude sitting at my table not understanding that tips are based on how much you order, god!"

M: Right and this idea that like, "I need a better table, and here's a little cash," and he looks 17, that must be so annoying.

V: And is in, like, beige-on-beige. Ugh! I waitressed for years, I'd have hated him. And of course you're in love with this girl who's like starving herself.

M: Yep, yes.

V: Yes, this waitress hates Edward, absolutely. And Bella's just projecting. God, solved.

[Music break]

V: So we always say we don't just give advice, we give practical items to help Bella through the world, so we put items in a care package and send those to her. So what would you like to put in Bella's care package?

M: Oh, this is tough, um, the world's largest seatbelt?

V: Like actually one of those harnesses that you wear on a roller coaster?

M: Yes

V: I know that we always put things in Bella's care package, and I have something for her care package, but I really wanna get Edward a pair of beige leather driving gloves

M: Oh that's so nice of you!

V: They would go with his outfit, and really I just want him to just fully lean into his ridiculous fashion aesthetic which I think includes driving gloves

M: I love that and you know, thinking about what you said about Edward and speed in general, it would be great if he had the technology of an app like Waze because then he could really consider the other cars on the road, how fast he's going, how he's changing other people's journeys. I would really love to see a situation where Waze is telling Edward where to go and letting him know that he's driving like not a very nice vampire

V: Like a dick.

M: Exactly.

V: So what I wanna put in Bella's care package is a backpack. A, like, matching beige leather backpack, like a fashion backpack- not that she uses for school, but that she uses as her purse. And I think in that backpack she should just be leaving things like Z-bars, and handfuls of raisins, and lots of layers because her temperature vacillates a lot, and she wouldn't have to deal with this whole thing of having left her jacket in Jessica's car. It's much sturdier she can run from people, or fight them better. I just think like a fashion-forward, awesome backpack would be a great aesthetic and accessory for Bella.

M: What you've just described, with his driving gloves being tan to match his outfit and her beige backpack, I'm starting to remember Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake in matching denim. That this would be the Edward-Bella version of that, that they would be just fully decked-out and ready to go out together looking not at all inconspicuous, but quite conspicuous.

V: Although leather isn't great in the rain.

M: True. Matching umbrellas.

V: Yes.

M: Beige.

V: A beige umbrella.

So Meredith, I have not read these books, can I tell you what I think is gonna happen in the next chapter though?

M: Tell me!

V: I think that Charlie, because he is a sheriff, is going to investigate what is going on. He knows something is amiss with his daughter, and he is gonna try to go and kill Edward but Edward will kill Charlie and then Bella is gonna have to forgive Edward because she loves him unconditionally, she'll be fine with it.

M: That is a jump.

V: Is that not what happens?

M: I'm gonna say you're probably wrong.

V: No! Is Charlie such a bad police officer that he doesn't understand what's going on in his own home? Is that a metaphor for how clueless dads are?

M: Charlie is like, he's like my favourite cliché YA book dad, and I say that with love because I have also in Chemistry Lessons written a cliché YA book dad, who's like, "I'm a good dad, I'm just doing my best." Where you have these parents who are involved in a narrative just enough but not too much where they take away the agency of the young person. So Charlie is just, y'know, wants to go fish, he wants to live his life, totally unobservant.

V: I just am worried that there could be a huge crystal meth problem in Forks and Charlie's just such a bad police officer that like-

M: He would not know. I'm telling you right off the bat, he would not know. Charlie would absolutely miss that.

V: Yeah, that makes me sad for the city of Forks.

[Music break]

V: Well, Meredith thank you so, so much, this was just such a pleasure. Can you tell the people all the places that they can find you and your work?

M: Well I have to tell you that if you are enjoying Twilight at all, there is a chapter in my memoir *Can't Help Myself* about Twilight and about my mother and about how Twilight sort of ruined my brain- or helped it for a bit, um so you might like *Can't Help Myself*, but you also might like the *Loveletters* podcast where people tell their love and breakup stories in fun narratives and it is escapism in a different sort of way.

V: I love that podcast. Well this has been *Twilight in Quarantine*, a Kantian exposition from *Hot and Bothered*. This episode and all episodes are executive produced by Ariana Nedelman and produced by Ariana Martinez. The show was conceived of as a vampire baby by Julia Argy, and I'm Vanessa Zoltan, and I'm just reading along. We are a production of Not Sorry Productions and are distributed by Acast. A special thanks this week to Meredith Goldstein and we will talk to you soon!