

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:19	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. First up this week, actor Ann Dowd. She’s being interviewed for our show by Linda Holmes, the host of NPR’s <i>Pop Culture Happy Hour</i> . Ann Dowd is a veteran actor. She started on the stage, first in Chicago where she went to school, then in New York. She started appearing onscreen in the ‘90s, eventually going from the <i>Law & Order</i> circuit to lead roles on film and in television. She’s had memorable parts in shows like <i>Search Party</i> , <i>The Leftovers</i> , and in the 2012 movie <i>Compliance</i> . But she’s probably best known for her part in <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> . Dowd plays Aunt Lydia, the cruel, sadistic, but sometimes maternal villain who presides over Elisabeth Moss’s June and the other handmaids. The role earned her an Emmy Award in 2017. <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i> is back for a fourth season on Hulu. At this point in the series, Gilead—the dystopian nation that took the place of the United States—is facing a rebellion. Several handmaids have run off and, in this scene, Lydia interrogates June over their whereabouts.
00:01:27	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:28	Clip	Clip	<i>[Heavy footsteps and hushed breathing.]</i> Aunt Lydia (<i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i>): That lieutenant is very determined. If you don’t cooperate, I fear things might get quite a bit worse for you, Ofrobert, Oferic, Ofhoward, and the others. All wanted fugitives in grave danger because of you. Bring them home. June: This isn’t their home. Aunt Lydia: Because you corrupted them. They had a life of meaning, here. A life of service. June: There is no meaning in this place except violence.
00:02:06	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:02:07	Linda Holmes	Host	Ann Dowd, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> !
00:02:09	Ann Dowd	Guest	Oh, my gracious. Yes, thank you. I’m afraid of that woman, whoever it was, there!
00:02:15	Linda	Host	Absolutely. She—you can sort of tell from the panting and crying of Ms. Elisabeth Moss that that’s a—that’s a pretty harrowing scene there with Aunt Lydia.
00:02:25	Ann	Guest	It definitely was. Definitely was.

00:02:27 Linda Host So, you're into the fourth season now. I've heard you talk before about the empathy that you find for Lydia. Has that changed at all as kind of the project has progressed and Aunt Lydia has kind of stayed the way she is?

00:02:43 Ann Guest Oh, so no difference, eh?

[They chuckle.]

I'm measuring the—you know, the really tiny, tiny, tiny steps that one takes.

[Linda agrees emphatically.]

Here's the thing, I'm crazy about her, you know? I know that's not really a good way to say it, but I have love for her—a sincere love for her. I've known her now for four years. You see? And the thing is, as an actor, you know that golden rule: no judgement. And so, that comes before we begin anything, four years ago. See? And I was very curious about her and that's a good thing. I think a character is aware when your interest is genuine, and the judgment is not present. Then the relationship begins, and the communication begins. So, now what I found—especially in this fourth season as it progresses, especially toward the end there. I think I'm speaking of maybe eight or nine—I was stunned at what happened when we shot, because it's not what I had in mind, necessarily.

In fact, you know, we work through things slowly. Elisabeth was directing; she's the best. You know. It's not enough that she's a phenomenal actress, she has to be extraordinary as a director as well. I can't explain to you the comfort in her being there, because she knows these characters very, very well. And so, the way things played out really shocked me. Meaning parts of Lydia that I would—I would say she has kept a very close watch on to the point of silenced those parts of her, emerged on their own and I know to anyone who isn't an actor it sounds like I'm speaking voodoo, and I really don't mean to sound that way and I don't believe that's what it is. But she was very fully in charge in those scenes and that, to me, was an indication of where she's going. And what I mean by that is, you know, she loves Janine without hesitation or there's no part of her that says, "Well, you shouldn't." She loves June as well, but the red flags go up everywhere, because June is incredibly complicated. But there is a very profound—to me—attraction between the two. An admiration on a level which I would assume Lydia would claim is unconscious, but—just parts of her she just can't keep shut down any longer.

00:05:24 Linda Host You've played some pretty physical stuff as Lydia. Right? She hits, she pokes, she yanks. On one memorable occasion she got stabbed and fell down the stairs.

[Ann confirms.]

What are the most physical days of playing that character like for you?

00:05:40 Ann Guest Oh, darling, you know, they take very good care. Can I just say? *[Chuckles.]* It's unbelievable. They were so fantastic and the last thing you wanna see on your call sheet is, "Coming in for stunt rehearsals." Like, really? Really? Do I have to—"Well, yes, you do, dear. Because you're clueless and you need to know how to do it." And they are sooo absolutely spot on. You know. You have the *[chuckles]*—you have like practically—what do you call those things you jump on? Trampolines laid out so if you fall any which way, it's—you're protected. And the really hard stuff is done by a stunt person. Do you know what I'm saying?

[Linda confirms.]

Which is to say when the woman slams her head on the banister after that stabbing by that wretched girl—!

[Linda laughs.]

—and over *[chuckles]*—over she goes, you know, she's a trained professional and she pulled it off. Now, the stairs I fell down? You know, rolling down a set of stairs is not the end of the world, you know what I'm saying? Especially when you have a banister to hold on to. The difficult part of course is keeping it sync with what you're trying to do as the character. Do you know what I'm saying?

[Linda confirms.]

So, you know, the physical part goes on only so far—meaning there's no danger ever, in other words. But running down the darn street in the middle of wherever we were, after a while that was—because Lydia wears like 20 pounds of clothing. Do you know? I'm sort—I'm joking here, but I mean to say there's weight to it. So—yeah. *[Chuckles.]*

00:07:20 Linda Host Sure! I think in most communities that weigh women down with a lot of—a lot of clothing, one thing that can arise is the fact that it's—that it's physically constricting. Right? Even if you're just talking about high heels and things like that.

00:07:36 Ann Guest

Okay, explain to me those.

00:07:38 Linda Host

Uh, yeah. They're—I mean, I will say you don't wanna wear the Gilead clothes, but at least June wears those nice flat boots.

00:07:46 Ann Guest

Yeah, I got a pair of flat ones myself. A little too flat.

[Linda chuckles.]

You see, there's a balance, but I mean to say—and then, yeah. The heels, I—no. And then, on the other side, I think to myself, "Yeah, they're definitely restrictive and annoying and there's—thank god it's not a cold day on a particular day, 'cause there's 32 more layers, but it builds strength and determination as well.

00:08:08 Linda Host

You know, I was—whenever I think about you playing Lydia, I think about one of the first performances of yours that stood out kind of most starkly to me, which was in *Compliance*, in 2012. *Compliance*, for anybody who hasn't seen it, is based on a true story about a

series of calls that were made—people will call the prank calls, but I think it's somewhat minimizing it.

[Ann agrees.]

Calls that were made to mostly fast-food restaurants where someone was impersonating a police officer who would persuade managers at these places to strip-search ultimately teenage—mostly teenage girls just by kind of gradually talking them through, you know—taking on this idea of authority and talking them into this.

00:08:57 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:08:58 Clip

Kevin (*Compliance*): Alright, so what—what is going on?

[Door closes.]

Sandra: There's some upsetting news about Becky. She stole from a customer and she may be in trouble for something with her brother. He's been in trouble with the law.

Kevin: Wait, she stole something?

Sandra: Yes.

Kevin: *[Stammering.]* No, I—I know her brother. He's not—wait, what?! *[Chuckles uncomfortably.]*

Sandra: I can't talk about it right now. It's all gonna be sorted out. What I need you for is to watch Becky until the police get here. We had to strip-search her. Hello, officer, I'm back.

Officer: *[Muffled by the phone.]* Hey, how's it going out there? Is it a madhouse?

Sandra: Oh, *[chuckling]* yes, you guessed it. It's a madhouse. Yes, I'm in the weeds. That's the word. I've gotta get back out there, but I have Kevin here and he's gonna watch Becky.

00:09:52 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:09:53 Linda Host

To me, there is a line between that character in *Compliance* and Lydia, in the sense that they're—

00:10:03 Ann Guest

That's a good point.

00:10:04 Linda Host

They're both—you know, they're both kind of wanting to be rule followers to the point where their own individual sense of what's right and wrong is getting a little bit foggy. Do you think?

00:10:16 Ann Guest

That's a great comparison. Yes, I do. I do think that's a very good connection. I would say it's significantly more extreme, of course, with Lydia.

[Linda agrees.]

But the root of it, if we agree that—I mean, my imaginings for that lovely woman, Sandra—felt terribly sorry for her. Well, it was the

same. Raised—and I—forgive me, this is so horrible. I mean, not that it wouldn't be the mother, too, but the parents saying, "Alright, fatty." You know. "Don't turn any proposal down, hon, because there's not gonna be another one." And never having an opinion paid attention to. "Shut your mouth." Deferring to church, deferring to authority, regardless. And to me, it comes down in a way to constitution—which is where I would draw the line in terms of differences between the two. To me, Sandra struck me as—here you are, you know, you're running a fast-food place. I mean to say, there's nothing in the world wrong with any job that pays for you—you know, gives you your livelihood in which you feel fulfilled. But if you don't feel fulfilled there and you have—it never occurs to you that you can go elsewhere, that—to me—is a life that isn't claimed by the individual.

And so, she struck me as terribly vulnerable, that one. And trying to do the best she could. And, "Yeah, oh, I understand the rules. Yep." That she never even for a minute wondered if this guy is legit. And even if he is legit, "I'm sorry, sir. It's Friday night and I'm running a restaurant and it's a fast-food restaurant. If you want this woman looked after, you're gonna have to find a deputy or come yourself. I can't help you. Not my job." I mean, how quickly would that come out of our mouths? When something like that happens and you—and suddenly awareness hits and the—and the wall—the veil comes off or whatever it is you put over your eyes and you realize, "Oh my god, I allowed that to happen. I did that." You know. The nervous breakdown or the collapse is a necessary step to then start again. Do you know what I'm saying? [*Stammering.*] "Okay, everything I've done—it just didn't—I could—I'm very—I'm very, very lost." But that's not where she went. This woman said, "You would have done the same thing and I would have done the same thing had I had to do it over. That's it."

00:12:56 Linda Host

Yeah. You know, *Compliance* is a—is a movie that I saw at a festival. I saw it at South by Southwest, in Austin. And I remember going around and recommending it to a lot of people and trying to make sure that everybody that I knew saw it.

00:13:12 Ann Guest

Thank you for that.

00:13:13 Linda Host

But I [*laughs*]—I do know there was a—kind of a limited budget to promote it and to make people aware of it. Are you at this point kind of sanguine about the "thing goes out the door and what happens happens" or are you—are you frustrated by kind of the capriciousness of outcomes for different projects, kind of irrespective of how good they are or how loved they are by the people who work on them?

00:13:37 Ann Guest

Oh, what a good question. Because I kind of—I came into it kind of late by the—by that I mean, you know, the awards stuff and all of that. I—you know, that wasn't—I would say in Chicago we had our wonderful Jeff Awards, which meant a lot to us and so on. And not to put it in a diminished state at all, however it wasn't on the level of Hollywood. You know what I'm saying?

[*Linda confirms.*]

Where—that extreme—of course you do. That extreme attention. And then when something happens, like winning an Emmy, which I'll just never forget. That was a really extraordinary moment. That then you begin to want that again and again. And you have to just step back and say, "Okay, hon, do you see where you're going here? Come on, now. Feet on the ground. You know darn well what's important. It's the work. So, don't even pretend anything—come on, now." You know, that takes a little bit of speaking to oneself. And so, in that regard I have stepped back and realized, "You're getting caught up. Come on." And that's been a good journey to remind myself. Very, very, very important. When a project that you love, that is extraordinary—I'm gonna throw out this one called *Mass*.

00:14:53 Linda Host
00:14:55 Ann Guest

Oh, yes. I saw that.

Which hasn't come out and which really, between us, I have not seen because the experience of shooting it was the most profound I've ever had.

[Linda hums in understanding.]

And by that I do not mean painful. I mean the generosity of a character, in my case, Linda—just stepping in and honestly taking charge and—because how do you take that—how do you do that in two weeks? The enormity of that grief and the enormity of the loss and so on? And again, I'm speaking from an actor's perspective. I hope this film is embraced for the reasons it is wonderful. And I say wonderful because of the experience I had. And of course, from what I've heard—that it affects people. And that I care tremendously about. That it—that it find its way and that it finds as much—as many—as large an audience as we can. I'm invested in that. And I'll do what I can to promote that or to support that, let us say. Beyond that, what can I do? Do you know what I'm saying?

[Linda confirms.]

00:16:13 Linda Host

So, that's the point at which you say, "Thank god there are people who know what they're doing, and they will—they will take charge.

00:16:19 Ann Guest

Yeah, I do know what you mean. And I think with that film in particular—I saw that through the Toronto film festival.

00:16:21 Linda Host

Oh, you did?

I did. It's a stunning film. I remember so much about it. It certainly is one of the ones from that week that has stuck with me the most and it's also such a—I mean, I'm not surprised to hear you speak very personally about it, because it's—partly because it's a very actor driven—I mean, obviously it's script driven as well, like everything, but it's a very actor driven piece. It's only really, for the most part, four people sitting around a table talking for the majority of the film. It could easily be a play. And you know, I have to think that's a lot to carry, regardless of the fact that—as you said—the subject matter is very—is very heavy and serious.

00:17:03 Ann Guest

Yeah, you know, it's funny—we're all thick as thieves now. We will be, I would imagine, for the rest of our lives. I don't think you go through an experience like that and then you part ways in any casual way. I mean to say, I would say that's true of any film, but

this in particular, they are family to me. And Fran. I love Fran. And all of those actors. And we were all—you know, we met briefly for I think two days, possibly three, for rehearsals, which really were about working through the text before we began shooting. You know, a month, I think, or maybe more. And I think we all were in the same place—you know, terrified. And these were not actors that started yesterday. Terrified. “Can we do it?” And can we know our words, number one! And can we do the deep dive that it has to have? And something about—you know how some experiences are just plain protected? Blessed? I don’t know how else to say it.

[Linda confirms.]

That was that experience. We were all together in this church. You know, this lovely church in Idaho that we were kindly loaned and everyone—there’s no greenroom for anyone to hide in. There’s not a trailer in sight. And that was fantastic. The crew was—everybody’s working very hard. We’re all sitting there in the same space. You know? Something wonderful happens in that circumstance. And terrifying things. I remember the first time I read it, I thought, “Okay. How can we exist in this level of grief for the period of time it will take to shoot this? And how will you ever say no to it?”

00:18:53 Jesse Host

Even more with Ann Dowd still to come. Stay with us. It’s *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:19:01 Music Transition
00:19:02 Jesse Promo

Cheerful, bright music.

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00:19:39 Promo Clip

[Music fades out.]

Music: Quiet, thoughtful music.

Host: Today, it seems like everybody’s got a bone to pick with the news. So, what happens when somebody stops talking smack and just decides to wage all-out war?

Speaker: First thing you do in an invasion, you eliminate the communications of the enemy.

00:20:04 Jesse Host

Host: And what happens if they win? Visit Stockton, California for a story about a revolt against the mainstream media that’s shaken up a city, from NPR’s *Invisibilia*.

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. Our guest is actor Ann Dowd. She plays the villain, Aunt Lydia, on television’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is in its fourth season now, on Hulu. She’s also had some great roles in *The Leftovers*, the movies *Compliance* and *Hereditary*, and the original run of TV’s *The Babysitter’s Club*.

00:20:32 Linda Host She's being interviewed by our friend Linda Holmes, who's the co-host of NPR's Pop Culture Happy Hour. Let's get back into it. I was talking to somebody the other day about the fact that you—I don't know who the record holder is for the most different characters in the *Law & Order*—in the *Law & Order* universe, but you have to be up there.

[Ann laughs.]

00:20:49 Ann Guest You've gotta be up there. I think you have nine.
00:20:51 Linda Host Is that right?
I think it's nine. And that's between all the different shows. And it spans a good number of years, too.
00:20:56 Ann Guest Oh, I loved working on those shows. Loved it.
00:21:00 Linda Host Yeah? Is that a—is that a good job?
00:21:02 Ann Guest Oh, god! It was—it was the ticket to come on in, in New York.

[Linda affirms.]

And they were good. They know what they were—they knew what they were doing. I love the actors. Love them! And you know, in those early days, you know you're there for the day, man. And *[chuckles]* the—you know, that's just it. And it—and it—the courtroom scenes, you know, part of you is on your knees begging for help because it just goes looong. And they're—you know, they're intense. And so, I loved working in those roles. And the kindness of—by that I mean, in the learning over time how to do it, you know what I'm saying? And getting the early roles where you could figure it out. "Okay, this isn't—I can do this." And then growing eventually into—one of the ones I remember is "Compassion". You know, the pediatric oncologist.

[Linda affirms.]

00:22:05 Linda Host Which I loved so much; I can't even say. I found that all fantastic. Absolutely fantastic. Loved it. Loved it.
00:22:15 Ann Guest Yeah. I found that as I was preparing to do this, I was reminded several times of things that I had forgotten all about, like that you were on—you were on *Freaks and Geeks*.
00:22:16 Linda Host *[Gasps.]* Loved!
Loved! I mean, who isn't—who is not amazing from *Freaks and Geeks*? That's a—
00:22:20 Ann Guest Okay, name one. You can't.
00:22:22 Linda Host That's a murderer's row, right? That's—everybody's great. You were Busy Philipps's mom, right? Amazing.
00:22:27 Ann Guest Yes! Yeah, the whole group—*[chuckles]*. Who—I mean, sitting at the table—sitting at the table of their house—was that like—I don't know, you know what I mean? Where they were proper parents, and some of those actors—I loved—the whole thing was like, "Pinch me." And the insanity, the insanity of what went on in the household I was in with my daughter, Busy. Oh, I loved every second. And then looking around the room, the creators of that show, I swear to god they were like 20s. In their 20s. And you look at them and say, "Wait a second, what?" And the sweet writer

whom I adore, he looked 14 to me. And he's—you know, you're just saying, "Wait a minute, how'd this happen? Where are you—where are you guys from? What is going on here?" It was a blast. Complete blast.

00:23:20 Linda Host Did you have a sense at the time that it—that that was a show where there were just a whole bunch of people who were gonna be super big deals?

00:23:28 Ann Guest No, the only thing that surprised me about that show was why it wasn't picked up.

00:23:32 Linda Host Oh yeah. I mean, I agree with that.

00:23:33 Ann Guest That was like, "Wait a minute, what is wrong with people?"

00:23:35 Linda Host That's wild. That's a—that's absolute—the interesting thing is it has had very long—I mean, it's had very long legs in terms of, you know—people still love it and talk about it and talk about kind of the spectacular nature of that cast. And I think for a lot of people it's a reference point for sort of, you know—a different kind of entry in how television started to broaden, how good it could be. You know?

00:23:57 Ann Guest Yeees. Yeah, that—I wouldn't—you know, you're far more aware than I. How about Cardellini in *Dead to Me*?

00:24:04 Linda Host Oooh, my gosh.

00:24:06 Ann Guest Come on!

00:24:07 Linda Host She's wonderful and I just watched her the other day in *Legally Blonde*, as well.

[Ann "ooh"s.]

00:24:15 Ann Guest She's a—she's all over the place. She's all over the place. Good for her.

00:24:16 Linda Host But yeah, I loved seeing her show up in *Dead to Me*, 'cause like she's one of those—she and Christina Applegate both are just—

00:24:23 Ann Guest Okay, stop. Can you even—?

00:24:25 Linda Host Love to see them every time. Love to see them every time!

00:24:28 Ann Guest I'm gonna just tell you right now, I don't watch a whole lot because I don't understand how anyone has time. I—that's stupid. I mean, yes, you do—

00:24:36 Linda Host No, no. No one does. No one does.

00:24:37 Ann Guest No one does. That is serious—I watched the whole thing twice, because—and then the scary part is [chuckles]—'cause I had some really challenging things happening in my life, in my personal life. You know, just things that people do have challenging things. Right? And so, [chuckling] I suddenly was hypnotized by Applegate in her responses and in her anger problem. And you can really adopt her way of looking at the world and, you know—when she's talking to someone and she says under her breath, "Uh-huh, and [censored] you." So, what—you know, where she just slips in under the sentences and you're dying! Yeah. I just loved seeing the two of them. And you know, you'd think they'd been—I don't know, they just—they're fantastic. That's all.

00:25:25 Linda Host You know, outside of *Handmaid's*, which obviously you're—you know, you're busy with *Handmaid's* and film—what are kind of the most important things to you right now in terms of deciding what kind of work you wanna do?

00:25:37	Ann	Guest	Well, as we speak, I'm working on a one person show that is written and will be directed by Robert Icke. Do you know—you must know him?
00:25:47	Linda	Host	I know who that is, yes.
00:25:48	Ann	Guest	Yeah, he's beyond. Beyond. It's based on <i>Enemy of the People</i> . And so, we had been Zooming and he's been writing as we've been talking, all along. And it's nearly complete and rehearsal begins May 3. Here, it'll be happening here in the—at the Armory on Park Avenue. So, you know. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Let's talk about challenge! Can we? Because there's—it's been extraordinary to really focus on the complexity of a character and let's come to know this character and we'll—if we don't get it in this take, just relax. We're gonna—we're gonna—there's a lot of ways we're gonna shoot this. And then if it doesn't work, we'll just do it again. Mm-hm.
			So, what the theatre is to me—which is where I began—is, "Let's step up into what real courage is. Not just on one level, but on many." Which is to say, drop the armor. This is what I have, tonight. And I'm gonna trust it. And I'm gonna put the walls down an I'm gonna—I'm gonna just say, "Yes, I can." And I say that like I'm talking about some—I don't know, Hallmark card. I really don't mean to sound that way, because that's the challenge in front of me. You know? And I'm determined to embrace it and enjoy it. But it's—you know, I haven't been there for a minute. The last play I did was something called <i>Night is a Room</i> , by Naomi Wallace, which we did at the Signature Theatre. And so, now it's time again to step in and see where the level of courage is and how we can <i>[laughs]</i> increase it.
00:27:36	Jesse	Host	We'll have even more with Ann Dowd in just a minute. After the break, she tells us about the time she went to medical school, got good grades, and dropped out so she could become an actor. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:27:51	Music	Transition	Jazzy, relaxed music.
00:27:52	Jesse	Promo	This message comes from NPR sponsor Womply. Womply is committed to helping self-employed workers and small businesses get their PPP loan. They've helped over 100,000 small businesses. Even if you're a freelancer or gig worker, you may qualify. Womply makes the process easy. Start your application at Womply.com/NPR . They'll route it to an approved lender. Apply for free today at Womply.com/NPR and see if you qualify.
00:28:31	Jesse	Host	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to <i>Bullseye</i> . Our guest, Ann Dowd, is an Emmy Award winning actor. She plays the sadistic Aunt Lydia in Hulu's <i>The Handmaid's Tale</i> , which just entered its fourth season. She's being interviewed by our pal Linda Holmes.
00:28:48	Linda	Host	What made you wanna act first? What are your first memories of wanting to act?
00:28:55	Ann	Guest	You know what used to bug me is when I was in acting school and I would hear, "You know, children know how to do it naturally." I'd be like what?! Well, of course, that's true, isn't it? You don't have—when you—when kids are playing—now, as a woman who's older, my children are—you know, my youngest is 16, but you know my kids are—I could watch children all day long. Could I just sit here in

the park and watch them, the imagination, the lack of boundaries? If you say to them, "You know, there's your kingdom. Right over there. You know what? Don't let anyone—that's—you've gotta protect—" You don't ever have to say it twice. And I think I had just feelings like that in my room, alone. That, "Oh, nobody's watching and no one's gonna say, 'What are you doing?'"

I come from seven kids, you know, you gotta keep yourself sharp. Can I just say? But I would say high school, but the thing that really—I was gonna be a surgeon. That was the whole plan. My father and I discussed that and that was the plan and then he died, senior year. So, I really doubled down on that. And it was—even though there was great love for theatre in my household and he had the—you know, theatres from Ireland? Can you imagine in our living room, for gracious sakes? And he used to do the stuff at Christmas for us, my dad. He would read and he would be putting on his velvet red coat. It was like, "Woooah." But it was never—and he would come to see plays that I was in, in high school, and just stand in the back, never tell me he was there. I mean, he would come—you know—for the formal coming, but then he would show up to things. And—but the message was never, "This is what you can choose for your life, by the way." Absolutely not.

This was a hobby. You know, you enjoyed it for fun and isn't this good? And now you're gonna get serious. And so, when he died in my senior year, I had done plays there that I'd loved. I mean, they meant everything. And when they were over, the depression just sank me. And then I went to Holy Cross College as a pre-med student. And then I learned about what anxiety is and how it can, in fact, rule the day. And I had wonderful teachers, mind you. Just extraordinary. The organic chemistry teacher—you know, just looking at me and saying, "Hon, you—you're happy here? You're sure?" And you know, there's no rule. You know? You're 18. There's no rule that you have to do this. And I had to get A's, mind you, because you had to get A's or you're not gonna be able to get into medical school. But also, I was acting in plays and I had an acting teacher that was extraordinary, and it was just straight ahead. It was very—it's about human behavior. Keep it simple. Keep it real. Don't turn it into a three act this and that. It's just between people, between two people, between—just simple basics which I—honest to god, I'm on my hands and knees in gratitude for.

And he just said to me one day, "You could do this, you know, if you want to." That stunned me. And also, that's the time when a character—if I let it—would float in and I would disappear. And it'd be like, "Woooah, this is the way. This is the most joyous thing I've ever experienced in my life." And then my roommate and I were very close and we'd both suffered a tremendous loss. Mine was, you know, my dad. And she lost her brother, senior year. And so, grief we understood deeply. Plus, I loved her anyway. She was a fantastic person. Mary-Beth Wally. And she looked at me and she said—and we would go off on our own because everyone else was like, "Alright! Time to put your best foot forward! I know you lost your brother!" And I was like—I looked at her and I said, "Babe.

00:33:24 Ann Guest Don't worry about any foot forward ever. You take your time, hon. Here's the key." I had a little gremlin, you know, god help us all. You know. "There's no rush, here. We're not—you know, grief is grief, and we'll get there together."
And she looked at me and she said, "Do you wanna—do you really wanna be a doctor?" It was one of those late nights in college. You know?

[Linda affirms.]

And I said, "No, um... I wanna be an actor."

She said, "Well, what are you doing? Come on, now."

00:33:47 Linda Host So, I literally said, "Thank you." And then I auditioned for an acting school and got in and that's it.
00:33:49 Ann Guest Do you still feel that way about acting?
Oh yes. Oh god—here's the great thing. Can I just say? *[Beat.]* When I told you I learned about anxiety that ruled the day, I thought that's how you do acting school too. Because chemistry—organic chemistry—is a beautiful thing, really. You know, it's built on the carbon molecule and it actually makes sense over time because it builds on that. You know? Regular chemistry was always confusing to me. It's like, "Okay, but I just learned that part and now we're going to this thing? What's this?" But anyway, I would study for hours and hours and hours and hours because I had no sense of what I was capable of. None! And that's that wonderful teacher who said to me, "What do you think?" And his tests were grueling. You know. You'd say, "I must be in the wrong test because I can't believe we studied this, 'cause I don't see anything familiar here."

Of course, what they would do is to extrapolate beyond what you were just taught to see. Can you then now do this? Do you know what I mean?

[Linda confirms.]

Yeah. And the test was two hours and I finished in like 20 minutes, I remember once. Thinking, "Ha. Maybe I got that."

And he said, "Well, how do you think you did?"

And I wasn't sure. I said, "I probably flunked. I don't know."

He said, "You got 100. And the mean of the class is 56."

The point I'm simply making is such lack of awareness and this teacher was so—Michael McGrath, I wanna say his name out loud. He just had the good sense to say, "Hon, come here a minute. Do you—you're not—you're doing well and you're not happy. That's a big tip."

Okay, so anyway, just to jump quickly to acting school. "I will learn these lines and I will know them this week and then I will know them

again and I will this—” You know. No way! Acting does not participate in that way. In fact, “no” is the big word that comes out. You cannot do that to a character! They’re not interested in being bullied. And so, the thing I love as time goes on is that I’m realizing that. It’s like, “Babe, just relax, will you? It’ll come. It’ll come.”

00:36:06 Linda Host You know what I’m thinking about? This all makes perfect sense to me because before I did this, I was an attorney. *[Laughs.]*

00:36:12 Ann Guest Oh my god, hon! And have you recovered?! No, I don’t mean to be disrespectful of—of—of—of—yeah.

00:36:18 Linda Host *[Laughing.]* No, no, no, I—it’s just—it’s very—it’s very familiar. I was—I was—yeah. It—I—yeah. It’s interesting.

00:36:25 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Ann:** Isn’t it?!

Linda: It’s a very similar—it’s a—it’s a similar kind of idea, that you can be good at it but you still—it still isn’t kind of setting you on fire from the inside out.

00:36:34 Ann Guest And it’s not—no self-awareness is landing on you! Of course, that takes like—I mean, I had to do *[laughs]* an analysis when I got out of acting school, which can I say, saved me. Do you know what I’m saying? By then I was like, “Who is that person that I thought I was?” *[Inaudible].*

[Linda agrees.]

00:36:52 Linda Host But, uh, good for you! Are you happy?
I’m very happy. Yeah, I’m—I mean—

00:36:53 Ann Guest Isn’t that wonderful?!

00:36:55 Linda Host I mean, it’s a ridiculous thing. I get to do things like this: sit here and have this conversation and just chat with people about the things that they do that they love to do and that they’re great at. And it’s, in some ways, a ridiculous job to have.

00:37:08 Ann Guest But can I just point out something to you, which I know now ‘cause I’ve known you for a full hour? That’s not ridiculous, because I’m telling you, there are people you don’t wanna talk to.

[Linda chuckles.]

00:37:39 Linda Host And you know it right away. You think, “I’m gonna do this ‘cause that’s my job.” But now I would tell you anything. And that would be called a gift on your part and a skill that is not ridiculous. In fact, it’s very meaningful. I’m just putting that out there to you.
Thank you. Thank you. I appreciate that. And thank you for being here on *Bullseye*.

00:37:45 Ann Guest You are wonderful, Linda. And I’d loved talking with you.

00:37:49 Jesse Host Ann Dowd, hands down one of the nicest and most charming people of all time. You can see her in *The Handmaid’s Tale* now. All four season are streaming on Hulu. Ann talked a little bit about her new film, *Mass*, in the interview. It premiered at Sundance a couple months ago. It should get a wider release later this year. Lotta buzz around it.

00:38:17 Music Transition Our interview was conducted by our good pal Linda Holmes. You can also catch her on NPR’s *Pop Culture Happy Hour*.
Cheerful piano music.

00:38:18 Jesse Host That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created out of the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where just the other night I was waiting for my daughter to fall asleep, sitting in a chair next to her bed. Her breathing started to get slower and more regular, and I thought I was done and then she turned to me and said, "*Tom and Jerry* the movie is a very strange film." It is! I mean, Tom and Jerry are friends, and they sing songs written by Henry Mancini. It's a weird movie. The '90s one, not the new one. Anyway.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio and Jordan Kauwling are our associate producers. Production fellows at Max Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks very much to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it.

You can keep up with the show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post all our interviews there. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:39:28 Promo Promo **Speaker:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]