

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.
00:00:20	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. For over 20 years now, Tom Scharpling has hosted <i>The Best Show</i> . If you’ve never heard of it ‘til now, yes, that is the actual name of the show. It aired on the New York public radio station WFMU until around 2013. Now, it’s a podcast. The format hasn’t really changed much since it began. Tom plays music. He interviews folks, takes calls from listeners, hangs up on listeners, and once in a while his buddy, Jon Wurster, calls. Jon does characters. Sometimes, he’ll play a guy called Darren from Work. Sometimes it’s the Gorch, who says that he is the real-life inspiration for the Fonz. Or the legendary Philly Boy Roy.
00:01:10	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:11	Clip	Clip	Philly Boy Roy (<i>The Best Show</i>): <i>[Angrily.]</i> That’s what I’m saying, you dummy!
			Tom Scharpling: <i>[Exasperated.]</i> The— <i>The Sopranos</i> does not take place in Philly.
			Roy: What <i>Sopranos</i> are you watching?!
			Tom: The one on HBO?
			Roy: Well, that’s the one I’m watching too!
			Tom: Are you that stupid that you don’t realize that that show takes place in New Jersey?
			Roy: So, you’re trying to tell me that <i>The Sopranos</i> —the show about the singing group in Philly—takes place in New Jersey? You’re nuts!
00:01:38	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:39	Jesse	Host	The more you listen to <i>The Best Show</i> , the more you get a sense of its rhythm. You recognize the callers, pick favorites. You start to pick up on Tom’s sense of humor. And you find joy in pretty much every time he tells a caller to, “Get off my phone.” It makes <i>The Best Show</i> a rewarding and wholly unique experience. It’s kind of the radio comedy version of the world building that people love so much in <i>Game of Thrones</i> or <i>Star Wars</i> or whatever.
			Tom is more than just the host of <i>The Best Show</i> , though. He’s also a comedy writer who’s worked on shows like <i>Monk</i> , <i>What We Do in the Shadows</i> , and <i>Divorce</i> on HBO. As a voice actor, he’s appeared on the Cartoon Network shows <i>Steven Universe</i> and <i>Adventure Time</i> . And, earlier this summer, Tom became an author. He wrote a memoir called <i>It Never Ends</i> . In it, Tom talks about his traumatic

childhood growing up in New Jersey, about his struggles with mental illness, and about how he managed despite all that to become a success in both comedy and podcasting. Also, it features his take on why Billy Joel stinks. Those are his words, not mine. *It Never Ends* is hilarious and harrowing and brilliantly written. I'm so glad to get to talk with Tom about it.

But before we get into the interview, I do wanna give a heads-up to listeners. There is going to be some very serious talk about mental illness, including Tom's experiences with ECT—electroconvulsive therapy. So, if that is a sensitive subject for you, we wanted to let you know. Anyway. All that being said, let's get right into it.

[Music fades in.]

00:03:27	Music	Transition	My interview with the great Tom Scharpling.
00:03:32	Jesse	Host	Relaxed, atmospheric music. Tom Scharpling, welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm happy to have you on the show.
00:03:34	Tom Scharpling	Guest	Aw, thanks for having me, Jesse.
00:03:36	Jesse	Host	We have known each other for 20 years, ish.
<i>[Tom confirms several times as Jesse continues.]</i>			
00:03:54	Tom	Guest	And I did not know that your surname is not Scharpling. At least, the surname that's on your ID cards. It's not the biggest revelation in the book, but it's the one that surprised me the most.
00:03:57	Jesse	Host	Yeah, it seems to rattle a few people. Did you— <i>[Laughing.]</i> I wanna talk about why you picked a new name and the symbolic meaning of that and so on and so forth, but like for right now I wanna ask: did you choose not really to tell people that it was a performing name? I know some people knew. But like—
00:04:18	Tom	Guest	Yeah, some people knew. But it was—it just was a thing. It's a thing that started when I was 18 and then it grew and grew and then I had it more than I didn't have it. So, it just made sense and that's how everybody knew me anyway. It helped me through—it helped me navigate my own self out of situations, in terms of just kind of trying to be able to cope with where I was at in life and move forward. It was necessary and then it just kind of became... just kind of worked. And it was just—it was just there. And—and I just—that's how everybody knew me. So, it wasn't a big deal, but it was a big deal, to me, simultaneously. I didn't care and I cared.
00:05:07	Jesse	Host	Why did you choose a name that wasn't your birth name in the first place?
00:05:12	Tom	Guest	Oh, because I was recovering from some pretty severe mental issues and bouts of stuff with that that was pretty extreme, to where it just made things hard to... to kind of carry that baggage. So, I just wanted a chance to not carry that baggage. And that was—that was a fast track to not carrying that baggage, to just kind of get to be somebody else. Like a variant on myself. So. It was—it was crucial, to me, actually. And it helped a lot. And I'm glad I did it.
00:05:55	Jesse	Host	Do you remember when you decided to do it?
00:05:57	Tom	Guest	Yeah. At like 18ish. 18, around there. 18, 19. And it started because I was just getting mail at home and doing kind of music things, tape

trading and things like that and ordering records and I kind of just wanted stuff to be differentiated from my father, who had the same name. So. It just kind of was a little bit of a—little bit of a break from that. So, yeah. It was... that's where it started. And then I started a fan zine and kept it for the fan zine. And then it just grew from there. Did you wanna be a comedy writer or a radio host?

00:06:46 Jesse Host
00:06:49 Tom Guest

Ultimately, I did wanna be on radio, but I didn't have the access to it, yet. I mean, I always loved the radio and—but again, radio was either huge FM stations in New York for me, or it was like left of the dial, college stuff. And that's for students. That's—those were not—and I was not a student at any of these schools. So, it wasn't an option. And the only station that was different than both of those two places, was WFMU. Which was, ostensibly, a college station.

It was a part of a school called Upsala that went out of business. And thankfully, the people running the station bought the license before the school went out, because that would have probably been one of the—that would have been one of the bigger ticket items that the school could've just sold off to whatever Christian broadcasting—'cause they just buy those things up. They were buying—at that point in the early '90s. They would just snap those—that was like gold to just have stations and have spots on the dial.

So, thankfully, WFMU kept existing and was a station kind of staffed by—not by students. Nobody—I think they would have a few slots for Upsala College students on there just almost like as a gesture, but the—but the purpose of the station was driven by non-students. And these were adults running that—running the station and doing the shows. So, they were—that was literally the only station and I got on that station. That was a minor miracle

00:08:52 Jesse Host

I wanna talk about the stuff that you went through as a kid and teenager in a minute. But I was happy to read your description of feeling at home when you sat down behind a mic for the first time—that maybe it was something that really was something that you could create from.

00:09:12 Tom Guest

It really—writing this book and looking back and kind of charting out the story and kind of sorting through—figuring out like what's the order of things and how did this lead to this which led to that and that led to that... it really dawned on me that that was such a powerful moment. Like, that is some—I got some kind of voice when I did that, and it was kind of immediate and I was immediately hooked on it. It was funny, because it almost felt like the—writing it in the book, it was like—it was the corniest moment in the whole thing, because it's like—it's—that's like movie stuff, when somebody suddenly gets their power. Usually, things like that are not as cut and dried as that, where it's suddenly like, "This is my thing, and I am doing great at it right away. I know this is for me."

And in retrospect, I guess it makes sense when you think of the way people talk about getting onstage when they say, like, "As soon as I got up there, I knew I was born to live on a stage." And I knew I was definitely not born to live on a stage. That—I learned that very quickly. But I did feel it in the microphone. I was like, "Yeah. This is it. This is my—this is my place." And it really was special. And I didn't wanna stop doing it.

00:10:49	Jesse	Host	When you're being funny behind a microphone, it is a very unusual circumstance. It is one of the only situations where you are performing funniness without feedback.
00:11:05	Tom	Guest	Oh, it's—and getting—like kind of—that felt like something—there was like a taming of the silence in a way, where it was like you could say the funniest thing you've ever said in your life and the response you get is pure silence. And it—I've seen people come on <i>The Best Show</i> , just the funniest people, and this is before—like, pre-podcast era. There was still a novelty for most people getting in front of a microphone. And if they were ever on the radio, they were on for ten minutes on a promotional thing on a mainstream station. And they never really would settle down or do a longer form conversation or longer form comedy. And I would see those people just get like rattled by it. And then they kind of press, 'cause it's just like... "I gotta—maybe to get this laughter, I need to just start—I just gotta start steamrolling people and I just gotta do—go faster and just get—"

And it's like, no! You actually have to just kind of—just kind of let it just happen. And it's just—it's really—there's just this sense of—the silence is so scary at first. But then, when I got a hold of it? It was my favorite part of the show, and my favorite part of the show still is kind of just writing silence in the middle of a conversation. If I'm—if I'm—or just a monologue or whatever you wanna call it. If I'm just talking. I love just letting the silence just sit there. And it spooks people, but it's like, "No, that's my friend. The silence is my friend."

[Jesse laughs.]

And the silence can be your friend too, if you just trust the silence. It's not—silence isn't necessarily bad, but it's scary. I mean, you know what that's like, those first moments when you say something and then it's just like, "I got nothing back. Like nothing!" 'Cause the people who get thrown the most were stage performers. They were used to just immediate response. "I said a funny thing. I hear laughter." And then, in their mind, they're just like, "Oh no! I'm bombing!" It's like, no you're not! There's just nobody here to laugh. You've gotta trust somebody out there thinks it's funny.

00:13:55	Jesse	Host	We've got so much more with Tom Scharpling coming up. Stay with us. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:14:03	Music	Transition	Upbeat music.
00:14:04	Jesse	Promo	This message comes from NPR sponsor Odoo.

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[Music fades out.]

00:14:40	Promo	Clip	Music: Light, cheerful music.
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Speaker 1: Good question. *[Laughs.]*

Speaker 2: That's a really good question.

Speaker 3: That's a great question.

Speaker 4: This is free therapy.

Speaker 5: Thank you for asking me that!

Speaker 6: God, that's such a good question!

Speaker 7: That's an interesting question.

Terry Gross: But what Fresh Air interviews are really about are the interesting answers. Listen and subscribe to *Fresh Air* from WHYY and NPR.

[Music ends.]

00:15:00 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Tom Scharpling. Tom is a comedy writer. He's also the host of *The Best Show*: a radio show and podcast that's been going for over two decades. Earlier this year, Tom wrote his first book. It's a memoir called *It Never Ends*. The book is heartbreaking and funny and features, among other things, one of the most brutal Billy Joel takedowns in the history of music criticism. Let's get back into our interview.

Once, you told me—I think. Maybe it was you on the air somewhere, but I feel like it was in conversation—perhaps because your show is so intimate—but you told me about after September 11th, driving to the—sitting in the parking lot of a Trader Joe's and eating an entire Trader Joe's cheesecake.

00:15:53 Tom Guest Yeah. On September 12th. That's how I spent—*[laughing]* that's how I spent the day after 9/11. In New Jersey, where—if you looked at the sky—you saw all the smoke. If you drove to WFMU—which was right on the—on the water, on the Jersey City—right on the Hudson—that it just—the smoke and the smell of burning metal and that, uh. Yeah, my way of coping was just to go to Trader Joe's and eat an entire cheesecake on the spot.

[Jesse laughs.]

00:16:29 Jesse Host But yeah. But—
00:16:30 Tom Guest Like, the reason—!

But the beauty is, I did say that on the radio.

[Jesse affirms.]

00:16:36 Jesse Host But you—but that's a huge compliment to me.
Yeah! Well, and I mean it! And like the reason it struck me *[laughing]* and the reason it stuck in my mind, other than it being a funny and moving story, is simply that it was the rare instance that I had heard you describe your feelings directly. And I had trusted you to be sincere. I mean, I think I trusted you to be sincere when you were nice to me 20 years ago.

00:17:03 Tom Guest And I was.

[Jesse agrees.]

One of the things—Jesse.

[Jesse laughs.]

The whole show is sincere. I might put on a little play for people here and there and maybe heighten things and goof around in the name of entertainment, but I—it's me every week. I'm still the same me. All I—all I—I figure, with the show, I'm just gonna do all of it. Sometimes I wanna... fib.

[Jesse startles into a belly laugh.]

Sometimes I wanna be deathly serious. Sometimes I wanna be super encouraging and positive. Sometimes I wanna be crabby. That's me bringing all of my head to the thing. And if you do it for as long as I have done it, you're going to get all of that at one point or another. And it's not my responsibility to—I don't have to suddenly make a—play a sound effect when it's just like the, "Tom is joking now." Like? What a bummer that would be! It's it more fun to parse through this stuff and go like, "I wonder if he was joking now." That's the best—I wish—why don't I have a me, Jesse?!

00:18:27 Jesse Host
00:18:29 Tom Guest

[Laughs.] I think you do! I think you described that you do. I think I am—so, I'm doing this for myself. Actually, I have been. Oh no!

[Jesse laughs.]

Another whole truth just hit me. I'm my own biggest fan! I'm doing the show for myself. Well, I knew that already. I knew I was doing the show for myself. That became very clear. For the first two years of the show, when no one liked it, it was clear I was doing the show for a very small amount of people. And that was the—that was the time to get out, where it's like if I—if it was based on audience reaction, if that was gonna dictate whether I kept at it or not, I would've been gone because it wasn't there. And one thing that does get lost on people is when it was called *The Best Show*, on WFMU, it was meant to kind of tease the other shows on WFMU. It was a joke of title! *[Laughing.]* 'Cause I was the lowest person the ladder! And I showed up—yes.

00:19:28 Jesse Host
00:19:33 Tom Guest

[Talking over Tom, laughing.] Tom... you're talking to a guy—this show used to be called *The Sound of Young America*! I know! I know! Yes. Were you like, "Motown, huh? Yeah, I can do—I guess I'm the next in line for that."

[Jesse agrees with a helpless laugh.]

00:19:45 Jesse Host
00:19:47 Tom Guest

Barry Gordy, Jesse Thorn.

I used to get a angry email a week, Tom!
Yes, but that—there is a—there—the context for it overtime has—that has gotten lost a little bit, is that it was—it was such a dumb joke to call it *The Best Show*. Because it was like, "Who does he think he is, saying—like, I've been on this station for 15 years. I have the most popular show on the station." It's like, "This guy says he's doing *The Best Show* on the station?" And there were DJs who

were not happy with that title. But then it was double—it was—not even doubly. Exponentially funnier that no one liked the show, and I was calling it that.

[Jesse laughs.]

That’s—that’s the—that’s such a perversely funny joke, to me. But then over time, people were like, “*[Beat.]* Huh. Maybe it is the best show. Well, I don’t think it’s the best show. I like it a lot but it’s not—I mean, it’s not the best.” People debated. It’s like you give people a chance to debate a thing if you make a bold statement. And you get that.

00:20:46 Jesse Host

I promised you that we would talk a little bit about your childhood and adolescence. So, I wanna do that. Your mother was seriously ill through most of your childhood. When were you aware that she was sick?

00:21:04 Tom Guest

I think at around eight is when—yeah. Like eight. *[Clears throat.]* She has—and still has; she’s still hanging in there—um, just a blood disorder that she’s had to deal with her whole—her whole adult life. And yeah. That was just one of those things where suddenly everything changes when that happens. Then life is just different. That now there’s a lot of time in the hospital, a lot of time—doctor’s offices, her getting surgeries, procedures, just every kind of thing to try to figure this out. And it was also something that was a very unconventional thing that there just weren’t answers for. So, there was always this sense of, “What is this? How can—how can she get help?”

So, there was just a frustrating, unknown quality to all of it too. Not just like, “Well, it’s this disease and this is how this disease gets treated.” The doctors were trying to straight up figure out, “What is this. We don’t know what it is. How come this is happening? Let’s try this. That didn’t do anything, so we’ll try that. That didn’t do anything. We got a few results here, then we’ll go talk to another doctor and see what they think about that.” It was just a giant, ongoing just journey through the unknown. And yeah. But that was one of those things that—it just—it kind of feels like it’s just like, “Eh, childhood’s kind of over now.” Even though you’re not an adult yet. I could feel the responsibility of being a part of my family showed up and it’s just like, “Well, what can I do to just help.”

And it’s just way too early for a kid to start carrying that stuff. Even—I think I was always kind of—came off like I could handle things and I came off like a—like a... like, “Oh! You’re like a little adult.” But it’s like kids just aren’t little adults, no matter what—how they can present that, they just aren’t. They—their capacity to truly handle huge things like that is very low. They will bear whatever that is in some weird way, at some other point. It’s just gonna—it’s gonna leave a mark, I guess is what it—in one—some kind of thing. It’s just a part—kids are just—kids are very strong and they’re also just very, very fragile also, at the same time.

00:23:59 Jesse Host

Because you don’t know what it is and there’s also... there is nothing for you, as a child, to do about it. And that must have been an awful feeling. Like, not just knowing that the person who’s supposed to take care of you can’t take care of you but knowing that even if you assume the mantle of responsibility—you know,

00:24:34 Tom Guest which is absurd, but you don't necessarily know that—that there's—like nothing you can do works. Like, it's like—you know. Oh, you're a kid. You can't change things or fix things. But when you're in that... when you're in that black and white thinking of kids, it's like you can be good or you can be not good—or you can be bad. And just like—it's like, "I wanna be good! I wanna help." And it's just—you just start doing that. And then it just becomes just like a pattern and then that pattern becomes kind of like a compulsion, to just always be trying to, "Let me fix it. I need—I know I can—if I try a little harder, maybe I can fix it. Like we got—I did okay. Maybe the difference between things getting better or things not getting better is my effort. The intensity of my effort."

And that was just—yeah. That became, um. Yeah, that's when those patterns got set. And those patterns are still—that is still who I am. I'm just—you know, it's finally understanding the things after a long, long time just realizing just what has been motivating things. And that's—I mean, I always knew it started there, but I didn't understand how one thing connected to the other and just created behaviors.

00:26:02 Jesse Host Did you have any mental illness in your family?

00:26:04 Tom Guest Not that I know of, no. There was never the—like the uncle or whatever that—no. Nobody was—it was—there—that was pretty uncharted territory for my family when I kind of started to fall apart.

00:26:22 Jesse Host How old were you when you started to fall apart?

00:26:24 Tom Guest Eh, like 13 I guess is when it really... I remember it was seeing a psychiatrist when I was 13 and it just wasn't—yeah. That's kind of when it started. And—I mean, it's hard enough just being a—just being a kid is hard enough. Like, that just—if you're—if you're a well-adjusted child, that's just—that's such a huge, huge thing to navigate. But then when you've—when you've got some issues, it's just—it's just, ah. I don't know. It's—it seems like it's impossible. Yeah. It just felt—it felt—*[stammering]* I always felt a sense of just inevitable doom, collapse, failure. Like it just felt—it just did not feel like it was gonna work. Like it was just, "When does it stop working?"

00:27:23 Jesse Host I mean, you had no evidence that something that you could do would... stave off collapse *[chuckling]* and disaster!

00:27:33 Tom Guest Sure! But—but you just wanna try! And that's—

00:27:40 Jesse Host It's sort of a negative reinforcement loop. 'Cause when you try, you don't have the power to fix things. So.

00:27:48 Tom Guest Well, it's—of course. Absolutely. And you can realize—you can either realize that or think that maybe the—maybe you were 1%—maybe you were just one more push away from making the difference. And it just—I did not know the former on that, at all. I just... it's like, my family was not—like, we were all—it was just self-employed, working—hardworking people. Just multiple generations of just small business, just—and that was all—that was all effort. Like, also instilled in me was just like the effort is what makes the difference. If you have a small business, that's what makes the difference. It's just like if you're gonna phone it in, your business is gonna suffer.

So, it's just about outworking things and I think that's a part of what that was, was just the idea like, "I'll just outwork it." But I didn't know that didn't work.

00:29:02	Jesse	Host	What led your folks to send you to a psychiatrist in the first place?
00:29:09	Tom	Guest	Um, I'm sure I was pretty sad. I don't remember, really, the first thing specifically. Yeah. I don't know. I don't remember. I don't remember the first thing. I just—there was just a general—there was just a cloud of sadness hanging over a lot of my—a lot of my life. So. I'm sure that it was some—I'm sure it was that. But I specifically do not remember.
00:29:35	Jesse	Host	Did you talk to your parents about that part of your life, when you were working on the book?
00:29:41	Tom	Guest	Um—well, I talked to my mom about... just certain things about hospitalizations and treatments and things. Not extensively. I wasn't showing her chapters and things like that. But I would—I would talk to her. You know. When I'd question—specific questions about things and just to get her angle on things. Um. Yeah, it was—it was a... it's always felt like it was enough of a—it felt like it's just like I don't wanna reburden her with a lot of this stuff, is what it felt like, honestly. 'Cause it was hard on everybody and I did get through it. So, she's been through enough. There's not a whole lot for me to be to be gained by relitigating things to her. It's like, I got through it. I—maybe it wasn't perfect, but I stayed alive, got to the other side of it. I'm still here.
00:31:05	Jesse	Host	I just didn't want her to feel bad about any part of it. 'Cause she truly—my parents both did—they did everything they could. This was uncharted territory for them too. So. We'll finish up with Tom Scharpling in just a minute. After the break, Tom tells us why C-3PO, the gold robot from <i>Star Wars</i> , is fiction's worst character of all time. <i>[Chuckling.]</i> It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I like C-3PO. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:31:25	Music	Transition	Jazzy music with light vocalizations.
00:31:27	Jesse	Promo	This message comes from NPR sponsor Discover. Discover matches all the cashback you've earned on your credit card at the end of your first year, automatically. With no limit on how much you can earn. It's amazing because of all the places where Discover is accepted. 99% of places in the US that take credit cards. So, when it comes to Discover, get used to hearing "yes" more often. Learn more at Discover.com/match . 2021 Neilson Report. Limitations apply.
00:32:01	Promo	Clip	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> <i>[A thundering explosion sound, followed by the ongoing roar of an excited crowd.]</i> Hal Lublin: <i>[In a dramatic, guttural Randy Savage impersonation.]</i> Prepare yourself for the greatest pro wrestling podcast spectacular known as <i>[echoing] Tights and Fights!</i> A backdropping audio showcase that helps you understand the world of pro wrestling, with a lot of love and no toxic masculinityyyyyy! Featuring hosts: Danielle Radford. Danielle Radford: Time to kick butt and chew gum! And I'm all out of butts! Hal: Lindsey Kelk.

Lindsey Kelk: I'm a brutal brit and my fists were made to punch and HIT!

Hal: And Hal Lublin! *[Switching to his normal voice.]* I was doing the voiceover this whole time!

Danielle: Hear us talk about pro wrestling's great triumphs and failures.

Lindsey: And make fun of its weekly absurdities!

[Electric guitar music fades in.]

Hal: On the perfect wrestling podcast: *[gutturally]* *Tights and Fights!* Every Saturday, Saturday, SATURDAY, on [Maximum Fun](#).

[Music fades out.]

00:32:51 Jesse Host It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is the writer and podcast host, Tom Scharpling. His new memoir is called *It Never Ends*.

00:33:20 Tom Guest Many years ago, Carrie Fisher was on my show, and she had written a book about her experiences with electroconvulsive therapy—ECT—which she had received for depression. Yeah, I read—I read her book. It was, um... it was interesting. It was—it was the—truly the opposite of my experience.

00:33:28 Jesse Host So, yeah. You received ECT as a kid, or as a teen.

00:33:33 Tom Guest Yeah, not as an—she was well into adulthood when she started with it.

[Jesse confirms.]

And it was also a different era, in it, as well. Mine was mid... mid-80s. And that was still pretty, uh—I don't even know what the right way to say it was. The technology has advanced to the point where it's so much more precise and controlled and targeted and specific. It's basically—it's basically an outpatient procedure for people, now. They go. They get hooked up. They get it. They go home and sleep. Maybe they have some memory—short-term memory problems here and there. They come back. That's usually how it works, now.

But for me, it was: I'm in a hospital for six weeks. I'm getting this regularly. It feels like they are—I could taste the burning. It felt like getting hit by a car. And most—so much of my memory never came back. So. It was—it could not have been more—mine was much closer to somebody that I've—is an important figure to me is Lou Reed, because he went through the same thing I had—would eventually go through. His was in the late '50s. So, he—or—he got it. Late '50s, early '60s. I don't know. Like, I think his was late '50s. Like '58, '59. And his was just barbaric. Like, it was just straight up—they're just electrocuting your head.

Then it went out of fashion for a while. And then it kind of came back in the '80s, late '70s, early '80s—came back to be something that was being utilized again. And then, so I got a version that wasn't as bad as his but wasn't anything like what the current day version of it is. And it was—it was rough. I mean, it hurt. I remember

it was like—I remember it felt like I was poured—being poured into the bed in the hospital after they did that. Just like—it was just brutal. And you know, look, I have a lot of feelings about it. I still am very—there’s parts of me that are still just extremely mad about it. But I didn’t have any choice. I just was—it was that or either end up on a ton of medication that would’ve just shut my body down.

So, it was a pretty extreme—pretty extreme circumstances. So, it was kind of like a... I don’t wanna say like a Hail Mary play, but it was a—it was a bold move to try to—try to fix a really bad situation and it did work. I mean, I did—I got through. I bear the scars of it, but I stayed alive. So, it worked. And I have to—I have to accept and acknowledge that, because that’s undeniable. The other versions, I don’t think I would still be alive, now, if I had ended up on—you know—Thorazine or whatever heavy-duty drugs they would have put me on. I don’t—I don’t think I would be here, now. I think my body would’ve—would not have lasted.

00:37:31 Jesse Host

You described the pain and the physical experience of the therapy in the book, but it seems like the biggest effect that you described is—you know, you describe your sadness about losing so much of your memory. That you lost—you just don’t know... things about yourself that other people do.

00:38:07 Tom Guest

Oh, yeah! No, it feels like... it’s like I can, um... I can look at photos. I can look at a yearbook. I could go dig through memories and things like that. It’s always—I just—it—there—it feels like it’s just—I think I describe it in the book this way, but it feels like it’s—there’s plexiglass keeping me from it. I don’t actually have a connection to those things. I can see that they happened, but they are not my memories. They are—they’re memories that I would have to pretend to—I mean, the whole thing with a memory is that you remember it! And that you hold onto it, over time.

I would be like reconstituting things that clearly did happen at a point and trying to claim them as memories and it just—I don’t have an honest connection to these things. They—it might as well have happened to somebody else. And that’s how so much of—that’s how so much of childhood stuff is. I would just be like—see pictures and be like, “Oh! Okay. I guess we went to a lake house or whatever.” Just these things that I—I don’t remember any of it. But it clearly happened. But—or once in a while I’ll just get this like ghost of a thing and—but there’s nothing to hold onto. But there’s just like a whisper of a memory. And it’s just—but I—there’s nothing concrete about any of it. And that’s like at best.

Teachers in school, it’s like—you could—if—you could name teachers from school. Right? That you—like, grade school teachers’ names? Other students? Stuff? I—

00:40:07 Jesse Host

Ms. Cornell. Ms. McLonis.

00:40:09 Tom Guest

See? I can’t—I can’t—

00:40:10 Jesse Host

Ms. Denny.

00:40:11 Tom Guest

I—I... I—it’s just—those are a struggle for me. Those are gone. And I could pull ‘em back together and I could study them. I would just be regurgitating facts, but they’re not actual memories. Yeah. It’s a funny book, too! I just need to say.

[Jesse laughs.]

It's mostly funny! It really has funny stories in it! I promise you! It's a good time.

00:40:46 Jesse Host Were you scared to write the book—not just because you were—in order to do it, you would have to talk about things that you had not really talked about publicly, but also because it would mean having to spend a lot of time directly engaging the absence of your memory?

00:41:05 Tom Guest Oh, yeah! All of that. The memory part was... it's embarrassing. It's—there's an embarrassment that comes with having things that everybody has that—not having them. There's something weird about it. And it's—and then, if it feels odd, then it feels weird, then it feels embarrassing, then it feels like shame. And then it feels like guilt. The range of emotions. And it just turns—and then eventually it would—I would turn it on myself, somehow. And it's just somehow—it's a bad thing I did. And that's what it felt like. It's like, there's a part of my life that was a bad thing, so I'd rather just run from it. I'd rather just move past it.

Why do I have to—it happened to me once. Why does it have to keep—why do I have to keep this thing alive? Let me just move past it. Let me get—let me just live a normal life like everybody else and do things and enjoy things rather than beat this drum of the thing that happened to me. And the things that happened—it's just, I'd rather not do that. I just would rather take a stab at being like everybody else.

00:42:27 Jesse Host There's not a lot of the second person in your book. You don't address the reader directly or tell the reader what to do very much. At the end of the book, you do allow yourself a couple paragraphs of saying, "I went through these things. I survived them and came out the other side." You say it pretty plainly and you say that you can put down what you're carrying and keep walking. It reinforced my wondering, which was: to what extent is Tom trying to talk himself into this? *[Chuckling.]* To what extent is Tom giving himself advice that he's allowed to put down the baggage and keep walking?

00:43:14 Tom Guest Oh, the whole book is me talking to myself. The whole book. I didn't wanna write a book—I never set out to write a book about writing a book, but it kind of—not in a—not in a meta way. The concept of like meta stuff, for me, turned sour a while ago. And it just—it feels like—I don't know. I'm just—I feel like I just wanna choose the opposite of that, now. So, when—it kind of evolved into this thing where it's like... the act of me being ready to tell the story is the story of the book. And when I got to the end of it, I could kind of—yeah. Kind of like unburden a little bit and just be like—it just kind of is. And I'm allowed to—I'm allowed to accept my own advice.

00:44:32 Jesse Host Tom, I have one last question for you, which is that you have asserted that C-3PO, the gold robot from *Star Wars*, is the worst character in all fiction.

00:44:46 Tom Guest *[Seriously.]* Yeah. Yeah, that's...

00:44:48 Jesse Host What—what is your justification for that?

00:44:53 Tom Guest It's annoying. He's unfunny. He does nothing to help any of the stories. He's a nuisance. He lets his pettiness truly take them off course. It's a miracle that the Death Star got destroyed with that *[censored]* messing everything up.

[Jesse chuckles.]

Thank god his pal, R2D2—can you imagine the things R2D2’s saying, if we could get a translator on that?

[Jesse laughs.]

He’s probably just saying, “Will you shut the [censored] up?” [Chuckles.] Like [mimicking R2D2’s noises], “Rrrrew! Boop, boop, beep-boop!” Is just like, “[Censored], when is this guy gonna shut up?” Like that’s what R2D2’s saying the whole time. I mean, it says a whole lot that the best two characters in *Star Wars* are a giant chimpanzee or whatever he is and a robot that goes “bleep” and “bloop”.

[Jesse laughs.]

The only ones—the only one that I wanna hang out with now don’t say anything I can understand. Any of the other ones are talking about, “Oooh, the Federation. And we gotta do—” And it’s like, can we get the bleeping—the bleep-bloop robot back again? I like that he goes, “Bleep-bloop, bleep-bloop, bloop.” And I don’t know what that means. Or the one that goes, [guttural Chewbacca roaring]. It’s like—it’s very telling that at this point in my life, those are the only characters I can handle.

00:46:30 Jesse Host

[Laughs.] Well, Tom, I’m always grateful to get to talk to you. And thanks for coming on *Bullseye*, again.

00:46:36 Tom Guest

Oh, thanks for having me on, Jesse. I appreciate it.

00:46:39 Jesse Host

Tom Scharpling. *It Never Ends* is the name of his memoir. It’s touching and very funny. Thank you to Tom for coming into our studio to do this interview, and! For being vaccinated so we could talk safely.

00:46:52 Music Transition

Brassy music punctuated with thumpy beats.

00:46:54 Jesse Host

That’s the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. And from our offices in the beautiful Westlake neighborhood of Los Angeles, overlooking MacArthur Park—where, recently, in our neighborhood there have been a bunch of neofascists coming out on the weekends to act like jerks. And I just wanna say that, in our neighborhood, in our city, and at our company, we think that trans rights are human rights and we stand with and care about our transgender colleagues and family members and friends and neighbors.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producer is Jesus Ambrosio. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. We get help from Casey O’Brien. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it. They’ve got a brand-new record in stores that is great.

You can also keep up with *Bullseye* on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post our interviews in all of those places. And I think that’s about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:48:27 Promo

Promo

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

[Music fades out.]