

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.
00:00:13	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.
00:00:21	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. My first guests this week are Jessica St. Clair and Dan O’Brien. Jessica is a comedy writer and performer. Alongside her real-life best pal, Lennon Parham, she created and starred in <i>Playing House</i> , a really great sitcom that aired for three seasons on USA. Dan O’Brien is her husband of 15 years. He works as a poet and playwright. He’s a former Guggenheim fellow whose work has been performed Off-Broadway and in London.

A few years back, Jessica discovered a lump in her breast. Didn’t take long for doctors to diagnose her with breast cancer. And she very quickly started aggressive treatment. Then, just as she was starting to recover, doctors diagnosed Dan with stage four colon cancer that had spread to his liver. I should mention that just before Jessica was diagnosed, the two had had a child together. You’ll hear more about their story in my interview with them, but needless to say it was an intense and frightening time. And as they recovered, that time inspired their work.

For Jessica, cancer became a central plotline in the third season of *Playing House*. For Dan, it became a book. In *Our Cancers*, Dan uses poetry to chronical the year and a half he and Jessica spent going to doctors, getting treatment, raising their child. It’s really beautiful. As you might have guessed, there’s a lot of talk about cancer in this interview—stuff about body parts and exams and all the pain and scariness that come with all that. So, if that is a sensitive subject for you, we wanted to let you know.

[Music fades in.]

00:02:10	Music	Transition	Okay, with all that out of the way, my interview with Jessica St. Clair and Dan O’Brien.
00:02:15	Jesse	Host	Thoughtful piano. Dan and Jessica, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . It’s nice to have you on the show.
00:02:18	Jessica St. Clair	Guest	Thank you so much.
00:02:19	Dan O’Brien	Guest	Thank you. It’s wonderful to be here.
00:02:21	Jesse	Host	A lot of big smiles right now. Don’t worry, we’ll get to cancer in a minute.

[Jessica laughs.]

I—the two of you have been together a long time. Can you tell me how you met?

00:02:34 Dan Guest Yeah, we were in the same comedy improv group in college—Middlebury College. Doing—

00:02:40 Jessica Guest With Jason Mantzoukas.

00:02:42 Dan Guest With Jason Mantzoukas.

00:02:43 Jesse Host Oh, wonderful comedy actor.

00:02:45 Jessica Guest And Rodney Rothman, who just won an Emmy for *Spider-Man*.

00:02:50 Dan Guest One of those *Spider-Man* movies.

00:02:51 Jessica Guest One of those *Spider-Man* movies.

00:02:52 Dan Guest *Into the Multiverse*.

00:02:53 Jessica Guest But yes. I came. I was a younger—I was a freshman and I auditioned and I—Jason thinks I had pleated jeans on, but I don't—like a—like a light-wash. He remembers as like a pleated acid-washed jean. I don't. And Tretorns.

00:03:12 Dan Guest I think that's pretty accurate. That sounds pretty accurate to me.

[They laugh.]

00:03:16 Jesse Host I mean, that's on trend, Jessica.

00:03:18 Jessica Guest I know, right now. That was '94. That was '95. '94 and '95.

00:03:23 Dan Guest '95, yeah.

00:03:24 Jessica Guest And that was like comedy catnip. You know? I had like Hugh Grant's haircut from *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. And I just rolled in with an ironic t-shirt.

00:03:33 Dan Guest And in the first scene we improvised together—this is true—I asked her to marry me. That's how desperate and inappropriate I was.

[She laughs.]

And—but it worked! It only took another 11 years, but we eventually—eventually got hitched.

00:03:51 Jessica Guest So, yeah. We've known each other since I was 18, and then been together since I was 20. So, that—it's—yeah, it's a very long time.

[Dan chuckles.]

00:04:01 Jesse Host The two of you were doing improv in college. Did you have the idea that you wanted to be in arts and entertainment professionally?

[Dan confirms.]

00:04:10 Jessica Guest Dan's known he was gonna be a writer since he was like—you know. I always picture Dan's childhood in like black and white. You know, he's like a Dickensian like boy playing *[chuckling]*—playing with like a wooden hoop and like—you know, writing—scribbling down things. *[Laughs.]*

00:04:27 Dan Guest It's all daguerreotypes.

00:04:29 Jessica Guest Isn't that—*[laughing]* right.

00:04:31 Dan Guest Yeah. In Westchester County in the '70s and '80s.

00:04:35 Jessica Guest But yeah, you knew since what age?

00:04:36 Dan Guest I did. I did—I mean, I always—like, you know, I always enjoyed writing, writing stories. It wasn't until I got to college that I discovered performing, to whatever degree I was good at it. But it's what sort of took me from being an aspiring novelist or poet to being a playwright, which is what I ended up doing primarily for the first 15 years of my career. But in college, I was really serious about writing. And comedy, too. I mean, I was—if you asked me when I was 21, I would say, "Yeah, I wanna go into comedy. I wanna be doing what Jessica's doing." Or what Jason Mantzoukas is doing.

And then once I graduated college and I—and I had to find, you know, jobs to feed myself—you know, writing was just the most important thing. And so, the acting kind of faded away. But I could live vicariously through what Jessica was doing, which I just loved. It was so valuable just to my mental health to be able to go, after writing alone all day in New York—when we lived in New York, I could go to the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater and see Jessica’s shows and feel like I was part of that world.

00:05:44 Jessica Guest
00:05:46 Dan Guest
00:05:47 Jessica Guest

Well, you could smell it, too. Because—

And you could smell it.

It was underneath the Gristedes Supermarket and sometimes *[laughing]* we would have like blood from the butcher’s drip on our foreheads while we were performing.

00:05:55 Dan Guest

I was there! Did that happen often or was that a—‘cause I remember one night where a lot of blood came through the ceiling.

00:06:00 Jessica Guest
00:06:05 Jesse Host

[Laughs.] Yes. Yeah. It was tough. That was a tough night.

A lot of stories about the UCB involve dripping.

[They both affirm with laughter.]

00:06:12 Jessica Guest
00:06:13 Dan Guest

There’s a lot of stories about things dripping into the theater.

Soooo many things.

Just exudations of moisture and dampness. ‘Cause it was under—yeah, it was underneath—

00:06:18 Jessica Guest

Yeah, there was always also like a dead animal in the walls. Like, we always knew there was something like in there that had rotted, and we were like—and I just would be terrified that it would be one of the interns or me that would have to go find out what it is. So, we never solved that mystery, but yeah. Dan and I—you know, it’s funny, because Dan was really the pioneer of like this, you know, bohemian life. Like, I thought—you know, I was from New Jersey and from an Irish Catholic family and you were just supposed to get like a normal job. So, you know, it was—Dan was really my gateway drug. And once I—

00:06:53 Dan Guest

I was and am a few years older than her, so I was a couple years post college, you know, trying to make a career in the—in the arts. And so, yeah. So, that’s the way in which I was a gateway.

00:07:04 Jessica Guest

Yeah. And then—but he gave me the courage, really, to do it. To tell my parents that I was gonna be doing that and that conversation went—I was with my—one of my best friends, Cree, who had come out his parents in college and he said that conversation was as much like a coming out conversation that he’d ever heard, ‘cause my parents were just like, “Who did this to you?! Like what are you—? Are you gonna dress differently!? Like, what does this mean?! What are we gonna tell people?! You wanna be an actor?!”

00:07:41 Dan Guest
00:07:42 Jessica Guest
00:07:44 Dan Guest

You know? It was like the worst thing you could possibly tell somebody. “Where did we go wrong?” There was a lot of that. Um.

And they did blame me. Yeah.

And they said, “Is this all Dan’s fault?” And, um—

That took—that took several years to recover from.

[Jessica affirms.]

00:07:49 Jessica Guest

But they came around.

They did. And—

00:07:51 Jesse Host Just one Christmas, you got a—you got a box and you opened it up and there was a beret and a turtleneck in there and you knew they had accepted you. *[Chuckles.]*

00:08:01 Jessica Guest Seriously! When I—when I did *Conan*, I remember saying to him like quite truly that he was—thank god he was on the air, because I think he was like the only Irish person my parents could point to that had like made it.

[Jesse chuckles.]

00:08:37 Jesse Host Like, they were like, “We don’t—we are not show people.” Do you know what I mean? “No one wants to see our faces on camera. You know? Ever. We only have like a good 10 to 15 years in us and then it’s like a swift decline physically.” So, I’m on—as far as I know, I’m living on borrowed time. *[Chuckles.]*

00:09:14 Jessica Guest Jessica, you were part of a relatively small group of women improvising at the UCB at the time, and it seems like that relatively small group of women are still buddies and are still working together. I mean, Lennon Parham, with whom you created *Playing House* was one of them. June Diane Raphael, who you podcast with now, was one of them. Were you ever self-conscious about pushing yourself into what was, you know—despite the presence of Amy Poehler—a pretty masculinized space?

Well, yeah, you know it’s funny, because when I joined the UCB, there was like—god, it felt like 60 people. It was that small. They didn’t even have a theater yet; they were just getting their new theater. And so, there were so few women that there was usually only one or two on a team. You know, we had these herald teams that were like—I don’t know—ten people? Eight to ten people? So, what June and I and Danielle and Casey—who have *[censored] Sesh*, that wildly popular podcast—like, what we all talk about now, because those are all my best friends—we saw each other as competition, I think, in the very beginning, simply because you’d be like, “Oh, there’s only one other girl or there’s only one spot for a girl.” And that was a real shame. It was a big regret of mine.

If I could go back—you know, I didn’t start working with Lennon ‘til I was in my 30s, out in LA. And I kind of—I wonder if that hadn’t been the case, like, how powerful we could have been together. But at the same time, we also had Amy Poehler as our like mentor and I did watch how she and Tina Fey and Rachel Dratch, how they all kind of were very close. Maya Rudolph. Close friends, and they also teamed up. Like my night to intern and clean the bathroom was when Dratch and Fey had their sketch show that really was—they did right before Tina got on *SNL*, and I watched how much they enjoyed the *[censored]* out of each other. And I thought, “God, I can’t wait to have a woman to write stuff that makes specifically me—as a woman—laugh. And that’s what I found when I—when I found Lennon. And that was like a glorious thing.

Now, the fact that we are all such close girlfriends is just such—it’s the best thing about being in Los Angeles, for me. It’s probably the only thing that would keep me there. You know.

00:11:08 Jesse Host Do you think it’s a choice you made? To look at that—those relationships differently at some point in your life?

00:11:15 Jessica Guest Oh yeah, I do think so. I think I fell so madly in love with them that it became like their good thing was my good thing. That happened to me. And I was just—it was such a revelation that I could like just be really happy for my friends. And I don't feel that competition. And I really don't feel it. I also think we were aging—you know, we were getting out of that kind of like desperate feeling of, you know, "Oh god, what if it doesn't—what if it doesn't happen for me?" I think now we know there is no "happening" for anybody. *[Laughs.]* It's just one—it's one long, nervous, "What's the next thing gonna be?" But we're always stronger when we're together and we write for each other, which is really—which is really nice.

And so, yeah. I do think it was like just because I fell in love with them, I realized like, "Oh, I can't want anything but good for them to happen. I can't want for anything but good to happen for these people."

00:12:20 Jesse Host Do you still find yourself showing up in the lobby of an audition and June Diane Raphael or *[laughs]* Danielle Schneider or whatever is sitting there?

00:12:33 Jessica Guest No, you know what's great now? Is like—listen, we still have to audition. Okay? But now it's all from our living rooms. But the best thing about June and I is that when June turns down a role, they come to me. *[Laughs.]* And vice versa. And so, I always know—like, one time June couldn't make it. Do you remember *Dog Days*? She like got a role that was taking her out of town. And so, they called me like the night before. And when I showed up, they were trying to pretend like I had just gotten the part, but I was like, "Oh no, I know—we're exactly the same size!" Like, *[laughing]* so, we—yeah. It's nice to have a backup, like a body double.

00:13:18 Jesse Host I mean, once I was riding in a van with Gillian Jacobs from *Community* and *Love* and other things and she had just—she had brown hair and I was like, "Oh, you're usually—usually you're blonde. What's going on?"

And she said, "Oh, I booked a part in a movie where the lead is blonde."

[They chuckle.]

00:13:49 Jessica Guest And I was like, "Wow. Showbusiness is different for women." Oh, yes! You can never have more than one! Yes, never have more than one blonde. You have to—no. No, no, no.

00:13:56 Dan Guest What about the time you had to dye your hair brown for an allergy medication commercial?

[Jessica affirms.]

00:14:08 Jessica Guest Because they felt that—to look sad and stricken with allergies—she needed to be a brunette. You couldn't be blonde. But then they found my voice so grating that they had somebody else come in and mouth—you know, and do the voice for me.

[Dan affirms with a laugh.]

But I was like, "Really?! Okay."

[Jesse laughs.]

And what was even sadder is I was auditioning for another commercial at the time and I was like, “Wait! What is this Zyrtec commercial! I did this commercial!”

And they were like, “It’s just for your voice, honey.”

I was like, “Well, that’s fair.” I do have a rough voice. *[Laughs.]* I apologize to your listeners, right now. It’s distinctive. It’s a distinctive voice.

00:14:36 Dan Guest

[Jessica agrees.]

00:14:39 Jesse Host Dan, you had picked the one career path—or two of the very few career paths—with less promise than becoming an actor or comedy performer.

[They agree with laughter.]

You had decided to become a playwright and poet. Both of them. You doubled down.

00:15:02 Dan Guest And—you know, and I’ll say, I doubled down when I moved to LA. I had been writing plays primarily for about ten years. And there was something about the move to LA that made me want to or feel I needed to write poetry. Part of it—*[laughs]* part of it, I think, was just a perverse enjoyment of telling people at parties—parties in LA that would often be Jessica’s friends who were in TV and film. And they’d say, “Well, what do you do?”

And I—sometimes I’d leave out the playwrighting and I’d say, “Oh, I’m a poet.” Just to see the look of—the sort of mix of like—of feeling sorry for me.

00:15:35 Jessica Guest
00:15:36 Dan Guest

Horror. But also admiring me. It was a strange mix of feelings that I would see. But no, it developed with—when we moved to LA, that I just—started to write more poetry. And it was—for sure, it’s a step backwards in terms of possible, uh, audience or readers.

00:15:54 Jessica Guest

But see, I like it because it makes me sound smart.

[Dan laughs.]

You know?

00:15:59 Dan Guest
00:16:02 Jesse Host

Depends on how you look at it. Dan, were you working in New York when you were out of college in those early years?

00:16:09 Dan Guest

I was, yeah. I mean, I had—I went to—I had about three years where I was—I had fellowships and grants where I could write, primarily. I spent a year in Ireland, traveling and acting a little bit and writing. And then I went to grad school at Brown University to study writing. So, it wasn’t until I got to New York at 25 that I suddenly really had to find a way to earn a living. And so, I taught a little bit here and there, creative writing and—you know—worked at a bank, you know, from 5PM to 4AM every night for stressed out investment bankers.

00:16:46 Jessica Guest

You and Jason both made—

00:16:48	Dan	Guest	Jason did too, yeah.
00:16:49	Jessica	Guest	You both made PowerPoint presentations for bankers, which is so weird. That was their job. And we would use like the fax machine. We would like—you guys—you would—or you would steal reams of paper. I mean, it was like—
00:17:01	Dan	Guest	Yeah! It was unlimited laser printing! I mean, that's a great—
00:17:04	Jessica	Guest	Unlimited.
00:17:06	Dan	Guest	That's a great thing for a playwright in the '90s. I mean, we weren't sending PDFs around. You know? We actually needed printers! So, there were perks. And often, you didn't have much to do. You just had to be there 'til three or four AM. You know.
00:17:18	Jessica	Guest	And listen to some of their like personal problems. But other than that. Jason used to turn out all the lights in the—in the studio and sleep on the floor so that when people came by, they would be like, "Oh, there's nobody here to do my presentation."
			<i>[They chuckle.]</i>
00:17:37	Jesse	Host	So weird! We've got more of my interview with Jessica St. Clair and Dan O'Brien. After the break, we'll talk about how Jessica and Dan's experience with cancer affected their child. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:17:50	Music	Transition	Upbeat music with rhythmic clapping.
00:17:53	Jesse	Promo	This message comes from NPR sponsor Discover. Discover matches all the cashback you earn 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.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:18:24	Jesse	Host	Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. My guests are Jessica St. Clair and Dan O'Brien. Jessica is a comedy actor and writer, star of the NBC show, <i>Best Friends Forever</i> , and the wonderful USA show, <i>Playing House</i> . Her husband, Dan, is a playwright and poet. He recently published a book of poems, called <i>Our Cancers</i> . In it, he recounts the time he and Jessica both overcame that disease. Let's get back into my conversation.
			You are both cancer survivors. Jessica, you were diagnosed with cancer first.
			<i>[Jessica confirms.]</i>
00:19:04	Jessica	Guest	How old was your kid when you were diagnosed? She was not yet two. So, she—I got my double mastectomy the day of her second birthday. Yeah. Which was—which was crazy, too. You know, just randomly happened to be that day. But I also felt like that was a really important thing, because I was being given a whole new life—you know—after that, to be able to be alive with her.
00:19:30	Jesse	Host	When you were diagnosed, was it because something came up in a—in a routine check? Or you suspected something? Or—?

00:19:38 Jessica Guest Yeah, no, I—so, *[sighs]* my childhood best friend, Kelly, had passed away before Bebe—before I got pregnant with Bebe. And, you know, I basically felt like I heard from her a couple times—you know, from the beyond. Okay? And Irish catholic people, we talk to dead people all the time. So, it's not like that big of deal.

00:20:00 Dan Guest

Don't be alarmed.

00:20:01 Jessica Guest

Don't be alarmed. But they'll be like, "Well, just ask your grandfather for help." Like, he's been dead for—you know, 40 years. But we were on—I had just wrapped season two of editing of *Playing House* and we had decided to go to this rented house, like a VRBO in Laguna Beach and we were there, and it was a real *[censored]* show of a VRBO. *[Chuckling.]* It had basically like a black fly infestation happened while we were there. And we had to leave a day early—a day or two early. And I was having these dreams where my best friend was telling me, screaming something at me, and I didn't know what it was. And as we were driving back, I said to Dan, "Hey, have you heard from Kelly?" 'Cause Dan also talks to dead people.

[Dan chuckles.]

And I was like, "Have you heard from Kelly? Because she's really squawking at me."

And he's like, "No, I haven't."

And I said, "God, I wonder if she's trying to warn me about something about *Playing House* or is it gonna get canceled? Or I don't know." And then the next morning, I was eating cheerios with my daughter, and I wasn't wearing a bra, as moms like to do—we like to rip our bras off the moment we get home. Anything attractive on our bodies, we like to change into something unattractive and that was—I was in one of those outfits. And I do not know why I felt my own boob while I was at the table, but they were so small because *[chuckling]* after breastfeeding, they were just like deflated socks. And I felt like a lump! And I was like, "Oh my god," and I knew the moment I felt it, I knew this is cancerous. I knew it. And because I knew that was what Kelly was trying to get to me about and I—Dan came downstairs, and he remembers the moment and I told him I found a lump and he backed out of the room.

He was like, "No, no, no, no." 'Cause I think he knew, too. Like this was bad news. Which is crazy, 'cause I had no reason to believe that. You know? I didn't know of anyone in my family who'd had breast cancer and I was under 40, so it—the chances of it being cancerous were very unlikely. Like, 99% chance I was gonna be fine.

00:22:12 Dan Guest

And Jessica is the farthest thing from a hypochondriac. I'm very—I am a hypochondriac, so—

00:22:17 Jessica Guest

I'm licking lampposts. Like left and right! You know?

00:22:22 Dan Guest

So, yeah. I think her certainty or the—you know, extreme nature of her fear probably spooked me that morning. And also, you know, *[stammering]* I've mentioned it in my poetry collection, but it was the first—I mean it was the anniversary of 9/11, which was already a weird day for us, as we lived near the World Trade Center and, you know, there's some possibility that breathing all that dust may have

00:22:58 Jessica Guest affected both of *Our Cancers*. So, there was something just uncanny about the experience, about that morning especially. Yeah, sometimes when you're a writer, you would like for life to be less on the nose. And this was really one of those on the nose experiences. *[Chuckles.]* But yeah, then I went, and I went right to my OBGYN, who was—had gotten Bebe out of me, who was a 10lb baby. And that—so, she was really good at her job. And she said, you know, "I don't want you to wait. I think you should go over to this woman, Dr. Memsic—Leslie Memsic—who had left Cedar's to open her own breast clinic, the Bedford Breast Center, because she felt that the level of care women were getting at—you know, at a big hospital was not good enough and not fast enough. And it turns out she was right.

Because, you know, my cancer was growing so fast, had I waited a month or two months it could have been too late. So, yeah. And then they took a sample—a biopsy of it—but I was like, "Oh, it's cancer alright. Like I can tell you. You don't have to send it to the lab."

She was like, "Okay, psycho."

And then Lennon and I had to go and co-host *The Today Show*, with Kathie Lee and Hoda. Okay? You think Lennon might have said to me, "Hey, I don't know if this is the best thing for us to be doing."

I was like, "Lennon, it's fine. Okay? We're just gonna go co-host—it's fine!"

00:24:13 Dan Guest "We're gonna fly to New York this weekend and co-host *The Today Show*."

00:24:15 Jessica Guest We're gonna fly to New York. It's gonna be great. Well, it wasn't great. I was out of my *[censored]* damn mind. Kathie Lee and Hoda were all over the place. They gave us apple juice instead of wine. I could've used the wine. It was a *[censored]* show. We were being told we were talking too much. It was just like nobody had a plan. It was horrible. And several times, Kathie had to go—I would just stare into the camera, like I'd never been on camera before in my life. And she'd go, *[angrily]* "It's your line!"

00:24:51 Dan Guest And I'm like, *[distressed]* "Okay, Kathie! Like, give me a *[censored]* minute!" So...

00:25:08 Jessica Guest Well, then Jessica went home to LA, and I had to stay in New York for auditions for a play of mine. And that's how I received the news that the biopsy was cancerous, was in the middle of some poor actor's audition. I get a little text that says, "It is cancer." And—No ramp up. Also, by the way, he begged me to come back home with me, to New York. And I was like, *[sighs indignantly]* "No way! I'm gonna be fine." Like, that was—that was not a good decision. *[Laughs.]* Yeah. That wasn't a good decision. But then, you know, Lennon was with me when I officially got the diagnosis, when I drove in. Pouring rain in Los Angeles. Again, like I was in a movie. You know. Ridiculous. Sobbing as I drive to Beverley Hills. And then I—you know—was alone getting all of this terrifying news. And then Lennon showed up and I did not tell Lennon to come either. I told her, "Please don't try to drive here in the rush hour traffic."

And she was like, “Of course I’m gonna come.” But she didn’t tell me she was gonna come. She just showed up. And then it became the three of us. It was me, Lennon, and Dan. And people couldn’t figure out—because at first they thought Lennon and I were a couple, and we were getting like the limousine treatment ‘cause we were this adorable couple with two girls. We kept talking about “our girls” and “our daughters”. And I said—I said to the doctor—she said, “Okay, so, you know, here are the options.”

And I was like, “Okay. Here’s the deal. Like, I need to stay alive for my daughter. Like I will do anything. I don’t care how much it hurts. I don’t care—I don’t care what it does to me. Just keep me alive. So, what would you do? What’s the most aggressive thing you can do?”

And she said, “Well, I would get a double mastectomy.”

And I said, “Great. Let’s do it tomorrow.”

And she was like, “Well, no. It’s gonna take a month at least to—you gotta choose a—”

I go, “Who do you like? Plastic surgeon, who do you like?”

She’s like, “Well, I work with a—”

00:26:53

Jessica

Guest

I go, “She sounds great. Let’s do it.”

And she looked at Lennon and Lennon was like, “Oh no, she’s serious.” Like—

And I said, “Watch. I will have my boobs off me faster than any woman you’ve ever had in this—in this office.”

[They chuckle.]

00:27:03

Dan

Guest

And I did!

00:27:04

Jessica

Guest

Yeah, two weeks later. Right?

00:27:08

Jesse

Host

Two weeks—oh, yeah, week and a half later I’m in, I’m out.

I wanna play a scene from *Playing House*, which is the show that you just co-created and co-starred in with Lennon Parham. And in the last season of the show, cancer became a storyline. And, just as in—you know—a previous season of the show, a baby had become a storyline. These were things that were happening in your lives. And this is a scene that I think really *[chuckles]* exemplifies the tone of the show. And it’s like the scene—basically the scene where you find out you might have cancer.

00:27:39

Sound Effect

Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:27:40

Clip

Clip

Speaker (*Playing House*): Um, Dr. Ericson, can you check this?

Dr. Ericson: Sure.

Emma: What is it? What’s going on?

Speaker: It’s probably nothing. You just haven’t had an exam, so we don’t have a baseline.

Emma: Oh, is it a lump? 'Cause I have very lumpy boobs. Not to brag, but in eighth grade, Josh Rosenfarm called me Lumplestiltskin. *[Chuckles.]*

Speaker: Can you feel that?

Dr. Ericson: Yeah.

Emma: Wh-why are you making that face? Is it bad?

Dr. Ericson: No, it's probably nothing. I mean, at your age—I mean, really, probably nothing. But some—yeah, we are going to have to run some tests just to make sure. Music swells and fades.

00:28:08 Sound Effect Transition

00:28:09 Jesse Host So, Lumplestiltskin is the moment, obviously, that stands out in that scene.

[They laugh.]

And, you know, like one of the things about *Playing House*—which was a show that I really loved—

[Jessica thanks him.]

Is that it was the very rare light television show with a lot of real relationships and real jokes that—you know, I think a lot of—a lot of breezy television achieves its breeziness by being dumb, basically.

[They laugh and Jessica agrees.]

Not to put too—like, it's fine for some things to be dumb. Like that can be nice. You know? To just watch something. And *Playing House* I think is maybe the only TV show that I've seen that's achieved that level of lightness while having so many real feelings and jokes. And like this is ultimate level difficulty setting that you're gonna—like, it's one thing to maintain that tone with, you know, single parenthood being a theme. It's another thing to maintain that tone with cancer being a theme.

[Jessica confirms.]

And so, you're doing lighthearted comedy *[laughs]* about this—like, Dan, no offense, but your cancer fits a lot better into, uh, poetry and memoir theatre.

[They laugh.]

00:29:32 Dan Guest

00:29:35 Jessica Guest

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Yeah! But you know, right away, funny things were happening. And that's the truth between the three of us. Like, I mean, I literally—you couldn't pay me enough money to go back and be in that moment again. But, you know, I very quickly—I would think within 30 minutes of being diagnosed, I was like, "Well, we gotta write about this." Because like I—the first funny thing that happened was—you know, I've always been very, very narcissistic about my nipples. I

have perfect... they're perfect! Now, listen—and it's no offense to the salad plates out there, you know, the dinner plate sized nipples out there, because we come in all shapes and sizes. But I don't have a lot of calling cards, but one is I have these perfect nipples that are like the size of a—you know, like a quarter and like a—like an eraser head. You know? It's just beautiful.

[Dan claps softly.]

And so, Lennon is in there with me and now I'm like, "Everybody thinks that we're a lesbian couple and I don't wanna necessarily not tell them that we aren't, because I think we're getting like the red-carpet treatment because of it." And then she takes out a pamphlet and it—basically, my doctor had pioneered the nipple-sparing mastectomy, where you can keep your nipple.

And she goes, "Heeey."

[They chuckle.]

She goes, "Good news."

And I said, "What?"

And she goes, "Looks like you're gonna get to keep those special nips you're always bragging about."

[Jesse laughs.]

And I'm like, "That is good news!" And you know what else I said to her? We put it in the pilot. I said, "How'm I the one with *[censored]* cancer?" I'm like, "You're the one who drinks shorty cokes and has like too many snickers every day." I'm like, "You should be the one with cancer!"

She's like, "Oh my god, that is so hurtful."

And also, I was like, "What are you wearing?"

She was like, "This—I got this sweatshirt for free!"

I was like, "No wonder everybody—!" Anyway. So, yeah. Things were funny even though they were horrible. And I think—
Yeah, or what about—I mean, this was a scene in the—in the show, too, was when Lennon—when you, Lennon, and me were picking out—

00:31:33 Dan Guest

00:31:41 Jessica Guest

00:31:42 Dan Guest

My boobs.
The replacement boobs, the artificial—the implants. And I mean, I was just incredibly uncomfortable. *[Chuckles.]*

[Jessica laughs and agrees.]

Doing that in general, in front of doctors—all women doctors. And you're meant to like pick up the—you know—and then...

00:31:55 Jessica Guest

00:31:57 Dan Guest

They bring out a suitcase.
The merchandise.

00:31:58 Jessica Guest A velvet-lined—I remember it as a velvet-lined suitcase. My doctor has now said, “I’ve never like opened a suitcase like *Deal or No Deal*. Like, that’s never been something.”

I’m like, “But I remember it as a black, velvet-lined suitcase.”

[Dan and Jesse laugh.]

00:32:13 Jesse Host And they had different—
You know, like there was—I remember there was a parking lot and a ‘70s sedan.

[Jessica dissolves into laughter.]

00:32:24 Jessica Guest They opened the trunk and there were some pelican cases in there. And they asked what I wanted.
She’s like, “Jessica, no.” But they do—they have all of the three types of implants you could put in! And you have to feel your own breast and then feel the implant and decide which one feels the most like you. And I’m like—I was panicked. I’m like, “How can I make this decision, this split-second decision? This thing’s gonna be in my body forever.” And so, I said, “Dan, could I get a second opinion? Can you get your hands on it?”

And he was just like, “I don’t wanna be doing this. This is so horrible.” And so, like I remember you poking the side of it, but you say that’s not what you did.

[Dan chuckles.]

00:32:59 Dan Guest But you really pretty quickly—
I think I—I think I held it.

[Jessica laughs.]

00:33:07 Jessica Guest But I think—I think Lennon went first. That’s my recollection. I think Lennon broke the ice.
I thought I fired you. I thought I said, “You’re fired. Lennon, get in here.” Or did she even say, “Could I get a—could I get my hands on it?” But regardless, both Dan and I said, “Lennon, you choose.”

[Jesse laughs.]

And I don’t—if you don’t know Lennon well, you just—she is like an old southern witch. There’s something about her that is so calming. Right, Dan?

[Dan confirms.]

She’s a calming energy and it’s like when *[censored]* hits the fan, you want Lennon to make that call. Right? And so, Lennon—I mean, she felt each one and we joked. We always said like a sommelier would like sample a wine. And she just said, “It’s number two.” She was like—there was no—and I said, “Put it in!”

[Jesse laughs.]

And so, everyone had never seen this type of a triad before. It was so weird. Lennon did most of the talking. She did all of the writing. She made a binder that said, "Cancer: You Wanna Roll With This?" And it had all sorts of manners of tabs. She went to Paper Source. She had special pens for leaflets—you know, sleeves. She had a lot of sleeves. But I mean, I just felt like if I had Dan and—you know, I had Dan to talk about all the serious *[censored]*. You know, because I always knew I wanted a poet in my life, because when like you get to like life and death stuff? That's who you want. You know, because they're not afraid of the dark! And that was so important to me, that I could say my deepest and darkest thoughts to Dan, and he wouldn't tell me to be positive or to shut up. He just let me be scared and listened. That was such a gift.

And then I had Lennon and her Paper Source tabs. You know? It's like what else—what else could a girl ask for? I always say, "Do not go into those plastic surgery appointments alone. Go with your husband and your best friend."

00:35:06	Jesse	Host	Dan, there's a boob moment in one of the poems in your new book.
00:35:10	Jessica	Guest	Is there?
00:35:11	Dan	Guest	Yeah. Yeah. Probably, yeah—probably more than—more than one.
00:35:16	Jessica	Guest	What? Do my boobs... make a bunch of appearances?
00:35:18	Dan	Guest	Oh, there's a few!
00:35:19	Jessica	Guest	I hope they're my boobs!
00:35:20	Dan	Guest	Well, there's one that's I think actually meant to be a kind of humorous poem. It's the night before our wedding. It was a memory of the night before our wedding.

[Jessica chuckles.]

00:35:41	Jessica	Guest	When we were returning to Jessica's parent's house where all of Jessica's parent's friends were partying, and we threw open the front door and Jessica's shirt just magically fell open. I had a halter top on and because I had these small boobs, I didn't have to wear a bra. And I went, "We're heeere!" And then topless. In front of my childhood best friend's father who then said, "It's not like I haven't seen it before." So awkward, right?
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[Jesse laughs.]

00:36:02	Dan	Guest	Because he knew us when we were babies. And I was like, "This is just horrible." But yeah. But I just thought what better way to—you know—say farewell to your childhood than to—than to expose yourself to your parents and their friends.
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[Jessica giggles.]

00:36:14	Jesse	Host	You know? To announce your womanhood. What it made me think of that you wrote about your wife's breast and the context of, you know, her having had cancer and you having had cancer was that we have this intense physical intimacy with our partner's bodies. You know, whether it's in a romantic context or just in a, you know, first woke up in the morning context. Whatever. Right? But cancer and cancer treatment are like a level
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of physical intimacy—like intimacy in relationship with the body—that are far beyond that. And you know, boobs are silly and funny [chuckles] but, you know, Jessica had to have a surgery where hers were cut off.

00:37:07 Dan Guest Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I—you know, I think both of us in different ways—I mean, of course she—her cancer happened to involve her primary sexual attributes and mine was my colon, but it was a similar type of thing where, you know, the core of my body was affected—was opened up—was radically changed in order to hopefully save my life. And yeah, you know, it's been years of us processing that development. You know? Losing the purely erotic potential of your body when you're young—hopefully you don't lose that entirely, but it's been complicated vastly because suddenly—especially if something like this happens to you relatively young—you know, suddenly you recognize to a shocking degree just how perishable [chuckling] and changeable and uncontrollable our bodies are.

But yeah, I think, you know, breast cancer—and breast, of course, you can't help but think as—thinking as a poet—you can't help but think about love and affection and many of the poems in the collection, which I just call *Our Cancers* 'cause it's—you know, the first part is about—me writing about Jessica's cancer. The second is writing about my own. You know, it's really a kind of series or sequence of love poems. You know? Maybe mature love poems or love poems written from the vantage of a greater awareness of mortality, but you know, I know that the poems started coming to me from my subconscious because I was feeling so much love and so helpless to change the situation when Jessica was in treatment.

So, you know, if nothing else—you know, it's a scary title for a book, but it really is about love and, you know, resilience. Uh, knock on wood, because we're lucky enough to be here five or six years later. You know, it's about love weathering a really terrible period.

00:39:09 Jesse Host We'll wrap up with Jessica St. Clair and Dan O'Brien after a quick break. When we return, we'll talk about the lessons they learned after overcoming cancer. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:39:22 Promo Clip **Music:** "Money Won't Pay," by bo en (feat. Augustus). Upbeat, cheerful music.

Rachel McElroy: Congratulations! You've won a ticket to attend an exclusive opportunity in a relaxing environment with two lovers.
[Laughs.]

Griffin McElroy: Wow! Well, this sounds like a sort of... proposition of sorts, but really it's an ad for our podcast, Wonderful! It's a show we do here on Maximum Fun where we talk about things that we like and things that we're into.

Rachel: I'm Rachel McElroy and you just heard Griffin McElroy and we are excited for you to join us as we talk about movies and music and books!

Griffin: Things like sneezing. Or... the idea of rain.

[Both laugh.]

Rachel: Can you get news or information you can use?

[Simultaneously]

Rachel: I don't think so!

Griffin: Absolutely you cannot!

Griffin: Because we're here to talk to you about pumpernickel bread.

Rachel: You can find new episodes on Wednesdays.

Griffin: [Extreeme announcer voice] So catch th—catch the waaaave!

00:40:07 Music Transition
00:40:12 Jesse Host

Chiming, thumpy music.

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guests are Dan O'Brien and Jessica St. Clair. Jessica is an actor and writer who has performed on *Avenue 5*, *The Goldbergs*, and *Playing House*. Dan, her husband, is a poet and playwright. His latest collection of poems looks back on the year and half he and Jessica spent fighting cancer. It's called *Our Cancers*. Let's get back into our conversation.

00:41:17 Dan Guest

Dan, the ink had barely dried on the book of Jessica's cancer treatment when you were diagnosed with cancer. When that happened, did the two of you... feel like your—you know... your energy had gone into Jessica's treatment and there wasn't more left in there? Or did you feel like, "We know how to beat this. Send me back in here."

Do you know what? I think at different times we felt—we felt both. You know? I think at first was just a sense of shock and the absurdity of the situation. I had put off investigating some symptoms because I thought, "What are the chances that while Jessica is being treating for cancer, that I would also need treatment for cancer?" And so, you know, partly I just couldn't believe that this was happening at the same time. I mean, it was the last day of—it was her final infusion of chemotherapy.

00:41:46 Jessica Guest
00:41:48 Dan Guest

I was in the chair.

Was the day that I was diagnosed.

[Jessica confirms.]

And in the same building. So, Jessica was literally—you know—hobbling down the hallway with her IV of chemotherapy to come to my doctor's office to deliver the verdicts of what we were dealing with in my case. So, you know, she would go on to still have some radiation treatment, but it was almost a perfect segue from one to the other. And that was shocking, too was—you know, it'd be one thing if six months later I was diagnosed. Or a year later. It was, you know, essentially concurrent 'cause I should have been in treatment for it six months, a year beforehand.

So, no. At first, I think it was a lot of shock. It was the *Book of Job*. It was a feeling of, you know, how can this keep—how can this go on? How can this continue? Like that was—but then I know from my

perspective, and I'll never get over this sense of deep gratitude to Jessica—I mean, right away, she was able to be my guide. You know? Her treatment, of course, wouldn't be exactly the same, but you know, she had been down this road six months that I was now starting down. My treatment would last even longer, about nine months. And she was able to teach me, to coach me, to reassure me. Of course, there were many times where we were both overwhelmed and we weren't helping each other and fighting and—you know, all those things that anybody would do.

But you know, yeah, I think we were able to use the experience to our advantage.

00:43:20 Jessica Guest Yeah. I think something—we had Julia Louis-Dreyfus on *The Deep Dive* and she went through breast cancer after me. And we sort of went through—I went through it with her. But she was saying—I was saying—you can feel so lonely when you have cancer. 'Cause especially when you're young, nobody else around you has it. And so, you feel like you're the—I always used to say, I'm like the loneliest unicorn. Like nobody else understands what I'm going through.

And so, even though Dan was there for me—you know, 24/7 while I was going through it, I felt really lonely. And then when Dan got it, it was like I could—he understood what I had been through. And then I understood what he had been through, was going through, as a caretaker. Because that role is equally intense and lonely and terrifying. And it requires a very specific set of skills. You know? And you have to summon courage when you don't feel like you have it. So, it felt in a way like even though it was bananas and I kept saying it was like a *People Magazine* moment—like, this is crazy! This doesn't happen to anybody! It felt like we would be equal at the end of it. We would understand each other in a way that if we hadn't both gone through it, I almost felt like one person could have felt separate for the rest of their lives!

00:44:44 Jesse Host Jessica, you sold pretty hard the benefits of cancer. Um.

[They laugh.]

00:44:52 Jessica Guest In our conversation.
00:44:56 Jesse Host Is this a—is this whole podcast just one big commercial for cancer?!

This is actually a PBS pledge special.

[Jessica cackles.]

A pro-cancer—but you have—so, you have talked about the ways in which cancer has—and the experience of facing death did the things that we would like that experience to do. Which is to say, clarified your relationships in your life. You know, it made you savor every flower you see and so forth. Do you like have to put a three-by-five card up on your bedroom door so that when you head out to make breakfast, you remember that that's what you learned from this experience?

00:45:39 Jessica Guest Oh my god, I forget it all the—almost every day. I mean, it's so easy to forget and to go back to your old, dumb ways. And yeah, I really—when I find myself—you know, even just we came to London, and it was raining every day, and I was like *[makes a*

			<i>frustrated sound</i>]. I just started to like get real cranky and down. And you know, I do have to shock myself and remember like, “What the <i>[censored]</i> are you doing?” Or like if Dan and I start fighting about something stupid, I’m like, “Ugh, remember how much you loved him?” You know? <i>[Laughing.]</i> Like that’s—
00:46:16	Dan	Guest	Past tense! Past tense. Loved him. Still do. No, I mean, I’ll say—
00:46:22	Jessica	Guest	<i>[Laughing.]</i> Still do, of course.
00:46:23	Dan	Guest	You know, when I first noticed some of my old thoughts and patterns coming back, I was depressed. You know, in terms of not prioritizing the way I was during treatment and when I was thinking about what was at risk. But you know, I also recognized it as evidence of the fact that I was healing and becoming a bit more of like a—you know, a normal person. I was gonna have the same anxieties, same ego. You know, a lot of the same things that we all deal with.
			So, it’s impossible to live in a kind of—it’s impossible to live on the cliff your entire life. You know? But I—you know, writing about it for me, Jessica creating—you know, and doing podcasts that deal with it, doing this podcast, these are ways that we remind ourselves, too. Of what we’ve been through and what it means. What—you know, why it matters to us.
00:47:17	Jessica	Guest	Yeah. I think the—I think the biggest thing that’s changed for me is like I don’t really put on—I used to be really good at faking it to everybody. Like, I would just kind of chameleon in a room and put on a show. And as a comedian, I could be very distanced from who I really was. And that felt really good to me. But now, it’s like I guess the experience just fully integrated those—who I am! So, I can only sort of be myself, which is—for better or for worse. You know? Because when someone doesn’t like you, well, they just don’t like <u>you</u> .
			<i>[Laughing.]</i> Like—you know?! That’s just—but there is—there is a kind of self-love that has come, you know, that I—that I’m—that doesn’t really leave me. You know? I don’t—you know, certainly get as rattled by career stuff anymore. You know. Sometimes I wish I—I think I should care more. You know? That’s the hardest part, is to go like, “Wait, well you can’t say <i>[censored]</i> it to everything, because you should care about something!”
			<i>[They chuckle.]</i>
			And it’s like—but I mean, you know! Like, if I had my way—like, Lennon always says like, “You keep talking about wanting to like buy a farmhouse in Tuscany. Like it’s very hurtful, you know? Because we’re supposed to be writing something!” <i>[Laughing.]</i> You know. But yeah, I find like at cocktail parties, I almost immediately get very deep with somebody now. You know? I don’t have time for small talk. Yeah, I don’t know. That’s sort of how I’ve changed.
			<i>[Dan hums in agreement.]</i>
00:48:49	Jesse	Host	Well, Dan and Jessica, I sure appreciate you taking all of this time to be on <i>Bullseye</i> . It’s really nice to get to talk to you.
00:48:55	Dan	Guest	Thank you. Thank you for having us! It was great talking to you.
00:48:57	Jessica	Guest	Thank you, Jesse. You have a way of making people feel safe to like share their true selves.

[Music fades in.]

And that is partially due to your mustache, I think, the calming—the calming sound of your mustache bristling against your upper lip. But also, it's because, you know, you just have a gift to let people be them. So, thank you for having us.

00:49:20 Jesse Host

Thank you. It's something I learned from my mentor, Sam Elliott.

[Jessica cackles.]

00:49:28 Music Transition
00:49:31 Jesse Host

Relaxing, cheerful music.

Jessica St. Clair and Dan O'Brien. Dan's collection of poems is called *Our Cancers*. It's available now from your local bookstore. If you haven't seen Jessica's show, *Playing House*, you're in for a treat. Really wonderful, one of my favorite shows of recent years. You can watch it on demand through Amazon, Apple, or Google Play.

[Music fades out.]

00:49:53 Music Transition
00:49:55 Jesse Host

Thumpy, brassy music.

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—where, today, temperatures finally dropped, if briefly, below 80. And I immediately donned blue jeans.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producer, Jesus Ambrosio. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Thanks to Max Fun producer Christian Dueñas for cutting together that Buddy Guy segment on this week's show. And to Jack Allen for recording Dan and Jessica in London. 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 with us. Always very grateful to them for that kindness.

You can also 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.

00:51:02 Promo Promo

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

[Music fades out.]