

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.
00:00:20	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. My first guest this week is Kumail Nanjiani. Kumail is, of course, a standup comedian and an actor. He was born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan. He moved here, to the United States, at 18 to go to college. His career started first as a standup comic. A great standup comic! And he got his big break as an actor in 2014, when he was one of the stars of the hit show <i>Silicon Valley</i> . He played Dinesh.

When I last talked to Nanjiani, it was 2017. Alongside his wife, Emily Gordon, he’d just written and directed his first film, *The Big Sick*. It’s a beautiful, hilarious, wholly unique romantic comedy. And if you haven’t seen it, you should. Lately, Kumail Nanjiani has been expanding his acting chops. He joined the cast of Marvel’s *Eternals* in 2021. Now, he’s starring in the true crime drama *Welcome to Chippindale’s*. The show just wrapped up on Hulu. And a heads-up, in case you haven’t seen it, you will hear some very light spoilers in the first ten minutes or so of this interview.

Welcome to Chippindale’s is about, as you might have guessed, the Chippindale’s dancers, the hunks from the ’80s who wore bowties and cuffs and collars and did sensual dances. But the show is about two of the people behind the scenes—the two who created the concept, expanded the business, argued, and plotted against one another until things ended in tragedy. One is Nick De Noia. He’s a choreographer with a Broadway background who, before he joined the Chippindale’s, had been working in children’s television. He’s played by Murray Bartlett, who you might know from *White Lotus*. The other is Somen Banerjee, or Steve as he’s known. He’s played by my guest, Kumail Nanjiani.

Steve immigrated from India to the United States as an adult. And when the show starts, he’s working in a gas station. But he has much, much bigger dreams. In this scene, Steve is meeting with the owner of the station in which he works. The owner had invited him over to give him a big promotion. And Steve’s response was to let him know that he was quitting.

00:02:34	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:02:35	Clip	Clip	Music: Harmonic, thoughtful music.

Steve (*Welcome to Chippindale’s*): I have no social life to speak of. So, all I do is sleep and work. For food, I eat expired sandwiches from the station.

Owner: If you have \$44,000, that’s nearly enough to own your own gas station.

Steve: [*Hesitantly.*] That's true.

Owner: So, why not just work with me for a few more years—

Steve: Sir, I do not want a gas station.

Owner: [*Sighs.*] What do you mean you don't want a gas station?

Steve: That was my dream when I came here, but that was seven years ago. My goals have changed. I have changed. Music swells and fades.

00:03:11 Sound Effect Transition

00:03:12 Jesse Host Kumail Nanjiani, welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's nice to see you.

00:03:15 Kumail Guest Yeah! Great to see you! Thanks for having me.

00:03:17 Jesse Host Do you have the kind of simmering resentment inside of you that Steve has inside of him?

00:03:25 Kumail Guest I really don't. What I do have is a very baseline insecurity that I share with him, probably. And you know, obviously, I did comedy for many years. And there's a stereotype of like, you know, the sad clown. I never felt like that. I really don't. I mean, I have issues. You know. When I talk to my therapist, it's not like, "Oh, what are we gonna talk about this week?" [*Chuckling.*] There's always—there's always stuff to find, you know?

I don't have that simmering resentment. But like I said, there's some baseline ways that he thinks about himself that I've thought about myself on my bad days.

00:04:03 Jesse Host Like what?

00:04:05 Kumail Guest Not liking yourself. You know? I think Steve really, really, really doesn't like himself. He doesn't like being in his skin. And I've certainly had times where I've felt like that. And I still sometimes feel like that. And it takes a while to even realize that that's what that feeling is—it's just like, oh, this is what being a person is! And then you realize like oh no! There are specific ways that I think of myself and that I talk to myself that are very harmful and weigh on me in ways that I'm not aware of, just 'cause it's happening all the time. So, that's something I share with Steve.

00:04:41 Jesse Host I was watching the show and thinking about you watching this guy and thinking like, you know, Kumail is not murderous as far as I know. Can you confirm that for me, Kumail?

00:04:53 Kumail Guest I have never murdered someone, and I promise you, here on *Bullseye*, I will never murder anyone.

00:04:59 Jesse Host Well, okay, so this is sort of a loophole thing, because the character hires someone to murder someone.

00:05:06 Kumail Guest I will never hire someone to murder anyone.

00:05:09 Jesse Host Okay. But Kumail is not a murderous man. Known you for a long time. But you are an awkward nerd at heart. You are not just a first-generation immigrant, but a first-generation immigrant who came to the States as a 18-year-old. Right, 18?

[*Kumail confirms.*]

As an 18-year-old by yourself, just off to college. Here we go, new country.

00:05:34 Kumail Guest Yeah, let's see what happens.

00:05:36 Jesse Host And that combination is not nothing to have in common with someone.

00:05:44 Kumail Guest Oh no, it's a big thing to have in common. Yeah. Yeah. To come here and try and succeed in a world that is not made for your success, I completely understand that part of it. You know? His sort of—his ambition and my ambition do align. But hopefully not to the same degree.

00:06:05 Jesse Host There's a specific part of the ambition, too. Which is that scene that we just heard in the show is him rejecting a classic first-generation immigrant narrative, which is, "I will work impossibly hard in the lane which set forth for me by—you know, people from my country or extended family that came here before." You know, like I'm Hmong; I'm gonna move to Minneapolis. Or I'm Cambodian in Los Angeles and my extended family works in—you know, has donut stores. Whatever it is, right? Whatever the lane is. It's your character rejecting that because he has this received vision of Americanness that he is thrilled by. And you have described to me before your relationship with America being completely defined by obsessive film and television watching.

[Kumail confirms.]

00:07:17 Kumail Guest Which is like pretty like—Hugh Hefner is a little different from Arnold Schwarzenegger, but it's a pretty similar thing. *[Chuckles.]* It is, yes, in some ways. I mean, his version of American success is very White and very, very specific. I never had like a version of American success in my head. My version of America came from movies and TV shows for sure. But I never had a version of—you know, I wanna be that someday. I never—my ambition has never been very farsighted. It's sort of just like about the next thing. So, I think that's where him and I differ. He has like a very specific White version of American success. And that's what he wants to achieve. For me, it was never that. I just—I kind of was mostly very, very adrift for the first few years in America until the end of college. I genuinely had no idea what I wanted to do or what I wanted to be.

00:08:11 Jesse Host When you were in college, were you lonely?

00:08:16 Kumail Guest No! I felt lonely before college. People are surprised by this, but I'm very introverted. I'm very shy. And then, over the years I've learned to sort of fake it. But then, quarantine and pandemic set me back to my natural state, and now I find it very difficult. I can have a one-on-one conversation. A bigger group, I start to get nervous, and it reminds me of how I used to feel when I was much younger. So, I was very, very, very—I felt very lonely up until college. And then, actually stopped feeling lonely kind of for the first time in my life.

I went to Grinnell College, tiny school in Grinnell, Iowa. And I just suddenly found people that I could tell really liked me. And I think before that, I'd convinced myself that people were just trying to be nice to me or something. I've reconnected with my friends from then, and it's been absolutely wonderful. But really, in college was the first time in my life that I didn't feel lonely or weird in a way that—I know it's sort of cliché. Everyone feels weird. But weird in a way that I didn't want to feel weird.

00:09:28 Jesse Host Did you think when you moved to the United States that you were going to leave being weird behind because you were going to a new place where you could be a new thing?

00:09:38	Kumail	Guest	I felt like that—my last two years of high school in Pakistan, I was going to a different school. I sort of transferred. And I certainly felt that going into that, where I was like, “I will not be weird now! I can be whatever I wanna be.” And then somehow, you know, I got away with it for a couple weeks, I think. I really did. And then, I don’t know what happened. Somebody—they sniffed it out. They sniffed out that I was weird. So, I don’t remember thinking that coming to America. If anything, coming to America I just felt like a state of crisis. It wasn’t—I wasn’t thinking anything aspirational. I was just trying to like hold on for dear life. My goal was just survival. But transferring to this school in Pakistan towards the end, the goal was I’ll leave the weird behind. And it did not work.
00:10:34	Jesse	Host	So, I think I understood—going to college—that this part of myself that I didn’t like was not something I could shed. Why did you go to college in Iowa? I mean, Iowa’s nice. Don’t get me wrong.
00:10:39	Kumail	Guest	It’s nice. It’s nice. I’m very glad I went to Iowa, because—like you said—my version of America came from movies and TV shows.
00:10:50	Jesse	Host	And I didn’t know America had different kinds of cities. [Laughing.] Wait, what did you—did you think you were going to college with <i>The Music Man</i> ?
00:10:56	Kumail	Guest	I thought it was gonna be New York or LA! That’s all I’d seen. Where is <i>The Music Man</i> set?
00:11:01	Jesse	Host	Iowa.
00:11:02	Kumail	Guest	Iowa! See, I didn’t know that. So, I was sort of surprised when I got there. I was like, “This is not—I don’t see this America in movies and TV shows.” I genuinely had no idea.
00:11:12	Jesse	Host	But like, literally, this is my question to you, Kumail. Literally, how did you get an application to a college—? Like, did you have a sister that went there? Like, how on earth was that—?
00:11:29	Kumail	Guest	I looked at the <i>U.S. News & World Report</i> , and I applied to like seven or eight colleges, ‘cause it’s expensive. And I sort of did—you know, my like moonshots. Which were like—I wanted to go to a liberal arts school, ‘cause I didn’t know what I wanted to do. So, I applied to like Dartmouth, Vassar. I think like Oberlin. I don’t know! And I just looked at the rankings and picked like, “Okay, I’m gonna do like a couple like super high, a couple medium, and then a couple that are like really definitely I should get into these schools.” And I think at that time, Grinnell was ranked either 9 th or 13 th . It might have been 9 th in the world—in America, in liberal arts colleges. So, I was like, okay!
00:12:32	Jesse	Host	So, I got my—I got my Vassar, and I got my Dartmouth, and then Grinnell was sort of the middle tier. And then, I got like—you know—tier two schools that I should really be able to get into. So, that’s what it was. Hamilton—I think I applied to Hamilton. All those sort of like small liberal arts schools. And then, also Dartmouth. We’ll be back in just a second. It’s <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:12:38	Music	Transition	Thumpy rock music.
00:12:43	Jesse	Host	Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. My guest is Kumail Nanjiani. He’s the star and cocreator of the academy award nominated movie, <i>The Big Sick</i> . He’s acted on TV shows like <i>Silicon Valley</i> , <i>Portlandia</i> , and <i>Veep</i> , and he is a Marvel superhero! For reals! His latest project is <i>Welcome to Chippindale’s</i> . It’s a true

crime miniseries that just wrapped up on Hulu. In it, Nanjiani stars as Steve Banerjee, creator of the Chippindale's male dance troupe. Let's get back into our conversation.

There's not a lot of people who change countries to go to liberal arts college.

00:13:21	Kumail	Guest	No, I just didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. And I realized later it was because I kind of didn't feel like a person until, you know, until I decided I wanted to be a comedian.
00:13:35	Jesse	Host	You didn't feel like a person?
00:13:37	Kumail	Guest	Yeah. I didn't feel like a person. I didn't feel—like, if someone was like, "Describe yourself," I don't think I'd be able to. I mean, I still kind of can't, but I just felt like I had nothing to me. You know? I like movies, TV shows, and video games. And that was kind of it. And I didn't feel like I had any traits. And then, it wasn't until college that I sort of realized that I had a personality and things that people may enjoy about me.
00:14:06	Jesse	Host	Being a standup comedian, you really have to have a sense of who you are. But like, you both have to have a sense of who you are and of what people see of you, both in the ten minutes you're onstage and in the 15 seconds as you walk up to the microphone.
00:14:31	Kumail	Guest	Yeah. That's exactly right. That's very well said. And because it took me so long to figure out my own point of view as a human being, I would say the first few years of my standup, I didn't really have a point of view beyond a manufactured persona, which was—I was so nervous to get onstage, that when I would go onstage early on, I would just play up that nervousness. And the only sort of point of view I had to my standup was, "I don't wanna be here right now." <i>[Chuckles.]</i> I had jokes that I'd written. When I look back on those jokes, they were like well-done jokes and they were—you know, they would do well with a crowd. I was lucky in that I didn't really have a bad set until I was a few months into standup. But I didn't really have a point of view beyond I think this is funny.
00:15:16	Jesse	Host	That's interesting, 'cause the first time I saw you do standup; you were already a reasonably successful comedian. But one of the things that struck me, and one of the things that I think of when I think of you performing standup is that you are performing ease—like conviviality.
00:15:38	Kumail	Guest	So, you saw me—when would that have been? 'Cause I remember—
00:15:41	Jesse	Host	It was when you were doing the rollercoasters—that was central to your act was the chunk about rollercoasters.
00:15:46	Kumail	Guest	So, that was right around <i>[laughing]</i> —that's a good bit!
00:15:50	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:15:51	Clip	Clip	<i>[The audience laughs regularly.]</i>

Kumail: I went to Coney Island recently. And I—yeah, it's a fun place. I rode this rollercoaster called the Cyclone.

[Scattered whoops from the audience.]

No, that was not my reaction. The single most terrifying experience of my life. And I'm from *[censored]* Pakistan. I had like bruises everywhere. I did, it's like I paid a guy like, "Here's a bunch of money, just kind of punch me all over." And then, when I got done—

00:16:57	Sound Effect	Transition	when I got off, I found out that the Cyclone is the oldest functional rollercoaster in the world. Wish I'd known that before I risked my life. Do you know what year the Cyclone was made in? The Cyclone was made in the year 1927. They should change the name of that ride to 1927, 'cause that fact is way scarier than cyclones. Music swells and fades.
00:16:58	Jesse	Host	I was kind of mad, honestly, at how funny you were.
00:17:02	Kumail	Guest	<i>[They chuckle.]</i> This was <i>Sound of Young America</i> , right? <i>[Jesse confirms.]</i>
00:17:05	Jesse	Host	This was—I remember— In New York, yeah.
00:17:06	Kumail	Guest	—meeting you. You were very kind to me. It was—when we met, I was sort of, I think, successful in the way of I was doing kind of the cool shows in New York, but I was not making a living doing standup. I was barely making any money. Really, when I moved to New York is when my standup persona really shifted. And as you said, I started performing confidence and conviviality. That is really what happened. Before that, when I was in Chicago, my persona was very much like I wouldn't take the mic out of the stand, and it was very much like—very small. My body would shrink. Couldn't make eye contact with anybody. I was performing nervousness, but there also was nervousness.
00:18:14	Jesse	Host	And then, I think it really, really changed because I found that persona was very limiting. I couldn't talk about anything personal—by that I mean not just—I'm not talking about opening up my heart and revealing my deepest darkest. I mean, I couldn't talk about a movie I'd seen that I liked. And I was like, "Oh, this is extremely limiting. I need to change. I need to be different onstage, 'cause I need to be able to talk about this <i>Star Trek</i> episode that I just watched that tickled me." You know? At what point did you develop a vision? Because I don't think that you could be at the point that you are in your career right now accidentally or just based on the—you know, your talent and people lending you a hand. I mean, those things are central to anyone's success, but like you clearly have been trying. So, <i>[chuckles]</i> when did you think like, "I am going to have goals"?
00:18:44	Kumail	Guest	Oh, you mean like big sort of career goals?
00:18:46	Jesse	Host	Or even small career goals.
00:18:49	Kumail	Guest	They were always like just a thing that's the next thing that's hard to get. You know? I'd never had anything bigger. So, when I was in Chicago, I wanted to do the HBO Aspen Comedy Festival or the Montreal Just for Laughs Comedy Festival. So, it was just the next thing. And when I moved to New York, it was, "I wanna be able to do <i>Invite Them Up</i> ." Which is Bobby Tisdale and Eugene Mirman's show. I wanna be able to open for—you know, my favorite comedians. And I did. I got to like tour with Eugene Mirman and Zach Galifianakis and Stella. It was always like just the next little step, and then it was like, "I wanna write for a TV show."

And still to this day, it's the same thing. It's just like what's the next little step that I can take that would be fun to do and could yield something that I might be proud of. I don't know if this answers your question, but it's basically just going to the next thing. There's no grand vision. I sort of have vague goals I wanna achieve. It's really about what's the next thing I could do that has a chance of being great and something that I could bring something to.

00:19:55 Jesse Host

Along the way, you met your wife—Emily Gordon—who is also, with you, a producer on this show and who has written a lot with you, produced a lot of things that you've worked on. You know, the two of you are partners in a lot of creative endeavors. So, Emily is both a former therapist with like a uniquely emotionally tuned view of the world, I would say, and like pretty focused like high life skills.

[Kumail confirms and they chuckle.]

So, what did being partners with Emily change about your life and career? Besides just—look, I mean, we're just going to leave love. Love is great.

00:20:36 Kumail Guest

Love is great. Leave it—yeah. Leave love off the table. That's like a good name for a collection of—you know—poems. By the way, she was like, "Are you gonna do *Bullseye*?" She's like, "I wish—see, now, that I would love to do with you." 'Cause she does not like doing press. And I'm always like, "Let's do it together!" And she never wants to do it. She didn't know I was doing this. She's like, "Aw, see! Now, that I would love to do."

I think it's emotional intelligence—a lot of emotional intelligence I've gotten from her. The skills I've picked up from her—you said like she is high—what did you say? Like high—?

00:21:11 Jesse Host

[Laughing sheepishly at himself.] Life skills. I don't—

00:21:12 Kumail Guest

She has high life skills.

00:21:13 Jesse Host

She's very competent.

00:21:14 Kumail Guest

She is very competent. So, picking up those competency tricks from her has helped me personally, but has also helped me professionally a lot. The way she approaches her work is very sort of workmanlike. You know? She has like hours, and she goes in and sits down and writes every day, and some days it's good and some days it's not. Her approach to work is very simple. You know, when I—back when I used to do a lot of standup, there were times where I was just waiting for inspiration to hit me, and I realized it's a terrible way to work. You kind of have to work to work. That's what she does. She's also helped me be a lot more intentional about my life. Sometimes I can sort of go on autopilot and just get pulled around by, you know, the things in my calendar. And she's the one who sort of taught me that I need to do stuff that makes me feel like myself.

Too often, I was just sort of doing stuff, and I didn't even know if I was liking it or not liking it. I was just kind of going and going. And sometimes, I would—my work would be too all-consuming. It's the only thing, sometimes, that would bring me any kind of satisfaction as a human being was what I was doing. And she's taught me that it's much more important for me to get satisfaction from being a good husband and a good friend and a good—you know—cat dad and fix stuff around the house.

So, all this stuff's still a work in progress. But it's really—learning from her has like recontextualized and reprioritized my entire life in every way. In my work and also my personal life. She's really good at living. She's good at being a person.

00:22:57 Jesse Host You can tell when you talk to her, you're sort of a little in awe of how feet-on-the-ground she seems. *[Chuckles.]*

00:23:05 Kumail Guest She's very, very together. And she—you know, that's sort of her function in all our various groups of friends, too. She's sort of the person who's like, "Alright, we're gonna have a party. Come over to our house." And then, she will like sort of take care of everybody. That's what she's really, really good at. I don't wanna speak about this too much, because it's not my place to say, it's hers. Over the years—we've been now married 15 years, together 16 years—her level of competence is so high that at times I have taken for granted the effort that it takes her to have that level of competence all the time. And understanding more, now, that it is work to be that together makes me appreciate it more. You know?

00:23:59 Jesse Host It is natural, but it comes with practice and actually be intentional about it. We talked about you enacting chill comfort onstage. You have also, since I've known you, gotten super yolked and started exercising all the time.

[Kumail confirms.]

00:24:23 Kumail Guest What portion of that is an enactment and what portion of it was organic in some way? The working out?

[Jesse confirms.]

The faking it 'til you make it is like a specific thing that I decided is how I would approach standup. This working out now—genuinely, is—really, it's for me and for nobody else. Like, honestly, if anything I'm a little bit embarrassed sometimes at how I look, because people make judgements about me. They think I've changed and all this stuff. If I could work out—honestly, if I could work out and look how I used to look five years ago, that'd be great. I just get so much out of the working out. I, at this point, don't get any kind of self-confidence or anything from looking differently than I used to look—you know—five years ago. That doesn't make me feel better mentally in any way. What I do get something out of is the actual, physical act of working out every day.

00:25:33 Jesse Host I get a lot out of it. So, I worked out just before coming here, and it like made me feel better. I see the benefits of actually like lifting heavy weights over my head. It's sort of like a weird kind of meditation. One of the things that reading you talk about getting buff made me think of is the extent to which—as a cis dude—your appearance is certainly part of your life. It's not nothing. You know. Like, there's a reason that a lot of comedians are goofy looking in some way or like—

[They chuckle.]

You know what I mean? Like, we have all—we have all grown up to—you know, try to control our world, in some way partly because of our appearance. But I think it makes you realize the extent to which you are experiencing something that not just women in showbusiness but like all women in the entire world have to deal with all the time.

[Kumail agrees.]

00:26:23	Kumail	Guest	You know, that feels very visceral.
			Yeah, I understand like .000001% of what it feels like to be a woman in Hollywood and in the world at large, where you're sort of being judged by how you look. I understand like a very, very, very, veeery tiny percentage of that, for sure.
00:26:42	Jesse	Host	How did having had this experience in recent years change the way that you looked at a show that's a story about the commodification of male bodies?
00:26:55	Kumail	Guest	Yeah, I mean—
00:26:57	Jesse	Host	And you're pretty schlubby on the show.
00:26:59	Kumail	Guest	I am. I had to, again, change how I look for the show, because I couldn't look like one of the dancers. I hadn't even really thought about that very much. What I've thought a lot about—
00:27:10	Jesse	Host	No, really?!
00:27:11	Kumail	Guest	Yeah! The commodification of the male form, being on a show about that. No, I really have put more thought into the women's reaction to it and what they got from it, 'cause that's what was really—that's what was really sort of—not shocking, 'cause it's not shocking. But it was sort of eye-opening. Because the actors who are dancers on the show really sort of owned it in a way and they liked being naked or—not naked, but like shirtless on camera, they really seemed to enjoy it. All of them did. And they look great. They should. And they really enjoyed, I think, performing for these women. And they enjoyed the reaction—at least, from what I saw and my conversations with them. I actually talked to one of the actors and he said it like gave him a lot more confidence in his life to hear the reaction. You know?
			And it wasn't—the reaction that the background artists were having was not scripted. We didn't tell them to have this reaction. They had this reaction for real. It gave him more confidence, he said. But what was interesting to me, when we were shooting that, was the visceral glee that the women had in being able to express a part of themselves that they hadn't—that they I don't think feel comfortable expressing outside of the confines of this very specific situation.
00:28:36	Jesse	Host	We'll finish up with Kumail Nanjiani after a show break. Stay with us. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:28:44	Promo	Clip	Music: Upbeat piano music.

Helen Hong: J. Keith, do you know what I love more than the trivia, comedy, and celebrity guests on our podcast, *Go Fact Yourself*?

J. Keith van Straaten: No! What, Helen?

Helen: Sharing all of those things with an actual audience!

J. Keith: Yes! Well, lucky for you, *Go Fact Yourself* is back to being a live audience show!

Helen: Woohoo!

J. Keith: Yeah! We've got a free recording coming up on January 15th, in the Los Angeles, and February 11th, in Pasadena!

Helen: And if you can't make it there, all of our recordings will still be available as a podcast! Twice a month, every month, on MaximumFun.org.

J. Keith: Yeah, no excuses. So, if you're not listening—

Helen: You can go fact yourself!

00:29:22	Music	Transition	<i>[Music ends.]</i>
00:29:26	Jesse	Host	Thumpy rock music. It's <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Kumail Nanjiani from <i>The Big Sick</i> , <i>Silicon Valley</i> , and the new limited series <i>Welcome to Chippindale's</i> . Let's get back into our conversation.
00:30:29	Kumail	Guest	I really love the scene that we played at the beginning, where your character is talking to his boss—I loved watching that scene. Your scene partner, the guy who plays your boss whose name I do not know, probably should've wrote down, is such a like lovely human dude onscreen. And it might just be because there are so few Sikh guys onscreen, and he just is a striking visual presence with a big beard and everything, but also like there is this like real, weird, human quality of these two kinds of things that the two of you want and him just really trying to figure out your deal. Yeah! Totally. I mean, what we wanted that scene to show is here is someone who has found success in America and is content with it. You know, there's a scene where it's sort of told in montage, but there's a scene of him with his big family and they're all sitting around a table and eating, and you think, "Oh, this is what anybody in America would want, especially an immigrant." You know, there's a house that's his house. He's successful. He's feeding his family, and it's a wonderful, lovely situation.
00:30:58	Jesse	Host	And you like—your character, clearly he's really enjoying the food.
00:31:02	Kumail	Guest	Yes! He's really enjoying it, but in that moment I think he's also deciding this is not what I want, which I think is kind of heartbreaking.
00:31:10	Jesse	Host	I'm not gonna put too fine a point on it here, Kumail, but you at some point decided to go into the entertainment industry. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Which is glitzier, substantially Whiter, and you know—I don't know that you were ever—I don't get the impression that you were ever in a lane where you were going to own a chain of gas stations.
00:31:37	Kumail	Guest	<i>[Laughing.]</i> Of gas stations?
00:31:39	Jesse	Host	But like, you very well could've gone into, you know, programming at a nonprofit or something like that, with your degree from the 9 th best liberal arts college in America, according to <i>US News & World Report</i> . So, like did you ever have that feeling of heartbreak that you knew that you were choosing something that was

fundamentally not just being happy with your children and a nice meal that your partner cooked?

00:32:13 Kumail Guest Yeah, I think for me—you know, I didn't go into this industry wanting wild success, 'cause that's—it's ridiculous. Like, if you look at the percentages, to want to be a comedian because you wanna be rich is like—it's an absolute ridiculous thought to have. For me, it was really—I had the day job. I was a programmer in some way. I was terrible at it, and it brought me no joy. And the thought of doing something for ten hours a day every day for the rest of my life doing this, it just filled me with sadness and dread. I just could not do it. I was like, "I can't spend ten hours every day doing something that does absolutely zero for me."

It wasn't that it was absolutely miserable. The work wasn't miserable, but I was miserable because I just found nothing from it. It gave me absolutely nothing. And I did work at a nonprofit, because I was like, "I'm doing some good." But I think the day-to-day stuff you do has to actually give you some sort of satisfaction. I was getting nothing from it. And so, when I chose standup comedy, I was like, "I'd rather be someone who tours 40 weeks a year doing tiny clubs, barely making enough money to scrape by. I'd rather be doing that than be comfortable with a nice family and a big house doing this." So, I didn't choose glitz and glamor. It's the opposite. I just chose being able to do something that was enjoyable to me, that brought me some level of satisfaction.

00:33:54 Jesse Host And there's also always a disappointment to anticipate in this business. It's not like *[chuckles]*—

00:34:01 Kumail Guest Oh my god, there's defeat around every corner. Oh yeah.

00:34:04 Jesse Host So, like it's—it's not like you're constantly being rewarded by the feeling of your success. Like there's no—there's no end to relative unsuccess.

00:34:15 Kumail Guest Oh yeah! I mean, just recently—you know, I was sort of like, "Oh, things are going pretty well. You know, I've done this thing, this thing. People know who I am. I'm sort of—I have all these opportunities and stuff." And then, just recently—you know, like I haven't had to audition in a long time. And I was like having a meeting with this director about this big movie, and I was like, "Oh great, yeah, sure. Let's have this conversation and then I won't have to audition, and it'll be great." And then, I talked to the director. We had a great conversation. And then, they gave the job to somebody else! And I was like, "Wait, what?! What's going on?!" And it sort of like really shook me. I haven't—you know, I haven't in a while—and it's sort of like I didn't come to you, you came to me! You wanted to talk to me!" And it wasn't even a movie I wanted to do that badly, but I was like, "No, I'm the one who says no. You don't—you don't say no."

And I know how like arrogant that sounds. But there's always something that, you know, makes you feel like you're back at like step zero. And it's happening. It used to be that if an opportunity comes to you, it is yours and you say no if you don't wanna do it. But if it's coming to you, it's yours. But I found that's not always the case. And most recently, that was not what happened. I talked to someone. I didn't impress them enough, and somebody else got the job.

00:35:39	Jesse	Host	<p>I listened to you on Conan O'Brien's podcast, and you talked about how the very kind compliment that he paid to you was to say to you, "I never worry about you." And when he said that, I thought, well, I understand what he means, because Kumail is so—not just talented, but like good at doing things. Like, good at making things happen and doing the hard work and those kinds of things. And like, I understand that part of it. But on the other hand, I was like, "I worry about Kumail." Because I'm so happy that he's in movies and stuff—like what an amazing thing. Like, you never know what person you like and is talented is going to have outsized success. I'm like, "Isn't that great that Kumail is in like a movie!?" Like, "Look! There's Kumail Nanjiani! In a <u>movie</u>! He's doing a great job!" Right?</p> <p>But like, the part that I worry about is that like—it's not that you're not gonna eat. Like, you're such a great standup comic, you could be a standup comic until the day you die and make a perfectly good living, I'm sure. You know. It's a trade. If you can wake work a club that's got 150 people in it, you can make a living. But like <i>[laughing]</i> I am worried, because you try to do things and I'm like, "Ooh noo! What if one of them doesn't work and then showbusiness doesn't like him anymore?!"</p>
00:37:04	Kumail	Guest	<p>It's absolutely devastating every time you do something and it doesn't work. You know? It's—'cause I don't ever do anything—again, all this sounds like cliches, but it's absolutely true. Every time I work on something, I really put all of myself into it. I really, really care! I really give a <i>[censored]</i>. I work really hard at every single thing. And then, sometimes they don't turn out well, and it's heartbreaking every time. So, on like an individual project micro level, each one is a potential devastation. And then, you get enough of those heartbreaks in a row and suddenly there's the big heartbreak of, "Alright, back to—you know—the Des Moines Funny Bone." That's always there. I think about that all the time.</p> <p>And that does not give me any kind of solace or anything—the fact that I can like fall back and just do standup and make a living, that doesn't make me feel better. <i>[Laughs.]</i> It's a terrifying thought! And I'm glad you said that, 'cause nobody says that to me. Nobody ever says that. Like, I think about that all the time: what if all this goes away? And people are like, "You're being ridiculous." I'm like I am <u>not</u> being ridiculous! It's a—</p>
00:38:11	Jesse	Host	<p>That's very sensible. It probably will. The odds are very good that it will.</p>
00:38:13	Kumail	Guest	<p>Yeah! Of course! At some point, it's all going to go away. It's like how long will you like be able to do this before it goes away?</p>
00:38:24	Jesse	Host	<p>Well, Kumail, I'm genuinely so happy for the success you have had. It's just great. I just think it's great. And I'm so happy that you were so successful in this show, as well, because I thought you were wonderful in it. So, it's nice to see you and thanks for coming by.</p>
00:38:38	Kumail	Guest	<p>Oh, thanks for having me again! Thank you.</p>
00:38:41	Jesse	Host	<p>Kumail Nanjiani. <i>Welcome to Chippindale's</i>, the show in which he stars, just aired its final episode. You can check out the whole thing now on Hulu. And if you only know Kumail as a screen actor, he's one of the best comics out there too. His special, <i>Beta Male</i>, from 2013 is a really fantastic one. Absolutely worth the watch.</p>
00:39:03	Music	Transition	<p>Relaxed, buzzy synth.</p>

00:39:07	Jesse	Host	<p>That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i>. <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. This week, here at my house was the week when we put the Christmas tree out on the curb and the trash people came and collected it. Thank you, city of Los Angeles.</p> <p>Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellows at Maximum Fun are Tabatha Myers and Bryanna Paz. We get help booking from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is composed and provided to us by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. He and I are gonna go see Brenton Wood and Barbara Mason next month, in Long Beach. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to them and to their label, which is Memphis Industries.</p> <p><i>Bullseye</i> is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Find us in any of those places, follow us. We share all our interviews there. I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.</p>
00:40:11	Promo	Promo	<p>Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.</p> <p><i>[Music fades out.]</i></p>