

[00:00:00] **Music:** Upbeat acoustic guitar.

[00:00:07] **John Moe:** It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here. Our show's producer, Gabe Mara, brought up the idea of having Joel Kim Booster on the show. And I thought that sounded great! I had seen Joel on this NBC sitcom, called *Sunnyside*, and he was amazing—one of those performances that you watch, and you think this goes beyond funny. This is a complete creative event. Something new and amazing is being born here.

I knew Joel had done a lot of standup and was well regarded. I watched a few clips of that. Hilarious, smart, innovative. And I knew he wrote as well for *Billy on the Street* and the show *The Other Two*. Brilliant, brilliant shows. He's also the co-host of the very funny *Urgent Care* podcast with very funny person, Mitra Jouhari. My only concern was whether Joel had any connection to mental illness, any kind of struggle. Combing through Google and Joel's Twitter there were some hints. He mentions bipolar disorder, but he mentions having that well under control.

I figured if there wasn't much there, he's obviously a sharp guy. We could talk about the industry or mental health in entertainment or something like that. I didn't know if there would be a lot going on with Joel Kim Booster's mental health until the interview started, and I asked him how he's been doing lately.

[00:01:33] **Music:** Quiet, strumming guitar harmonies.

[00:01:42] **Joel Kim Booster:** What a coincidence that we're recording today, because I am in the midst of a pretty bad depressive episode right now. Um, barely, barely getting through today. I mean, I've actually been fairly productive, but I've been—it's been like moving through a fog, doing it. And it's just been like pulling teeth, so I'm really happy to come here and talk about it.

But yeah, other than that, I would say the big sort of headlines of the year for me were: I lost my ability to write. My imagination has left me and is shot, and I lost my dad to Covid. So.

[00:02:17] **John Moe:** I'm so sorry.

[00:02:18] **Joel Kim Booster:** Um, yeah, those are the two big things. I've sort of—that have sort of gone hand in hand to bring me to a pretty dark place at the end of this year.

[00:02:31] **John Moe:** So, what's today look like? You say this is an episode that started today? Or is this—has it been going on for a while?

[00:02:39] **Joel Kim Booster:** Well, it's—no, it's been going—it's been up and down, I would say, for the last several weeks. You know, I'm a party boy, and on the weekends—like when I'm surrounded by my friends and I'm able to, you know, use some substances to prop myself up, I feel great. I feel fine. I was just in Puerto Vallarta for a week, and it was the best week I've had in a year and a half. And I felt free. I felt the most like myself I think I felt in a year and a half. Um, I fell in love. I came back. And it all came sort of crashing down and it's—you know, it's a chemical comedown, but it's also, you know, a sort of spiritual comedown

after, you know, a vacation that is that intense and wonderful. And it's been, you know, up and down since then.

[00:03:29] **John Moe:** Was it a feeling—was it a trip that kind of kicked off the “we're climbing out of this phase of covid”?

[00:03:36] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yes, absolutely. It was the first—it was the first thing that I had really done like that. It was the first time I danced in a group of people. It was the first time I'd, you know, taken my shirt off and been free in a club. Which is something that I was, you know—you could find me doing pre-pandemic for a long time. But yeah, it's been—it's been a rough couple of weeks.

[00:03:57] **John Moe:** Yeah. What does a day look like when you're in a cycle like this? How does it start? What happens over the course of a day?

[00:04:07] **Joel Kim Booster:** Well, you know, it's amazing, because I have this incredible autopilot. And so, I have a list of things that I need to get done, and as long as they're not creative, I'm okay. You know, I get up, I go to the gym. I come back, I sit in the shower for upwards of 40 minutes, and then I stand in the shower and do the things in the shower you're supposed to do. I get out. I feed myself. I clean my apartment. I take care of admin work. I try and tackle one or two projects that I'm supposed to be doing around the house. Like today, I'm clearing out my closet to give away clothes, and that's—if I can accomplish that, then I have really done something with my day and I can feel a little bit better about what's going on.

But yeah. All throughout it, there's this sort of a crushing, unending dread in the back of my mind while it's happening.

[00:05:09] **John Moe:** Is it focused on anything in particular or just dread as dread?

[00:05:14] **Joel Kim Booster:** I mean it definitely is directional. You know, I'm worried about my body. I'm—you know, I was out of the gym for two weeks, 'cause I was sick, and I was on vacation. And I'm, you know—I have pretty—I have pretty—not extreme, but I have unrelenting body dysmorphia about how I look. And so, there's that. There's this guy that I have, you know, met and opened up to for the first time. You know, I don't open up to people. I don't date. And so, there's anxiety about that. There's anxiety about my career. There's anxiety about, you know, I'm done in this business. I don't know that I can—I don't know what the future holds for me as a comedian who can't write a joke.

[00:06:12] **John Moe:** How long has the writing drought been going on?

[00:06:14] **Joel Kim Booster:** About a year and a half. I haven't written a joke in a year and a half.

[00:06:19] **John Moe:** Before Covid?

[00:06:20] **Joel Kim Booster:** No. It started a year before.

[00:06:21] **John Moe:** Just since Covid. Yeah. Let's go back a little bit. Let's do a quick arc of life. Let's figure out your life in just a few minutes, Joel. You are not originally from LA; you're from the Midwest, correct?

(Joel confirms.)

Where in the Midwest?

[00:06:39] **Joel Kim Booster:** Right outside Chicago.

[00:06:40] **John Moe:** What was mental health growing up? Like, what were your experiences with it? What was your understanding of it?

[00:06:46] **Joel Kim Booster:** You know, I grew up in a really religious household. And so, we weren't really somebody—we weren't people who talked about mental health in terms of sort of psychological mental health. It was all about spiritual health. So, if you were feeling down, it was about—you know—the spirit and, you know, where your relationship was at with God.

You know, I'm bipolar, and in looking back at a lot of my experiences growing up, that was—that manifested a ton. And my parents didn't know how to handle it, and they certainly didn't wanna medicate me. They certainly didn't send me to any reputable therapists or psychologists. It was all Christian therapy, and it was all prayer, and none of that worked. And it was extremely damaging.

[00:07:32] **John Moe:** Bipolar one, bipolar two?

[00:07:35] **Joel Kim Booster:** Bipolar one.

[00:07:36] **John Moe:** Okay. Did you share your family's belief in religion but just found it at odds with your brain?

[00:07:43] **Joel Kim Booster:** You know, up until the point—up until basically I came out. And then, you know, that was at completely at odds fundamentally with everything, top to bottom, that I was raised to believe. So, that's really when I started to—I sort of full-tilt left the church and left the religion, and it took a while for me to not believe that I was going to hell.

[00:08:07] **John Moe:** When was the bipolar diagnosis?

[00:08:10] **Joel Kim Booster:** Not until 2019.

[00:08:12] **John Moe:** Okay. So, fairly recent. When did you realize—when did you realize you were gay?

[00:08:22] **Joel Kim Booster:** Four.

[00:08:23] **John Moe:** Four! Okay. So, when you came out, was it a—was it a surprise breaking the news, or did everybody already know?

[00:08:31] **Joel Kim Booster:** I mean, listen, I am—I don't—you know, I was called a faggot like from a very young age, and to me that means like you just can't hide it. You know? People knew that about me before I knew that about me, and so I don't know if people were surprised, but it was definitely a—it was definitely a tumultuous experience for my family. I ended up moving out when I was 17. I didn't talk to my family for a year. And you know, it was just—it was a bad situation.

[00:09:06] **John Moe:** Before we get to the bipolar, I guess, what—when did what you now know as a depressive disorder, as a clinical depression, start factoring into your life?

[00:09:19] **Joel Kim Booster:** Oh, you know what's funny is that my bipolar manifests as mania more so than depression. I rarely ever felt depressed until the pandemic. Depression is a relatively new addition to my life.

[00:09:32] **John Moe:** A new development. Oh, okay. When did the mania start then?

[00:09:39] **Joel Kim Booster:** Pretty young, like when I was a teenager. It would manifest in—you know, I would get—I would stay up all night doing homework. And I would, you know—and then, I would just like a hair trigger, like be—just have these meltdowns that were unexplainable, and my parents called them tantrums. But at 17/16, like it's not just a tantrum. It was something uncontrollable in me that was really hard to articulate to anybody. You know. This is all really hard to talk about by the way. And, um, yeah.

[00:10:19] **John Moe:** Okay. If I cross a line, if I go somewhere you don't want to go, just let me know and I'll back away from it.

[00:10:26] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah. I just thought this would be funnier.

(They chuckle.)

[00:10:29] **John Moe:** Well, I'm trying to get the—I'm trying to get the story. When you were in a mania, did you recognize it as—you know, 'cause I've heard some people say they thought this was just living their best life. They were getting all this stuff done. They were—you know, they were entertaining and amusing. They were talking a mile a minute. So, everybody must love that. They thought it was really great. Was that what it was for you?

[00:10:52] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah, absolutely. It's that until it becomes uncontrollable rage and tears and destroying a hotel room and, you know, not being able to control your emotions and screaming at anybody who is around to, you know, withstand the wrath of it.

I've written some of my best jokes during manic episodes, and I miss the manic episodes. I often wonder if that's why I can't write anymore is because I am cut off from that.

[00:11:27] **John Moe:** Are you cut off from it through medication, through counseling?

[00:11:32] **Joel Kim Booster:** (*Beat.*) Yeah. Medication.

[00:11:34] **John Moe:** Okay. I mean, it is—it's funny, I—we've never met, I know your work. I know your standup. I really liked *Sunnyside* a lot.

(*Joel thanks him.*)

And I was a big fan of the other two as well. And—

[00:11:52] **Joel Kim Booster:** I almost quit *Sunnyside* a week before we started shooting because of a manic episode.

[00:11:57] **John Moe:** Really?

(*Joel confirms.*)

What happened with that?

[00:12:01] **Joel Kim Booster:** It just—it's unexplainable. Something happened, a scheduling conflict came up, and I couldn't handle it, and I had a complete mental breakdown and said, "If I can't make this work, then I will quit." And nobody understood. Nobody—it was just like I had to leave a vacation a day early to get back for a table read, and I said, "I can't fathom doing that." So, I quit this huge opportunity. And of course, like, you know, my manager intervened and, you know, talked me down. And I got stabilized. But it was one of the bigger breaking points of my life where I was like, "Okay, this is a big problem."

[00:12:54] **Music:** Thoughtful acoustic guitar.

[00:12:57] **John Moe:** Coming up, Joel Kim Booster develops a character to play on stage: confident hot guy. Not himself, but a version of himself. And it gets complicated.

Back with Joel Kim Booster. I will say it wasn't a comfortable interview. Joel was perfectly nice. He was polite. But he wasn't in a good place. I want to point out that we did very little editing with this interview. The pauses, the ums and uhs, me fumbling around. We tried to leave most of that in.

(*Music ends.*)

When did the comedy interest, the inkling, the displays of talent—like when did that start showing up in your life? When did you kinda latch onto to comedy?

[00:13:56] **Joel Kim Booster:** You know, growing up as a gay-coded kid, you learn to either hide or you learn to become the class clown. And I chose that route. And so, that was when I started to try and make people laugh. And it was effective. I wanted to be an actor, after

college, a writer and an actor. And I moved to Chicago to do that. And it just sort of fell into my lap. I didn't—I didn't like the parts I was being called in for as an Asian person.

And you know, I tell this story often, is—you know, I just started doing standup as a lark, not thinking that it would ever be something that I could do on a large scale, but just as like an outlet to like finally feel like I was being represented. My—like an authentic version of myself was being represented by the part by art. You know? Like it was so frustrating to like get called in to be a Chinese food delivery boy over and over and over again. So, I turned to stand up.

[00:15:03] **John Moe:** And your standup—I've seen it described as a character that you're playing. It seems to me more like just a part of who you are as sort of the—

[00:15:16] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah. It's a heightened version of myself, for sure.

[00:15:18] **John Moe:** Right. The kind of confident hot guy. Yeah. How did that—how did that come to be the voice that you did comedy in?

[00:15:26] **Joel Kim Booster:** Um, I think—you know, early in my career, and I think this was just like what everybody was doing, is it's—comedy is about self-deprecation. My comedy was about self-deprecation and, you know, like, “Oh, I'm so ugly I can't get a date. You know, I'm so pathetic and stupid and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” And it really had an effect on my self-esteem in a big way. And also, I realized I—especially as I started to gain a little bit more notoriety and success like—you know, I'm an Asian person. I'm an Asian man. And I think so often we are put in this position to be the clown, to sublimate ourselves to White audiences and play that part of like the pathetic clown. And that works for some people. And that may feel authentic to some people, but to me I was like, it's been done and that's not really how I wanna feel about myself.

And it felt like a different sort of route to go. It felt like a challenge. It's way harder to go out on stage and say, “I'm hot and awesome. Now laugh at my jokes,” than going out on stage and saying, “Oh, aren't I so pathetic? Now please laugh at my jokes.” You know, it's like going out there and demanding people laugh at you is way harder to get them on your side. And so, it was an interesting challenge for me to try and attempt.

[00:16:54] **John Moe:** It's kind of a—it's a character or it's a—it's an approach that does have some precedent to it though. Like, I think of Steve Martin going out there as the kind of—he had kind of an arrogance about him, but he invited you to laugh at his arrogance at the same time. Yeah. I mean, was—do audiences or have audiences seen through it and kind of get the wink if there is a wink that you're doing?

[00:17:24] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, it wouldn't work—I don't think—to the extent that I do it if people believed it. You know, I'm still an Asian man. I'm still an effeminate Asian man.

And so, I think people laugh because they don't believe it when I say I'm hot and powerful. They say, "No, you're not." And so, they're able to laugh at it, because there is a difference there. And I'm okay with that, because I believe it. So.

[00:17:56] **John Moe:** Yeah. That's surprising to me, because it's—I mean, it's a character, but it's a convincing portrayal. I mean, maybe I'm—maybe I'm underestimating anti-Asian bigotry, but it seems plausible to me. Like, you know, good looking, confident guy. I've seen those before. Do you think it's the Asian quality that makes audiences in general like—I don't know. Like how does—I guess, how does the anti-Asian discrimination factor into that idea of that audiences don't believe that you're powerful?

[00:18:33] **Joel Kim Booster:** I think it knocks them off balance a little bit. They don't expect it from me. And they, I think because they're used to seeing people apologize on stage for it. And it knocks 'em off balance. And whether or not they believe it or not, I don't know. The jokes work. But I think what also helps is that I play up being an idiot too, you know? And that, I think, is helpful. 'Cause they're like, "Oh, this guy's just an idiot." And so, it's okay to laugh. "He's not—he doesn't—he thinks he's better than us, but that's because he's an idiot."

[00:19:10] **John Moe:** Hmm. Is comedy a refuge? Is acting a refuge? Are any of these things a break from the struggles that you have?

[00:19:22] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah, I would say standup when I'm on stage feels great. I mean, it definitely is the most self-realized. It's the best thing I'm—it's what I'm best at out of acting, writing, all of it. Standup, being on stage—it's what I'm best at, and it's why it hurts so bad to not be good at it anymore.

[00:19:43] **John Moe:** Are you doing shows again? Are you doing live shows?

[00:19:45] **Joel Kim Booster:** I'm touring right now. Touring on the hour that will eventually be a special and that is all material that I wrote pre-pandemic, and it feels great because it all works. It's all good material. But you know, I'm looking ahead, and I don't have anything beyond that.

[00:20:07] **John Moe:** Okay. (*Sighs.*) I'm staying with you here, because even though I think there's a lens of the depression that you're looking at this through, but I don't get the connection between you knowing that it feels great to be out there—you're doing this material—and thinking that you're not good at it anymore. Like, if you're out there and it's going great, how can you not be good at it?

[00:20:37] **Joel Kim Booster:** Because, um, I'm not generating new material. You know, I'm basically being an actor right now. I'm performing old material that I wrote when I was good at writing standup, and that feels good. But in the back of my mind, I know like you can't riff, you can't—you know, you're not—you're not trying new jokes. You're not—you have no observations left about the world. You're done.

[00:21:11] **John Moe:** But you've been—you've been in the pandemic since there. Like, if you haven't been in the world, what's there to observe about the world?

[00:21:18] **Joel Kim Booster:** I mean, you know, it's been a couple of months I've been vaccinated and out in the world, and it's not coming back. My thing is, is like things don't remind me of other things anymore, and that's the bedrock of my comedy. You know, like I—you know, I feel like I'm in love and I have nothing interesting to say about it. Nothing funny. No observations about it at all. And that's wild to me, like this new experience in my life and I have nothing to say about it. That's scary. That sucks.

[00:21:52] **John Moe:** And the depression is new. This didn't exist pre-pandemic, correct?

[00:21:59] **Joel Kim Booster:** No. Not to this magnitude. I mean, I'd get sad sometimes, but you know, it was nothing that would keep me from writing.

[00:22:08] **John Moe:** What are you doing to address it?

[00:22:12] **Joel Kim Booster:** You know, therapy, medication, that—the whole—that whole shit.

[00:22:18] **John Moe:** It sounds like it's not going great on that front.

[00:22:22] **Joel Kim Booster:** No. Nothing works. This is who I am now.

[00:22:25] **John Moe:** Yeah. Yeah. What do you—what's your plan?

[00:22:31] **Joel Kim Booster:** I have no plan. I just ride out, you know, until people start to catch on. And then, I can still act, you know. That's easy. Acting is the easiest thing in the world. And hopefully I'll be able to continue to get work that way. But beyond that, I don't know.

[00:22:48] **John Moe:** Are you—are you working on like writing projects but are just stalled on them? Or are you just not working on them at all?

[00:22:57] **Joel Kim Booster:** You know, I have a movie that I'm shooting that I wrote. I'm taking out a show. I wrote one of the best scripts I've ever written at the very beginning of the pandemic, I think during a manic episode. Trying to sell that. But if they asked me to write an episode two, I couldn't do it.

[00:23:15] **John Moe:** Hm. Have you talked with other people who have been in this situation, similar situations?

[00:23:22] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah. Everybody says, “Oh yeah, my creative—my creativity is shot,” but yet, they're still turning out new jokes. They're still turning out new videos. They're still tweeting through it. It's not the same. I'm a blank.

[00:23:33] **John Moe:** Do you think it's permanent?

(Joel confirms.)

How do you know?

[00:23:41] **Joel Kim Booster:** Um, because I have no reason to believe it's not.

[00:23:51] **John Moe:** *(Beat.)* Okay. But if it came on during the pandemic and the pandemic is over—

[00:24:00] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah, for all intents and purposes, the pandemic has been over for me since February. And it's June now, and nothing's changed.

[00:24:06] **John Moe:** How much of your dad do you think is in this?

[00:24:13] **Joel Kim Booster:** Um... it's hard to suss that out, you know? It's another situation where I can't believe I have nothing to say. It's just grief. It's just a—it's just grief. And... it used to be when I would experience something like that, I could write a joke about it. I could write something about it. I could process it through writing, and I have not been able to process anything. Um, he's just gone. And—

[00:24:58] **John Moe:** Were you close?

[00:25:01] **Joel Kim Booster:** No. We got closer in the final years. We were sort of at an impasse. I mean, he's a very conservative man. You know, it's—our relationship was probably as good as it has ever been right before he passed. You know, and it just—there's a lot of big things coming from me and I—it just sucks that he won't be able to see them. And you know, he never approved of what I did for a living. I don't think he—he never saw *Sunnyside*. He never—he's never seen any of my standup.

But like, you know, I might buy a house this year. And that's something that like he would've been really, really excited about. And you won't get to experience that now. And you know, we were finding little ways to connect. I was starting to garden. He's a farmer and has a huge garden, and that was something we were connecting about. And now he's just gone.

[00:26:08] **John Moe:** What about the things that you think he might have been really excited about? Like you're in a position where you can recognize those things as exciting. Are they exciting to you?

[00:26:23] **Joel Kim Booster:** *(Softly.)* Yeah, sure. I mean, it just, um—I've never felt so blank in my entire life.

[00:26:31] **John Moe:** Yeah. I don't understand what “yeah, sure” means. Are you—is that—you are excited about those things or not really?

[00:26:42] **Joel Kim Booster:** On paper. I can—I can recognize things on paper as like being exciting. I understand that that is the human emotion that coincides with this event, X event. But in terms of really feeling it, I feel nothing.

[00:27:04] **John Moe:** I—you know, I'm looking for, uh—(*chuckles*) for ways to make this interview not dark, in case that's what you want it to be. But I also feel like I need to kind of honor the reality of the situation you're in. Like if I'm talking to Joel on this day, this is who—this is who Joel was on this day.

[00:27:31] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah, I'm really sorry for being such a fucking downer on the depression podcast.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:27:36] **John Moe:** No, I mean, I'm the one running a depression podcast. So, it's fine with me.

[00:27:41] **Music:** Quiet, thoughtful guitar.

[00:27:46] **John Moe:** More with Joel Kim Booster, including where he goes from here. That's coming up in just a moment.

(*Music ends.*)

[00:27:59] **Promo:**

Music: Sophisticated harpsicord music.

Teresa McElroy: Shmanners. Noun. Definition: rules of etiquette designed not to judge others, but rather to guide ourselves through everyday social situations.

(*Music stops.*)

Travis McElroy: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: Every week on *Shmanners*, we take a look at a topic that has to do with society or manners. We talk about the history of it. We take a look at how it applies to everyday life. And we take some of your questions. And sometimes, we do a biography about a really cool person that had an impact on how we view etiquette.

(*Music fades back in.*)

Travis: So, join us every Friday, and listen to *Shmanners* on [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org), or wherever podcasts are found.

Teresa: Manners shmanners. Get it?

(Music ends on a bright chord.)

[00:28:42] **Promo:**

Music: Light, chiming music.

James Arthur M.: Hey, folks! It's me, James Arthur M., host of *Minority Korner*—your home through these bewild times for weekly doses of pop culture, history, news, nerdy stuff, and more through a BIPOC, queer, and allied lens.

(Scene change.)

James: Sexy-ass from *Moonlight*—who was in the third act of *Moonlight*, Trevante Rhodes—who was like—*(mumbling)*.

Speaker 1: Yes, yes, yes, yes. “I cook now. You want something to eat?”

James: “I work—and I work—I work out.” Yeah, I do! Yeah, I do want a piece!
(Groans.)

Speaker 1: Let me have a taste! *(Laughs.)* Ew, gross!

James: *(Laughing.)* This is just—you know what? It's been a long pandemic, girl!

(Scene change.)

James: What are you doing now to deconstruct this system?

(Scene change.)

Speaker 2: He basically did a covert genocide of Black people.

(Scene change.)

James: So, join me and some of your new BFFs every Friday, here on Maximum Fun, to stay informed, empowered, and have some fun. *Minority Korner*: because together, we're the majority.

(Music fades out.)

[00:29:31] **John Moe:** Um, do you—how is it for you to watch funny things now? To watch funny shows or stand up or stuff like that?

[00:29:42] **Joel Kim Booster:** Nothing but jealousy.

[00:29:44] **John Moe:** Really?

[00:29:45] **Joel Kim Booster:** Nothing but jealousy and just—not in terms of the success of it, but just like, “God, I wish I could do that again.”

[00:29:52] **John Moe:** Yeah. Why is your Twitter handle @IHateJoelKim?

[00:30:00] **Joel Kim Booster:** Oh, I just thought it was funny in 2011 or whenever I created it. I thought I'd get in before the haters.

(John laughs and affirms.)

It makes people laugh.

[00:30:09] **John Moe:** It's—well, it's funny. Do you hate Joel Kim?

[00:30:15] **Joel Kim Booster:** No. Um, I don't think so.

[00:30:19] **John Moe:** Okay. You like yourself right now?

[00:30:24] **Joel Kim Booster:** I'm frustrated with myself right now, but I don't hate myself. I don't think there's anything to be gained from feeling that emotion.

[00:30:36] **John Moe:** Yeah. What happened after that Puerto Vallarta trip? Like, what was the—? You came home, and it sounds like it was a wonderful trip. What fell apart after that trip?

[00:30:53] **Joel Kim Booster:** Well, I mean, I was doing hella drugs on that trip. So, there's just like a chemical come down that happens naturally. I was also very sick. I was also away from this guy. And you know, I—yeah, that's basically it. I mean, I made it through the week. I pushed through, and I got shit done and I—you know—did what needed to be done. And there were high points and low points, but it's just another week, man.

[00:31:31] **John Moe:** Was it a work trip? Was it professional? Or was it just all vacation?

[00:31:35] **Joel Kim Booster:** Just vacation.

[00:31:36] **John Moe:** Okay. Okay. Is the—you know, we're talking on Zoom right now, and I'm seeing your apartment. Is the apartment a place that you associate with the depression since Covid? I imagine you've been there since Covid.

[00:31:52] **Joel Kim Booster:** I hate this place. I moved in, hm, four months before the pandemic. And I've grown to hate it deeply. I used to love it, but I hate it now.

[00:32:04] **John Moe:** Yeah. Because of associations that you make with it?

[00:32:10] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah. It represents the darkest period of my entire life. And my bed is up against the wall. It's impossible to make. And there's no other way to orient the room. It's too small.

[00:32:22] **John Moe:** Yeah. Are you gonna move?

[00:32:27] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah, but I wanna buy a house. So, I'm waiting until I'm financially—you know—able to do that, which hopefully will happen by the end of the year, but we'll see.

[00:32:36] **John Moe:** Has—I wanna ask you again about the refuge of doing this kind of stuff. Because we talked a little bit about the standup portion, but we haven't talked about the acting portion. Were you a theater kid growing up?

(Joel confirms.)

Musical theater and—?

[00:32:56] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah. All kinds.

[00:32:57] **John Moe:** All kinds. Okay. Was it—because—I asked 'cause I was that kid too before I got into any kind of radio. It was all theater, and as a depressed kid who didn't understand depression, it felt less—it didn't feel like escapism to me, 'cause I knew I wasn't these people, but it just felt like a pause. I was able to kind of hit pause and live in a different world where I knew what I was gonna say and I knew what everybody else was gonna say and I understood all the relationships that were going on.

Has that been your experience? Where it's maybe not like a total expression of who you are, but it's a place to hide out for a while?

[00:33:42] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah. It's so easy. It's just so easy, because I don't have to be creative. *(Chuckles.)* I just have to say the words. And acting comes very easy to me, and it feels like such a relief to go on set and just say the lines, be funny in that way. That's the one way I can still be funny is through acting, and you know, it just feels like a relief. It feels like I'm hiding.

[00:34:14] **John Moe:** Hm. Hiding from—?

[00:34:17] **Joel Kim Booster:** From the reality of my situation, which is that I lost it. Whatever I had, I lost it.

[00:34:26] **John Moe:** You lost the ability to generate laughs?

[00:34:30] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah. Gen—write material.

[00:34:32] **John Moe:** Okay. I mean there's a fair number of people in Los Angeles who would be very content with that, who see themselves as actors, who don't need to write scripts and don't need to do other things, and who see acting as a creative act. Like, if they're—if they're doing a performance, it's getting laughs, they are generating laughs in that way. You don't see that as possible for yourself?

[00:35:05] **Joel Kim Booster:** No, I do. And I don't mean to shit on acting. It is a creative act for sure. But the thing that made me really special is gone. The thing that has always made me really special is gone from my life. And that was writing. For as long as I can remember, I was writing. And I wrote, and it was the thing—you know, I'm a good actor. But I was a great writer, and it really is devastating to know that that has gone from your life. It's like I've been lobotomized, and part of my brain is missing.

[00:35:46] **John Moe:** *(Beat.)* Do you think this is environmental, like circumstantial to the pandemic, to your father's death? Or do you think there is a chemical change that has happened in you?

[00:36:02] **Joel Kim Booster:** A little column A, a little column B, probably. Who's to say?

[00:36:09] **John Moe:** Well, the medical community. *(Chuckles. Like, if it could be determined where this is coming from—if it can be a tweak in medication or a tweak in the approach to the therapy. There's a hundred different types of therapy. Do you have the will to search for the—to, you know, run some flags up the flagpole or—you know, kind of play around with it and see if you could find a combination?)*

[00:36:41] **Joel Kim Booster:** *Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I'm trying different things right now, as we speak. I'm reading all the self-help books. I'm doing all the alternative therapies. I'm lighting candles to create creative spaces. I'm doing all the bullshit.*

[00:36:55] **John Moe:** *(Chuckles.)* But it's all bullshit.

(Joel confirms.)

Yeah. Alright. Um, what do you think it's gonna be like in five years?

[00:37:10] **Joel Kim Booster:** I'll be one of those people who used to be a standup but is now mostly just on TV. That's the—that is like the best-case scenario for me right now—who had one good special come out, and then never again. Stop touring. Maybe did one tour. Bad jokes. People laugh because of the fumes that I'm running off of the last special. But, um, I

don't think anything big was gonna happen for me. I'm not gonna—you know, there was a point in my life and my career where I thought I was like gonna be where I never wanted to stop doing standup. And that's still true. I never wanna stop doing standup. It's just I can't do it anymore.

So, I just—I thought I would be one of those people who would be, you know, around for a long time. And now I think, you know, I'll get this next special out and retire and hopefully get some acting gigs and be able to retire for real.

[00:38:21] **John Moe:** How do you go about working on a special and doing the creative work that goes into a special, in a circumstance like this?

[00:38:28] **Joel Kim Booster:** Well, it's already done.

[00:38:30] **John Moe:** Oh, you've already taped it?

[00:38:31] **Joel Kim Booster:** No, the hour that I've been touring on, that I was touring on in 2019, I sold. And I'm just, you know, fine tuning that. Basically, just getting the reps in at this point, not really changing anything about it. And that'll be the special.

[00:38:52] **John Moe:** And when do you tape that?

[00:38:54] **Joel Kim Booster:** Probably sometime in the fall. It's a little up in the air right now with Covid.

[00:38:59] **John Moe:** You excited about that?

(Joel agrees unenthusiastically.)

Okay. Um, I feel compelled to ask—I feel it'd be irresponsible not to. Are you safe?

[00:39:12] **Joel Kim Booster:** What do you mean?

[00:39:13] **John Moe:** Uh, are you inclined to hurt yourself?

[00:39:16] **Joel Kim Booster:** No.

[00:39:17] **John Moe:** Okay. Has that ever been an issue for you?

[00:39:20] **Joel Kim Booster:** Hm. Not since I was a teenager and only for attention.

[00:39:25] **John Moe:** Okay. You weren't seriously—?

[00:39:29] **Joel Kim Booster:** No. I'm way too afraid of dying.

[00:39:31] **John Moe:** Okay. Okay. It's so funny, because I listened to this most recent *Urgent Care* episode, and the guy I'm talking to and the guy I heard just seem like very different guys, and I don't think it was taped all that long ago.

[00:39:45] **Joel Kim Booster:** No, I was—I'm working at a really high level to be that guy.

[00:39:52] **John Moe:** Okay. I'm really—I'm really honored that I got to talk to this guy, actually. To find out—to find out how you're doing.

[00:40:03] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah. (*Chuckling sardonically.*) Well, lucky you.

[00:40:06] **John Moe:** (*Chuckles.*) Lucky me. Um, okay. I don't think I have any other questions, but I really do appreciate the time that you spent on this, and—

[00:40:19] **Joel Kim Booster:** Well, I'm sorry to be such a fucking downer the whole time, but—

[00:40:23] **John Moe:** You know, Joel, here's the thing. People are gonna listen to this. And one complaint that I've got consistently from people is “you talk to these people who've struggled before, and now they're doing great,” and you know—this is an audience saying it like—“I'm not doing great, and that makes me feel like I'm fucking up, because everybody else seems to have turned the corner. And now they're high on life and everything's going great. And I, an audience member, still feel like shit. That's why I'm listening to your fucking show.”

And so, I think this is gonna help people to hear from someone who isn't doing great.

[00:41:01] **Joel Kim Booster:** Well, I hope that's—I hope that's true. Deeply, I do. Because it is a lot of work to appear normal, and this has been nice to just be a fucking blob of flat emotion.

[00:41:25] **John Moe:** Mm-hm. I've—in preparation for this, I've been watching some of your standup. And you know, the sets that you did on *James Corden* and *Conan* and some of these other places. And for me it was another side of you. I hadn't—I wasn't as familiar with your, your standup as your acting.

But I just finished *Search Party*. My wife and I watched *Search Party*, and you were so delightful on that, that I want you to know that you brought joy. And you've brought joy on several occasions into my house. My daughter and I watched *Sunnyside*. It was our show. And you know, sure, like everybody else, I sure wish it had gone on longer. But it provided—like the acting that you did provided a lot of joy. And I'm grateful for that.

[00:42:25] **Joel Kim Booster:** Well, that makes me—that makes me feel really good to hear. I do appreciate that.

[00:42:29] **John Moe:** Yeah. You help people. And I wish you well, and I want you to keep on trying lots of different things, lots of different therapists. How's your therapist? Are they okay?

[00:42:46] **Joel Kim Booster:** They're fine. She's good.

[00:42:46] **John Moe:** She's good?

[00:42:47] **Joel Kim Booster:** Yeah. I've been with her for a minute. I don't know how much it helps, but she's good.

[00:42:52] **John Moe:** Okay. Well, I want you to try a lot of things, and—you know, and I want you to recognize the power and goodness that you have.

[00:43:08] **Joel Kim Booster:** Alright. I'll do my best.

[00:43:13] **Music:** "Building Wings" by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

[00:43:20] **John Moe:** So, that's Joel Kim Booster. Google him, search for him on YouTube; you'll find all kinds of funny standup clips. I remain a fan of Joel Kim Booster's comedy. I have become a fan of Joel Kim Booster, the human being, as a result of this conversation. He says he's not creative, but I think he created something amazing just now.

(Music fades out.)

Depression, as we know, is a hard thing to describe. It's difficult to articulate just what it is to be in a deep depressive episode. I've never heard or read or, I think, written anything that really covers the expansive, exhausting swamp of depression. I think the best anyone can do is talk about what life is under the weight of this illness. And I think Joel did that beautifully. And now when someone asks me what depression is like, I can say, "Well, I can't quite describe it to you in words, but I did this one interview you might find helpful." I'll send them a link to this episode.

There's another thing on my mind that I wanted to just take a minute to recognize. At some point in the interview, I stepped away from the idea of gathering information. I went more into the territory of trying to help Joel, of expressing concern. I wasn't really following the rules of interviewing in the classical sense. I was breaking them, and I felt kind of weird about it afterwards because it's like I wasn't doing my job. And if you thought that too, believe me, I get it. I try to be as much in the moment as possible during the interviews. I try to have very few plans or expectations as to where the conversation will go. I try to just be there.

And I think that's why I dropped the idea of an objective, disengaged interviewer, and—in this one especially—I just became a human listening to another human who's suffering, and the urge to help overwhelmed me. And I tried to help, even though I know you can't reason someone out of depression. You can't point to reasons to feel better, because depression is not

based in reason. It's not a response to a single thing. It doesn't respond to logic. It's an all-encompassing mood disorder. I know that about depression. I've been doing this for years. I literally wrote the book on depression. Well, I wrote a book on depression.

Look, I'm not trying to make this all about me. I'm really not, and I'm not trying to beat myself up either. I'm just saying all this, because I believe there is hope in the compulsion to try to help someone. That urge, that basic root benevolence. And I think you would've done the same in my position. That is more than politeness. It's an instinct. We want to lift each other up when we've fallen, and if that instinct to help is there, I have faith. Faith being belief without proof. I have faith that there's an instinct also to seek help and receive help and take it in.

My friend Ana Marie Cox says that hope isn't always something you can wait to have delivered to you. Sometimes you gotta go out and find it, and sometimes it's hard to find and you gotta go look for it anyway.

(Music fades back in.)

Next time on *Depresh Mode*, we all have brains. We would all like to be as healthy as possible. So, why is talking about mental health so dang difficult?

[00:47:00] **Anna Sale:** When you just name a thing and say like, “Depression is an experience that I know intimately. Like, how about you?” Then it’s like, “Oh, we're allowed to talk about that? We don't have to hide and pretend like it's not happening?”

When you acknowledge and invite in that kind of questions about—that that's part of the plot of all of our lives, you can sort of be like, “Oh, okay. We're gonna actually admit that that's happening? Okay!”

[00:47:23] **John Moe:** A pleasant talk about difficult things with Anna Sale, host of *Death, Sex, & Money*.

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Along the same lines, *Depresh Mode* can only help people, can only entertain, can only exist with the support of listeners. Thank you to those who have joined, become members. If you haven't, join us. It's easy to throw in a few bucks to keep this thing going. [MaximumFun.org/join](https://www.maximumfun.org/join). If you're on Facebook, look up our mental health discussion group, Preshies. Great talk going on over there. I like to stop by sometimes. Join in the chat. We're

on Twitter and Instagram @DepreshPod. Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is available on Substack. I'm on Twitter, [@JohnMoe](#).

Hello, credits listeners, bone-house wasps not only hunt and kill and eat spiders, they line the walls of their nests with dead ants, and they should stop because it weirds me out.

Depresh Mode is produced by Gabe Mara. Our senior producer is Laura Swisher. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, "Building Wings".

[00:49:13] **Music:** "Building Wings" by Rhett Miller.

I'm always falling off of cliffs, now

Building wings on the way down

I am figuring things out

Building wings, building wings, building wings

No one knows the reason

Maybe there's no reason

I just keep believing

No one knows the answer

Maybe there's no answer

I just keep on dancing

[00:49:43] **Mary:** I'm Mary from Maine, and I want you to know you are worthy. Just as you are.

[00:49:56] **John Moe:** *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun. I'm John Moe. Bye now.

(Music fades out.)

[00:50:08] **Sound Effect:** Cheerful ukulele chord.

[00:50:09] **Speaker 1:** [MaximumFun.org](#).

[00:50:11] **Speaker 2:** Comedy and culture.

[00:50:12] **Speaker 3:** Artist owned.

[00:50:13] **Speaker 4:** Audience supported.