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Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

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

Music: “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. (*Chuckling.*) I just want to say, before we get into this next interview, what you are about to hear is very warm and cozy, vibes-wise, but it does briefly include one description of a grisly act of violence. So, I wanted you to know ahead of time. Okay, anyway. Before Bob Mortimer, the comic and author, became Bob Mortimer, the comic and author, he was Bob Mortimer, the cockroach king: a successful lawyer who represented tenants all over London whose rental units were infested with cockroaches. In fact, Bob Mortimer didn't even try his hand at comedy until his late 20s when he met a man named Vic Reeves, an established comic who was playing the London club circuit. Soon, the two of them were a double act in the beloved British comedy tradition. Vic and Bob appeared on dozens of television shows, including variety shows and sitcoms and several of their own programs. Their brand of humor isn't especially topical. It is very silly, joke heavy, and extremely British.

Transition: Music swells then fades.

Clip:

Donald Stark: (*Voice pitched into a comical falsetto.*) Good evening, ladies and gentlemen!

(*Applause fades out.*)

And welcome to (*a toy xylophone chimes*) *This is Your Life!* With me, Donald Stark. Now—oh, shush, shush, shush. Mm, shush, shush. Now, tonight's victim should be over there, just putting a plaster on his hand. So, let's go and start him. Come on. Hurry!

David: (*Also speaking in falsetto.*) Pat down the plaster to cover the injury which I recently received from fighting Mrs. Schmidt.

(*Laughter.*)

Oh, yes, there's a battle of the—

Donald: David!

David: What? Oh, have you startled us yet?

Donald: (*Furiously.*) No, I haven't! You'll know when I've started startling you! 'Cause then you'll be startled!

David: Well, start startling us!

Donald: (*Babbling.*) David! (*Playing the toy xylophone.*) *This is Your Life!*

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Jesse Thorn: Mortimer paired up with comedian Paul Whitehouse for *Mortimer and Whitehouse Gone Fishing*, a show in which, well, those two comics and old friends go fishing and don't do much else. It is a great show.

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Clip:

Bob Mortimer: I'm gathering my followers. I'm warning my foes to stay put. And I'm celebrating victory all through the power of the wader.

Paul Whitehouse: You finished?

Bob: Yeah.

Paul: Okay, good.

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Jesse Thorn: These days Bob Mortimer is also a novelist. He just released *The Clementine Complex* in the US. It's his first novel, a mystery story set in South London and loosely based on Mortimer's time as a lawyer. It centers on Gary, a legal assistant who gets roped into a fascinating complex quest after his coworker vanishes. It's a very fun, very funny read—just an immensely pleasant book. And I'm so excited to have Mortimer on as my guest. Let's get right into it.

Transition: Playful synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: Bob Mortimer, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show, and I so enjoyed your book, *The Clementine Complex*.

Bob Mortimer: Thank you very much for having me. And thanks for reading it!

Jesse Thorn: I was disappointed. I think it was called The Satsuma Complex in the UK.

Bob Mortimer: It was, yes. It was.

Jesse Thorn: I'm a real satsuma enthusiast. I see it as really central to my brand. I have a satsuma tree in my backyard.

Bob Mortimer: You do?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, did someone convince you that Americans don't know what satsumas were, or is there like a—?

Bob Mortimer: Absolutely. That's what happened, yeah. Which if you've read the book, you'll know it doesn't really matter whether you know what a satsuma is or not.

Jesse Thorn: No, not at all. (*Laughs.*)

Bob Mortimer: But yeah, they convinced me of that. And I'm not a person who likes to think I know better. You know, it's a different country. So, I don't know. That was the advice I was given.

Jesse Thorn: Well, when we put out our own edition of it, you and I can take it back to *The Satsuma Complex*.

(*Bob thanks him with a chuckle.*)

Don't worry, I'm a satsuma influencer. I'll get behind it, and we'll make it a smash. So, I know that when you wrote your memoir, *And Away*, it was—you know, from reading interviews with you—a bit of a struggle for you to feel like a “real writer”, quote/unquote. And I wonder how you got from there to feeling like you could write a novel.

Bob Mortimer: Well, I don't think I—even now, feel as if I'm a real writer, but I think it was important for my autobiography, because I'd never written a book before, to assume that I wasn't a real writer. And then it would just have my own voice, and people could take it or leave it. Because I kind of hadn't realized at the time that, you know, establishing a voice in a book is obviously the important thing.

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And for my audience here in the UK, it was correct to use my own voice and not the voice of me pretending to be a writer of some sort, you know. And the memoir did amazingly well. You know, like I'm over 1,000,000 sales. It's really taken off. So, I thought, well, maybe I can get away with writing another book in the style of someone who doesn't write so well.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

You know what I mean. You know, it's a style.

Jesse Thorn: I think so. I mean, you could have done what a lot of people who are short on time and long on celebrity do, which is do 15 or 20 hours of interviews with a professional writer and have them write the book. Why did you want to go through the torture of writing it yourself?

Bob Mortimer: I mean, I wasn't given that option. But now you say it, I'm full of regret.

(They laugh.)

I think—do you know, it was the circumstance really, because I wrote it to fill lockdown. When we were locked down, I thought if I'm ever going to write a memoir, this is the time to do it. And I began to really enjoy the process, because I didn't take it too seriously. It's not my career, as it were. And I enjoyed sitting on the sofa. I have a sofa that has a very long squab, long seat. So, you know, you can almost lie on it. But I never really made use of that facility, even though, of course, it cost a lot to get that extra slab of squab on the seat. But it was perfect. And suddenly the sofa made sense, and lockdown made a bit more sense. I was—you know, I was using it to do something that I would never have done otherwise. Which I know a lot of people did something similar, but that was my way through lockdown. And I missed it when I stopped, so I thought I'd have a go at a novel.

Jesse Thorn: So, when you sat down to write a novel, to write your book *The Clementine Complex*, did you have an idea of what kind of book you wanted to write?

Bob Mortimer: When I first sat down—do you know the author Murakami?

(Jesse confirms.)

I thought I might be able to do something like that. And after just perhaps even less than a day, maybe a couple of days, I realized that I couldn't do a book like that. And then I—

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughs.)* I mean, it's an ambitious goal, Bob.

Bob Mortimer: *(Laughs.)* I know! But you know, you have these—I don't know. They're the books I love. So, I always wondered whether I could get anywhere near that sort of feeling, that sort of atmosphere that he creates. I realized quickly I couldn't, so I sort of returned more to my comedy head. But I was always determined that there would be a story in there that was worth pursuing. And in a previous life, I was a lawyer—when I was about 28 years old.

As a lawyer, you sometimes use private detectives for serving summonses and various bits and pieces of work. And one of the private detectives that we used took me out for a drink one night and asked me if I would like to join his company, his firm. And he was willing to pay me a lot, lot more than I was earning as a young lawyer. And I was too cowardly to take the job, but I always wondered what would have happened if I had taken that job? Because only a couple of weeks after he offered it to me, he was murdered. He was found with an axe in his head in the car park of a pub near where I worked. And it's a very kind of famous, notorious case in this country. Because there's involvement from the police, from newspaper groups. There's accusations of cover-ups and all sorts.

So, that was my starting point, just thinking I wonder what would happen if me, Bob Mortimer as a 28-year-old, had taken a different path. So, I had my voice for the book already, because the voice is me. And I had the little scenario, a starting point, because maybe in a different life I would have taken that job and got involved in a very murky kind of underworld, you know?

Jesse Thorn: What was it like when a guy you knew had an axe in his head?

Bob Mortimer: It's a strange feeling, yeah. It made the work I was doing—I was in a very deprived area of London. I was doing a lot of criminal work and a lot of housing work, you know, suing landlords and suing the local authorities for substandard housing and cockroach infested housing and things like that. And finding out that this really lovely lad, this chap had an ax in his head, made it all very, very real and not quite feel so much of a game, you know, that these criminals that I was representing—

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You know, there's another level that, as their lawyer, you're not aware of. You know. My book is nothing to do whatsoever with that actual case, but I'd just like to have a taking off point. And that was my little taking off point was if I'd taken that job with this firm of private investigators.

Jesse Thorn: Did you feel as hapless as a young man as Gary seems to be in the novel?

Bob Mortimer: Yeah, very much so. I mean, it's me trying to imagine how I would deal with those situations. It's me looking at a version of Bob Mortimer that had a little more oomph, you know, had a little bit—was willing to stand his ground, was willing to stand up to people. I never had that. I've never done that. And I just thought that was interesting, because I can write it as if I did and try and consider how that would have felt for me and—yeah.

So, that's kind of interesting, because that was my little test was what would I do if I saw this girl? And of course, I would never have spoken to her. So, I was saying, well, sorry, for the purposes of this exercise, you've got to speak to her.

Jesse Thorn: You look visibly uncomfortable thinking about talking to her right now.

(They laugh.)

Bob Mortimer: Yes, I do.

Jesse Thorn: This fictional exercise from a book you've already written, edited multiple times. As soon as you described having to talk to a girl, you started turning sideways. And—

Bob Mortimer: Yeah. I was very, very shy as a young man. And the sort of celebrity I achieved here from when I was in my late 20s, that cured me of a sort of general social anxiousness, but it never cured me of the fear of approaching a lady.

Jesse Thorn: The character Gary has a very lonely life. And I get the impression that until your late 20s, you had something of the same.

Bob Mortimer: Yes, for sure. Yeah. So, it was nice for me, even if only in a novel, to break out from that. Because there's a strength in being comfortable on your own, and I can still have fond memories of my times at university as a solicitor where I was very isolated. And so, I never complain about it. It's fine, but it's frustrating thinking about what could have been if I didn't have that anxiety.

So, yes, I suppose there's a bit of therapy in doing it, but not really. It's just when you get to my age, it's nice to look back on your life and consider it seriously and think about the things you did right and the things that you did wrong, you know? But Gary in the book is the version of me that I would like to have been, I suppose.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, he's a bit of a doofus too.

Bob Mortimer: Yeah. But I like that.

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) Do you aspire to that part?

Bob Mortimer: (*Chuckles.*) No, that's fine by me. That's fine by me. He's a good lad. He's not gonna bother anyone. He's not gonna cause anyone any heat. He's not gonna steal from anyone. He's not gonna beat anyone up.

Jesse Thorn: It's an interesting thing to aspire to when writing a version of yourself for a crime novel. Like, I feel like mostly if we're going to turn some portion of ourselves into a hero for genre fiction, it's mostly like what would it be like if I was really good at riding horses and shooting guns, or like what would it be like if I was always leaping into dangerous situations? Not what would it be like if I would never steal from anyone?

Bob Mortimer: Yeah, but it wouldn't be an authentic voice then, Jesse. Do you know what I mean? That wouldn't be an authentic voice for me, doing it that way. It's funny enough, probably the most successful TV show I've done in the 34 years of doing TV shows is the one I'm doing at the moment, which is a show where I go fishing with another British comedian called Paul Whitehouse. And you know, we have—we film as having very ordinary, dull days. And Paul and I have kind of come to the conclusion that maybe the biggest achievement you can have in life is taking joy from the most ordinary of days, you know. So, he's a doofus, but he's doing okay.

Jesse Thorn: Even more with Bob Mortimer still to come back in a minute. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, I am talking with Bob Mortimer. He's a comic and actor. He's also half of the beloved British double act Vic and Bob.

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Besides that, he co-created and costars in the wonderful, quiet, hilarious British reality show *Mortimer and Whitehouse Gone Fishing*. In that show, he and comedian Paul Whitehouse go fishing. He's also the author of the new book *The Clementine Complex*, which is a fun and funny mystery novel that is in bookstores now. Let's get into the rest of my interview with Bob Mortimer.

I have to say, I watched your fishing show on an airplane coming back from London a month or so ago. I watched two of them, and I think it is the least that has happened in a television show of any television show I've ever watched.

(They laugh.)

Bob Mortimer: Yeah. But it's—I mean, maybe the lockdown helped it as well. The timing of these things. But it's what—I think they call it slow TV. Just something unchallenging, rather lovely to look at in your front room. You know, just some gentle, nice company that stops you thinking about the world that we're living in and its troubles, you know. So, I could never analyze why that show's worked so well for us, but it's serving some need. Because it's a big show.

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Clip:

Music: Gentle, relaxed acoustic guitar.

Paul: Yeah. See? Get in there, Bob.

Bob: Right. Thank you so much. Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to get out of your way a bit and practice that. But there's fish there, Paul. I felt a couple sniffing at it.

Paul: Did you?

Bob: Yep!

Paul: Well, bonne chance, Marie.

Bob: Bonne chance to you, Jonathan.

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Jesse Thorn: I really liked it, too. *(Laughs.)* I want to be clear about that. Like, I was confused at how I liked something so much where there was so little narrative conflict. Even jokes. There's not really jokes in the show for a show hosted by two comedians.

Bob Mortimer: Yeah. It was a factual commission. You know, it's not a comedy commission by the BBC. There's a few laughs every now and then in the kind of laughing at old men genre. (*Chuckles.*) But yeah. Interesting. Quite interesting to analyze why a show like that should possibly work. It's something to do with the times. Because as you're hinting at, Jesse, it's terrible in some ways. You know, in terms of traditional TV, in terms of entertainment, it hasn't got anything.

Jesse Thorn: I'm sorry to read compliments to you, an English person, but I watched a compilation video of you on the—I guess you'd call it a game show, *Taskmaster*. Where—and this is a show where the hosts of the show ask comedians to accomplish little goals. One of them in this was to—there was a coconut and a briefcase, and you had to make it look like a businessman in ten minutes.

(*Bob affirms.*)

Just odd things like this. And the top two comments, the most thumbs-up clicked of all of the comments on this video that had millions of views on it, were “Bob is the most chaotic good person I have ever seen”—your *Dungeons & Dragons* alignment, I guess is chaotic good.

(*They laugh.*)

And then the other one is “Bob Mortimer is what you get when a man never questions a single thought in his own head. I bloody love him.”

Bob Mortimer: Well, I suppose that's what I've just been hinting at. But it's, both for me and Vic, who I started off with—you know, it sounds a bit pompous really, but that's the way we survived and the way we made progress was by just trying to be certain. If we both laughed when we were writing it, then that was good enough for us. And later on in our career, where we started asking the additional question of “Yes, but would other people laugh?” the material lost something. We're sure of it. Even though, to be honest with you, it was more successful. But we think it lost something. It lost some of its sort of heart.

Jesse Thorn: I want to play a clip from a Reeves and Mortimer bit. Yeah, I presume it's a specific thing in the UK, but I gathered it to be the sort of idea of a fancy food show. And this is the two of you reviewing alcohols. And it's just you, sitting at a table with two big bottles of liquor and like an airplane pack of peanuts. And also at some point, a giant man holding a small baby walks by.

(*Bob laughs.*)

Let's take a listen.

Transition: Music swells and fades.

(*Everyone involved in the skit speaks with incredibly thick northern English accents, which 'cause the vowel in “booze” to sound more like “bows” or “balls”.*)

Chester: New booze, new booze, Derek.

Derek: Right, the new booze which I had this week was this lovely pint of booze here. Let's have a look at the color of that. That is nice, brown booze!

Chester: Nicest of brown boozes. What would you have with that, Derek?

Derek: Chester, I'd have peanuts with it. Let's have a look at some peanuts, here.

[00:20:00]

The contrast—lovely, look at that. Nice, brown nuts. Next to it, nice, brown booze.

Speaker: Hey, got any booze for that baby?

Derek & Chester: You can't give a baby booze!

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckles.*) Just yelling stuff!

Bob Mortimer: I don't—you know, it has got a following, Jesse. You know, there are people who adore it.

Jesse Thorn: No, I'm laughing right now, Bob! I mean, the things that strike me about it, that seem reflective of what you're doing and aren't necessarily—they're not really *Three Stooges* things. They're not really *Python* things exactly. It has all of the kind of unhinged energy of *The Three Stooges*. Like, there are some *Python* things that are like that, but a lot of *Python* things are really tightly controlled. And this feels like it could go off the rails at any moment. And it also is clearly just a function—like, substantially a function of you guys liking the sound of the word booze pronounced bows and like—

(*Bob laughs and repeats the word.*)

And just yelling that a lot. And then one of you guys like in a writing session raising your hand and being like, “What if we said baby bows?”

Bob Mortimer: You can't give a baby booze, Jesse. You can't do that.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

Yeah, it's always been a bit divisive, our humor. But yeah, it's just that—I think that's the nature of our process—you know, of not taking that extra step of trying to decide whether other people will like it. Yeah, I like all that old stuff.

Jesse Thorn: I'm gonna play another little bit, and this one is—it's another pretty simple setup, which is that you are onstage, and you look like your foot is caught in like a bear trap kind of thing. And you're crying out. So, let's take a listen.

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Clip:

Bob: (*Calm and monotone.*) Help. Help.

Vic: What's the matter?

Bob: Is it not obvious?

Vic: Ha! Actually, it's not.

Bob: Help. Help.

Vic: Look, don't think of me in any way callous or indifferent, but I can't actually see what the problem is!

Bob: (*Incensed.*) V-V-V-V-Vic! Do you want me to spell it out for you?

Vic: I wouldn't mind.

Bob: Well, I will, then! This cuff button here is dangling on a very, very thin thread. Any moment now, it could potentially drop off.

Vic: WHAT?! No!

Bob: Yes!

Vic: No!

Bob: Yes!

Vic: Nooo! Nooo!

Bob: Now he moves! Now he moves!

Transition: Music swells and fades.

Jesse Thorn: (*laughs.*) Again, just the sheer amount of silly voice and yelling for this premise. It is a very—it's a wonderful, very slight premise.

Bob Mortimer: (*Laughs.*) It's as slight as a mouse's handbag, yes. It really is.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

But no, I mean, yeah. But it's fun. It's very traditional comedy, really, just like—you know, undermining your expectations. My foot's in a bear trap, but my problem is my buttons are falling off. But you know, we did it with great belief and passion! (*Chuckles.*) And, uh, yeah. I don't know what to say, really. I enjoy them, and it's nice to hear them again.

Jesse Thorn: Your career went from, as we would say in the States, 0 to 60 when you and Vic Reeves partnered. You did not have a career before the two of you met up and started doing comedy together. And you know, you were a big deal on television within a couple of years of partnering. Was it hard for you to I guess understand and value your own contributions, since that line in your life was so clear and had everything to do with this partnership?

Bob Mortimer: To value my own contribution? Yeah, no, I didn't value it a great deal at the beginning. Because from my point of view, Vic Reeves—the lad I doubled up with—he is the UK's greatest ever comedian, for me. Without a shadow of a doubt. I had this awful job, this ordinary life going on as a solicitor that just, you know, I could see another 40 years of this terror. And he dragged me out of that. So, no, I just felt like, you know, a contributor, just incredibly lucky to be there. It's nice to come into a comedy career. I'm very grateful that I did have another career beforehand just so I could—you know, just to really appreciate how lucky I was to be living that life.

[00:25:00]

You know, when I'd been doing a seven day a week, nine 'til five job. But no, I was very grateful for that. Later on—and me and Jim have spoken about it—I realized that it was very important for him to have me there to unlock various aspects of Vic Reeves. So, I'm very proud of my contribution then. But you're right to say, no, I didn't particularly value my contribution for the first two years at all, to be honest with you. I thought I did okay, backed him up, you know, as a good wingman. But on reflection, I think I was playing quite an important role. So, I look at back on those days very fondly. And I was with Jim the other day, laughing with him. And yeah, we said similar things to each other. That, you know, like (*sensor beep*) we were good back then, really.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

You know, we were alright; we did good,

Jesse Thorn: There was this documentary maybe 15 years ago on public television here in the States about *Your Show of Shows* and *Caesar's Hour*, which was this show that was on American television in the early '50s—one of the first big comedies on American television. And famously, the writers on this show were Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner and Neil Simon and all of these legendary geniuses, right? And the star of the show was Sid Caesar, who—in some ways, this was the peak of his career. He was an alcoholic and a real jerk in a lot of

ways. But like one of the things that I remember from watching that is Sid Caesar was such a powerful performer, physically. Like, he was physically large and big and specific, like could hit things hard. It wasn't just wild nonsense. And all these little nebbishy comedy legends—Carl Reiner, a big guy too. But it was almost like they all took comfort in him as their giant comedy dad. You know what I mean?

(Bob confirms.)

And there was something in there that reminded me of you ending up in this show with Vic Reeves, who's a lot bigger than you, has a big presence, and the two of you are making these huge choices comedy wise. And he's, professionally, your big brother, right? Because he's the one that said, "You come on stage with me." That there's like some comfort in that bigness.

Bob Mortimer: Yeah, no, I was kind of, you know, like—yeah, hiding under his cape, you know, just fueling what he was doing. It's like—I mean, he had all the skill sets that I didn't have. He was confident; he was loud. He could do it. He could walk the walk, you know. I could think about it, but I would never have done it. But under his wing, I did it, you know. And talking, performing, in front of an audience is very different from approaching an individual. But that was a gift. That was a big step for me—performing, you know, in front of an audience—and took me a step nearer to being able to just talk to people generally, you know, on a one-to-one basis.

But yeah, he was kind of like—yeah, my dad. My big brother's right, yeah. Like, you know, my big, daft, funny brother who'd look after me. And if I did what he needed me to do, everything would be alright.

Jesse Thorn: I just came back from touring with my friend and colleague, John Hodgman. And on the show we do together, I'm very much the second banana. And once in a while, someone will ask me how I feel about being the second banana. Like, don't you want to be the star of the show or whatever? And the like real truth about it is that it is so much easier and more comfortable to be the second banana. *(Chuckles.)* Like, I have a little brother/big brother relationship with John, to some extent. And like I think what a joy it is to be up there on stage and know that if something goes wrong, it's probably his fault.

(They laugh.)

Bob Mortimer: Probably. Yeah. No, I agree—

Jesse Thorn: And that if I do something good, it's like a bonus, you know?

Bob Mortimer: Yeah, and it's—there's a weird sort of alchemy that is that this kind of the junior partner is often the one that subtly over time gets more embraced by the public, which is weird. It's not done deliberately, but it kind of happens. But I agree with you. I've been asked that so many times over the years, and I've said, no, I really love being the sidekick. I used to be called the sidekick. But whenever I said it, I didn't know whether it's because I was lacking conviction and I was lying, but I always felt like nobody believed me. Now I'm at the front of it.

[00:30:00]

I know I was right. 100%, it is much better.

Jesse Thorn: Did you want a comedy career for yourself?

Bob Mortimer: Absolutely not. I was the least likely person I can imagine to have ever got up on a stage. And when I was working as a solicitor, I didn't know anyone in London. It's a big, old place to be on your own, you know. And by chance, I went along to this comedy night, and it was a revelation. It was an extraordinary show, *The Vic Reeves Big Night Out*. Quite extraordinary. Where's this come from? This show, this new—I mean nothing's new, but it felt like a completely new type of comedy.

So, that became like my life really. That's the only thing I had outside of my work. And it was just a tiny thing. I'm just talking audiences of maybe 7 the first time I went, maybe 20, maybe maximum 35 people. You know, that's all it was. So, it was just like a little friendship group that I'd wandered in on, and they were quite receptive to me. We were all from the same part of the country, up in the northeast. And yeah. Maybe Jim saw something in me, I don't know. Maybe he saw something in me, but he started asking me to come up and do stuff.

But when we were offered a television series, all I did was take 12 weeks off work. I fully intended to go back to being a solicitor, you know. And I thought, but I can't—you know, I can't resist the idea of doing a TV show for 12 weeks. But I never went back. I never reclaimed my little briefcase that I used to keep my papers in. (*Chuckles.*)

Jesse Thorn: We'll wrap up with Bob Mortimer after a quick break. Keep it locked. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Promo:

Music: Exciting rock music.

Jordan Crucchiola: I'm Jordan Crucchiola, host of *Feeling Seen*, where we start by asking our guests just one question: what movie character made you feel seen?

Speaker 1: I knew exactly what it was!

Speaker 2: Clementine from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Speaker 3: Joy Wang slash Jobu Tupaki.

Jordan: That one question launches amazing conversations about their lives, the movies they love, and about the past, present, and future of entertainment.

Speaker 4: Roy in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Speaker 5: I worry about what this might say about me, but I've brought Tracy Flick in the film *Election*.

Jordan: So, if you like movies, diverse perspectives, and great conversations, check us out!

Speaker 6: Oof, this is real.

Jordan: New episodes of *Feeling Seen* drop every week on MaximumFun.org.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Bob Mortimer. He's half of the double act Vic and Bob and the author of the new novel, *The Clementine Complex*.

You described yourself as being okay being on your own and having that be a skill and a gift, but I also feel like, you know, you had very real, serious loneliness in your young life. Your father died unexpectedly when you were very young. You and your mother, not that long after that, had sort of financial ruin, because your house burned down. You ended up separate part of your childhood as your mom tried to get things back together. You said you did not have friends in law school. *(Chuckles.)* Like, you really didn't have friends.

Bob Mortimer: No, I really didn't.

Jesse Thorn: That's how you describe it, right? And you had a thing that you had dedicated your life to previously, which was that you played soccer or football very seriously and had been sort of told at 16 by the club team for which you played, "Yeah, this is the end of the line for you, ace."

(Bob confirms.)

And that was like the one thing that you had poured your life's energy into.

Bob Mortimer: Yep. Yes, that was what I was going to be. You know, my place in the world was defined by my skills as a football player.

Jesse Thorn: And so, like I don't know if I believe how okay you say you were being by yourself, but I might be wrong. I don't know. Is that real? Like, were you really okay?

Bob Mortimer: Well, I mean, it's interesting. I was okay, for sure. But yeah, of course I always, you know, from—as a young boy in a playground looking over to the group that was having fun, to university looking over to the people in a bar maybe or who were obviously part of a—yeah, I probably wished I was over there with them. But I never equated the loneliness with unhappiness, I don't think.

Jesse Thorn: You did have some major depression as a young man, too.

Bob Mortimer: I did, I was—I mean, who knows, but I was just getting along, doing my work in me little student accommodation.

[00:35:00]

And god, it's hard to remember why, but I took a tab of LSD, which is unbelievably unlike me. I'm not someone who'd had any—from where I'm from, had any contact with drugs or anything. But this happened. And I took it, and yeah, for the next day, from waking up for I think something like maybe four to five years, yeah, I had really bad depression. You know, on medication and so on. So, I always blamed it at that time on that LSD tablet. Truth is there's probably a lot more to it than that, but at the time I put it down to—you know, to a blip that had caused in my brain's chemistry.

Jesse Thorn: Was it comfortable or uncomfortable when you went from your one thing being going to a comedy show once a week that 12 people were in the audience for to being a famous person with a television show two years later?

Bob Mortimer: Yeah, I mean, you know, it might not even have been two years. I can remember at the time there was an awful lot of political standup comedy. That was the comedy in the UK at that moment in time. And we went from this little club in a pub to the TV, in terms of it being commissioned, probably in less than a year to be honest with you. And there was quite a few people on the circuit at the time who really resented us for that. But you had to have seen the show, and you had to kind of understand—I understand now how TV works. You know, there was something new. So, yeah, I realized now of course producers started sniffing around it and TV channels.

So, we never felt too bad about it. Because, yeah, they came to us; we didn't go to them. You know, the thought of this stupid show being on television, it wouldn't even enter your mind, you know. But I realize now, of course it would enter the mind of the TV companies, you know.

Jesse Thorn: But what about the experience of it? Did you feel—I mean, it was obviously—I'm sure it was super exciting, but did you feel safe and comfortable in this just whole new way of living your life?

Bob Mortimer: It didn't feel so different. I just had this massive sort of weight of gratitude surrounding me that I didn't have to do this awful—pursue this awful career that I'd chosen for the rest of my life. That's my main memory of that time. That's like—not the fame or being interviewed or, hey, we're on telly. It was just waking up every day and saying I am not going in to this lawyer's office today.

Jesse Thorn: Are you telling me that you were happy to leave behind your life as a celebrated cockroach lawyer?

Bob Mortimer: (*Chuckles.*) I was very happy. And I'm very grateful to it. As I say, I'm very grateful for that. It is like I had a triple heart bypass, and I've—maybe six or seven years ago—and I have a lot of gratitude for that as well as to the wakeup call that it was and to

making me appreciate and make use of the time that I had left. And similarly with my legal career, I've never lost that gratitude for leaving it behind. And you know, a lot of my contemporaries and an awful lot of, in this country, the comedians, that's all they've ever done. They started on the circuit when they were 17, 18, 19. And I think it messes them up. That's what I see.

Jesse Thorn: You do seem to regard your career with a sort of combination of placid gratitude and maybe the slightest bit of—I don't know—bemusement or something like that. And that's not something that a lot of entertainers can muster.

Bob Mortimer: Yeah, I mean, maybe it's because—if that's true, it's like that I had no ambitions in that respect for fame or for—to be on a stage. I'm well aware that I entered it under the sort of—on the shirt tails of Vic. I've never found it a great effort. I'm not saying that anything I've ever done is of any particular merit, but I've never found it an effort to do what I do.

With a lot—when me and Jim did live stuff, when I do live stuff now, even the sketches—some of them that you've played—we don't know absolutely what we're going to say. We just know the attitude we're going to be taking to the little scenario. As I say, it's always felt a bit effortless. So, you know, you can't get grandiose about it. It's just what we do. And then it ain't no big deal. I like all the old stuff we've done, and I like the book! Because the book was such a surprise. I suppose every author fears this, but I thought that it would be ripped to shreds, you know. Because it's not a literary work. But it wasn't.

[00:40:00]

People took it for what it was and enjoyed just listening to my voice in the book. So, that's nice that my voice did okay for me. You know, that's 58 years' worth to get my voice to there, and people found it reasonably pleasing. (*Chuckles.*) So, that's—you know, I'll call that a little achievement.

Jesse Thorn: Well, Bob, I'm so grateful to you for taking the time, and I really enjoyed reading the book. There was a lot of real classic me laughing out loud and then yelling at my friend across the room, “Hey, hey, hey, listen to this sentence.”

Bob Mortimer: Oh, that's very kind, thank you.

Jesse Thorn: So, I really appreciate you taking the time to come on the show. It was nice to get to talk to you.

Bob Mortimer: Thank you very much, Jesse. Thank you, and all the best for the future!

Jesse Thorn: Bob Mortimer. His new book, *The Clementine Complex*, is available in bookstores everywhere and at Bookshop.org. *Mortimer and Whitehouse Gone Fishing* is also a terrific, just absolutely lovely television show. You can watch that on YouTube.

Transition: Bright, buzzy synth.

Jesse Thorn: 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. I'm still working from a little bedroom in the front of my house, but I'm moving to a shed out behind my house, and my friend, Stefan, was nice enough to let me come over to his house and check out projector screens. Stefan knows everything about projector screens. Pretty soon I'm going to be watching screener movies on a real screen!

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Welcome to our new Maximum Fun production fellow, Daniel Huecias, who just joined us this week. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by our pal Dan Wally, aka DJW. Our theme music is called "Huddle Formation". It was written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their record label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is on Instagram, [@BullseyeWithJesseThorn](#). We are also on Twitter and YouTube and Facebook. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](#) and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)