

[00:00:00]

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. Next up, Atsuko Okatsuka. She is a brilliant comic and a gargantuan social media star. Her dancing, often with her mom and grandma, made her a viral sensation during the toughest days of the pandemic. Her standup career was already on the rise, and her social media stardom cemented it. Her debut comedy special aired on HBO last December. It’s called *The Intruder*. As the name suggests, it’s about the time someone tried to break into her house. But it’s also about a lot more than that. It’s full of stories about Atsuko’s life and family—things like trying to impress teens and attending a *Magic Mike* live show with her grandma. It’s also deeply engaged with dark topics: her mother’s mental illness, her time undocumented during her teen years.

The Intruder is hilarious, but its genius comes from Atsuko’s ability to take a rich, dark subject, approach it sideways, and make it hilarious. Let’s take a listen to a clip from *The Intruder*. Atsuko’s talking about the time someone tried to break into her house.

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

(The audience laughs regularly.)

Atsuko Okatsuka (*The Intruder*): Yeah, an intruder came to our house. An intruder, to our house! Yeah. Uh, but technically we rent. You know? Yeah. So, our landlord had an intruder. We were just there to have to deal with it. ‘Cause that’s what paying rent is. You pay someone else to look after their asset. You’re easily replaceable. And we know it. Yeah, ‘cause if we had died? Oh, he would still rent the place back out the very next day with our bodies still in it.

I know! Yeah, it’s all about the money. Landlords don’t care about you. No. No, he would be like, “Here are the keys,” to the next people, right? “Here are the keys. This place

comes with ghosts. Yeah, a White guy and an Asian girl ghost. A classic combo. Good luck.”

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: *(They chuckle.)*

Atsuko, welcome to *Bullseye*. I’m really happy to have you on the show.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Thanks for having me! I’ve never heard any of my standup special, just audio.

Jesse Thorn: Were you enacting your act outs while you were listening? I feel like I saw you give the keys to someone, there.

Atsuko Okatsuka: *(Laughs.)* I couldn’t help it. Even with my eyes, I’m just like, okay, and I look over here usually when I say that. And over here, you’ll see that I’m looking at my landlord. Yeah.

I’m a very physical performer is what I’m realizing. And so, it’s nice that maybe it still translates, just audio-wise.

Jesse Thorn: We also—we record this show sitting on like stacking school chairs that I bought at a thrift store 15 years ago. And you are definitely the first person to have ended up perched atop one.

(Atsuko laughs.)

All the way cross-legged.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Crisscross applesauce. I have to check it out. Like, maybe—*(sighs)* I don’t think I have good circulation. And so, I always have to have my feet like close to my heart or something. So, I always sit in like a crouch, or I need to squat. I don’t do well with my legs just so far away from my heart. I don’t know what it is. You know? But—

Jesse Thorn: This is like—I feel like this is like the kind of theory that a guy at my college radio station in Santa Cruz would tell me. Like something about toxins.

Atsuko Okatsuka: I’m very bad science, yeah. I’m very like—

Jesse Thorn: Why carob is good.

Atsuko Okatsuka: (*Chuckling.*) No, totally. I'm very—yeah, I have all these theories that like, you know, I've never talked to doctors about, but I know is true.

Jesse Thorn: Let's talk about teens for a second.

(*Atsuko agrees.*)

You have a big chunk at the beginning of this special about teens that I related to uncomfortably much, which is that teens are the future, and they know it. Now, you're sitting before me. You look like a million dollars. You have an art curator's haircut. You're wearing platform patent leather shoes, I think. What do you have to fear from teens? Teens fear you!

Atsuko Okatsuka: Wow. That's really poetic. I feel the same way about you! I was talking about how well-dressed you are when we first came in here. And then, you know, the blog that you had that still continues to live on about men's fashion. You know. And sometimes it's like we look so cool, we—but isn't it all of us just, you know, trying to outrun the new people?

(*They laugh.*)

The youth? You know what I mean? It's us trying to—you know. Yes, I have to upkeep, because the teenagers are gonna take over.

[00:05:00]

Jesse Thorn: I mean, I think—I think what you're on the edge of here—and it's something that I'm trying to embrace. I'm gonna offer it to you: middle-aged eccentricity. Like, you're—

(*They chuckle.*)

You are ready. In ten years, you can just drop your shoulder and start doing weird stuff and have people just accept it.

(*Atsuko agrees.*)

And if you keep it weird enough, pretty soon you're on one of those Instagram accounts for like old people with inspiring clothes.

Atsuko Okatsuka: 100%! You are like (*chuckles*)—I feel like I thought I had more years before I reached that. But I feel like you really—

Jesse Thorn: Okay. Well, you're not—you're not ten years from old people! You're 50 years from the old people. But you're—

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah, I can be that cute grandma that is also like fashion week. You know what I mean? That everyone follows because what is this 85- year-old Asian grandma wearing—you know—awesome like Balenciaga? What's going on here? You know? Yeah. Yes. Middle age—what did you call it?

Jesse Thorn: Middle aged eccentricity I think is (*chuckles*)—

Atsuko Okatsuka: Eccentricity. That's awesome. You've—did you coin that term? I've never heard that.

Jesse Thorn: I don't think so! But it's just a way of living that I aspire to.

Atsuko Okatsuka: I love that more than just a midlife crisis.

(*Jesse agrees.*)

I do. You know? And it's also embracing our childlike-ness, I think. All the things we couldn't do as kids because our parents dressed us. You know, other people told us what our personality was when we were kids. And so, sometimes it does take 'til you're in your 30s to go, "Okay! I can finally look and eat what I want and listen to the music that I like and watch the things I want to. Maybe talk like I actually talk." You know what I mean? And so, yeah. I think that's why I dress the way I do. And that's why teenagers intimidate me, because to me, a lot of them these days I feel like they know who they are. (*Chuckles.*) And that is so scary! How did you know that?! How do you know what you're into? You're 16! You know? That's so cool. (*Laughs.*)

Jesse Thorn: What did you know about who you were when you were a teenager?

Atsuko Okatsuka: Gosh, that I—well, when I was a teenager, I did like performing and I did like dancing. I was a cheerleader. And so, I was able to—I did know some things about myself. But I still was, I think, trying to talk like other people and act like other people. I tried so many things. I was in cheerleading. I even did basketball for a little bit. Theatre. I mean, that's three different groups of people, friends. You know what I mean? That's three different archetypes in a movie.

(*Chuckles.*) So, I was really trying to find myself. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: You came to the States when you were like a preteen, right? Like ten or something like that?

(*Atsuko confirms.*)

How was your English when you came to the States?

Atsuko Okatsuka: It was—gosh, nonexistent. Yeah. I didn't know English. I only knew one language. I speak three, now. But when I first came here, I picked up English, and I had to pick up Mandarin, because we moved in with my Taiwanese side of the family.

Jesse Thorn: One of your parents is Taiwanese, one is Japanese, and you were born in Taiwan but grew up in Japan. Right?

(Atsuko confirms.)

Have I got all of those—that complicated story right?

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yes, like most people. *(Chuckles.)*

Jesse Thorn: So, you moved—you moved to—yeah. *(Chuckles.)* So, you moved to the States being able to speak Japanese and pretty much nothing else.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah. Yeah, pretty much. That's all I knew.

Jesse Thorn: What about your mom? Did she have any English?

Atsuko Okatsuka: My mom and grandmother, who I moved here with, were English teachers back in Taiwan. Which you may go, “Wow! They had an easy time assimilating!” My grandma especially still barely speaks English. *(Chuckles.)* In Taiwan, I was like, wow, so for 40 years or however long she taught, it was just year after year all these classes of Taiwanese students, you were—you were teaching them your broken English and graduating them. You sent so many people out there thinking they spoke English because they learned it from you. That's a hustle I respect.

(They laugh.)

She barely speaks it, but she taught it for 40 years.

Jesse Thorn: So, when you moved to the States, were you speaking Mandarin at home?

Atsuko Okatsuka: No—

Jesse Thorn: Or was your family speaking Mandarin to each other at home?

Atsuko Okatsuka: That was their secret language so that I wouldn't understand when we were in Japan. So, between my grandma and mom, they would speak Mandarin or Taiwanese or this other dialect that I don't know what it's called in English, but in Mandarin it's called *(inaudible)*.

And those were the languages they would use to plan things like moving me to the States without me knowing. *(Laughs.)* And then, yeah. So—and with me they would speak Japanese. Yeah.

[00:10:00]

Jesse Thorn: That's a lot going on at once in a time in your life when there's already a lot going on. 'Cause if you're like 10/11/12, that's when you're becoming a person. *(Laughs.)*

Atsuko Okatsuka: Totally! And I desperately was trying, Jesse. I was—I owned four birds when I was in Japan, like at age eight. You know. *(Chuckles.)* Like I was training—

Jesse Thorn: Most eight-year-olds only have like two or three birds. So, you were doing pretty well.

Atsuko Okatsuka: I was like training to be a widower. You know?

(Jesse laughs.)

At a very young age. I saved up money to buy birds. Four! I have multiple pictures of me with different animals from the time I was in Japan. Me feeding a goat, me with a horse, me with a bunny, me with my four birds. I'm like where were my human friends?!

Where—? Did I have friends?!

And I think that was me sort of escaping and trying desperately to have a—my own thing. You know? Because my family had secrets and all these things. And they were divorced. My mom's mental health issues. And so, I think that's what it was. I was desperately trying to be Snow White *(laughs)* with all the animals.

Jesse Thorn: Stick around! More *Bullseye* around the corner from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

Transition: Thumpy rock music.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking to Atsuko Okatsuka. Her standup comedy special is called *The Intruder*. It is hilarious. It's on HBO Max.

Your family overstayed a tourist visa, right?

(Atsuko confirms.)

Did you know that when you were a kid?

Atsuko Okatsuka: I didn't. I didn't know legal things. You know. When you're a kid, you think, "Oh, well, I took a plane here and I ended up here. So, I'm allowed here." *(Chuckles.)* And so, I didn't know things like overstaying a visa. I didn't really know what a visa was, what not having papers meant. I just knew that I couldn't do certain things, but not until I was 17. And that's—you know—when I wanted to start driving and I realized I couldn't get a driver's license,

because I didn't have a social security number and what that meant. But for seven years, I was able to do a lot. *(Chuckles.)* And that's how I learned—you know. Undocumented folks can do a lot is what I realized: go to public schools, ride public transportation, go to the library, make friends. You know, you could do a lot. You really could.

Jesse Thorn: What happened when you figured it out when you were 17?

Atsuko Okatsuka: Well, maybe I was like—maybe it was like 16. I had started the conversation. “Hey, you know, when I turn of age I want to at least like—can I get a permit?” I think at 15 you could get a permit, too.

Jesse Thorn: 15 and a half, I think in California. Yeah.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah. And so, I had started the conversation a couple years earlier. So, I think that's when I realized that we didn't have papers. And so, it was this thing I was dreading that we were always gonna be—you know, *(chuckles)* just like public transporting places and I was like what are we gonna do about money? How have we been doing with money?

You know, my grandma would babysit sometimes and my uncle in Taiwan would help her out with some money, send it over sometimes. And—but what are we gonna do? Like everything costs so much, she'd always say. We were always trying not to get hurt, because we couldn't go to the hospital because we didn't have health insurance. It was all these things.

And so, it started stressing me out and I started doing poorly in school when—like I said, my grandma with all these secrets always had a plan, always taking care of us behind our backs. And when I turned 17, luckily, our names had been drawn from the visa lottery program which my grandma had been applying us for every year.

And in that year, our names got drawn and we all got our green card. So, it was—it was—it was like magic.

Jesse Thorn: Did you have to go back to Japan or Taiwan and then come back to the States?

Atsuko Okatsuka: My grandma was pretending we were living in Japan that whole time. Yeah. So, using an address from Japan while she was applying us for that. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Was it like your grandma running into the house waving the golden ticket situation?

Atsuko Okatsuka: *(Laughs.)* That's sooo much more cinematic than what really happened. I feel like she just was like, “Hey. Yeah. We're going to Pomona.”

(Jesse laughs.)

“To get green cards.” *(Chuckles.)* It was more like that.

[00:15:00]

Jesse Thorn: Pomona’s a perfectly nice place, but— *(Laughs.)*

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah, I was like, “Whooo? What? What are you talking about?”

And she was like, “Oh, so yeah, uh, I’ve been applying us for a green card for this whole time.”

I was like, “You should’ve told me! I would’ve had something to look forward to!”

(They chuckle.)

Jesse Thorn: “We’re going to Pomona. We’re gonna get green cards, and then we’re gonna see America performed at the LA County Fair. It’s gonna be great.”

Atsuko Okatsuka: *(Laughs.)* Yeah. I’ve never been back to Pomona since. Oh, I got my—when I got my citizenship, I went to Pomona too. Pomona’s got a lot of space. You know?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. For the LA County Fair, among other things.

Atsuko Okatsuka: That’s true, yeah! And so, I wonder—I don’t know where that takes place, but maybe—it was like a big convention center type place where we all got, you know, pushed in. And they were like, “Okay! Now, here’s a video from Barack Obama!”

(Lowering her voice.) “Congratulations, everyone! You are citizens now! Raise your hand.” Or whatever. And then, we waved our little flags. But it was a lot of space. Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: Had you gotten to the point of talking to the college counselor at your high school and that kind of thing at that point?

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yes. Yes! Yes. But because—you know, in a weird way, I didn’t think about it ‘til now—in a weird way, maybe I was like halting myself from dreaming too much. ‘Cause I wasn’t sure what the future entailed. I was like, “I mean, shoot, if I can’t even drive forget college. Right? I’ll just work some under the table job where I get paid in cash. You know?” And so, when—you know, like junior year of high school I feel like you start talking to your high school counselors about college and applications, start applying! Okay, we just do it all on this computer now. And you know, “You should apply even if you don’t know your status right now.”

And I remember applying and not knowing what I wanted to major in. I never even thought about it ‘cause I was like what future, though?! *(Chuckles.)* What future are you talking about

where I could actually go to one of these schools? And what would I study? I don't know! I didn't think about that! I'm just—I don't—I was just—I'm choreographing dances for the cheer squad. Can't you see? I'm a little (*chuckles*)—I became the, you know, head choreographer of the cheer squad. So, that was cool. But yeah, I—(*sighs*). So, I chose psychology, is what I'm saying.

(*They chuckle.*)

Because I think, you know—I feel like it's one of the popular majors. Because if you don't really know what you wanna do yet, it's easy to go, “Well, I like people!” Right? And so, that's what I decided to major in if I got into a school.

Jesse Thorn: You mentioned, Atsuko, that your family had secrets. What were the secrets that your family had that you feel comfortable sharing here?

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah, well, you know like the bringing us to the States but—you know, my grandma told me we were coming for just a two-month vacation to—you know, when we got here, that it was it a garage we were gonna be living at. Even those—it was my uncle's place, which is how she said it. To you know, the whole green card thing. She didn't tell me about that. To—it even stems before my time.

You know? It started before me, my grandma not telling my dad—you know—when my mom went off to marry my dad that my mom has mental health issues and that she has epilepsy and so that she'll get seizures. You know, not telling him these things so that he wouldn't—you know—change his mind, freak out and, you know, maybe change his mind about marrying her. Things like that that, you know.

When I say my family keeps secrets, I feel like it's—I guess it's my grandma. (*Laughs.*) Yeah. She's the matriarch. You know? She really makes things happen. But she also does it in her own way which is—you know—by avoiding conflict. I think that's what it is. Holding secrets sometimes is you just want to avoid conflict. And it runs deep in my blood of, you know, my generation—the generations of at least women in my family. Yeah. We'd rather not talk about it now. So, we'll deal with it when Atsuko finds out when she's 15! (*Chuckles.*) Yeah.

Jesse Thorn: I mean, there's an element of dealing with trauma there when the trauma is continuing. You know, when it's not discreet and in the past it's hard to engage with and also keep putting one foot in front of the other. Like, it's hard to do both of those at the same time.

[00:20:00]

Atsuko Okatsuka: Oh, wow! That is so interesting. It's true, 'cause you're constantly trying to catch up. Keep up. You're putting out fires still, the present ones that you might have not healed from the past fires that you had to put out. Yeah! That's true. It's like sleeping. If you

(chuckles)—if you haven't slept well in a week, it's gonna take you two weeks for you to heal from that. Right? Something like that. I haven't been sleeping well, so I've been thinking about that. (Chuckles.) Where I was like, you know, "Oh my gosh! I got ten hours of sleep yesterday, but why am I still tired?" It's like, girl, you need a few days of that. Anyway. I'm so smart. (Chuckles.)

Jesse Thorn: It's true.

More with Atsuko Okatsuka after a quick break. When we come back, she'll tell us how recording videos on social media with her mom and grandma got her family through the pandemic and brought them closer together. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is Atsuko Okatsuka. She released her debut comedy special, *The Intruder*, late last year. She is so hilarious. The special is so great. It's streaming now on HBO Max. Let's get into the rest of our conversation.

Your mom is schizophrenic. Did you know that when you were a kid? How did you understand that when you were a kid?

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah, I did not know that. I was just scared of her. I was scared of her, and I knew—they kept saying she was sick. And I knew she would get seizures. So, I would physically see that. But the—

Jesse Thorn: Hm. That's scary in and of itself.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Right. Yeah. That was scary. And so, in my head maybe I thought, "Well, she's mean sometimes and throws temper tantrums and has these thoughts that seem a little outlandish. Maybe because it sucks to get seizures all the time. And she doesn't seem to have any friends here in Japan. She can't work because she can't—I don't—I don't quite know why she wasn't working in Japan. But now I know there was just a lot going on. You know? And I'm sure there was like—it's—yeah. You can't drive when you have epilepsy, for example. Right? So, I just think it must have made it harder. And so, at that time I just thought, "Okay, you know, life was hard on her and that's why she's the way she is."

And then, strangely enough when I randomly picked psychology as my major—and I did get into a college; I got into UC Riverside. I did get to take like a year and half of psychology.

(Chuckles.) And— 'cause I dropped out after that. But yeah, during that time I was like okay, you know, now that I'm out of high school, I'm out of the home. I just got even more interested

in my mom and what she's going through. And I knew all the things—I knew how to describe her really well. And so, that's when I started studying about schizophrenia more. And I was like I think this is what she has. I never really like talked to my family about it. I was like this seems the closest to what she has. Paranoid schizophrenia.

And then, I mentioned it to my grandma. And my grandma was like, “Oh yeah. That is what she has. She's been taking medicine for it.”

Or she was—we were gonna try to put her on medication for it. So, that was like another secret that she didn't—you know—tell me until I mentioned it. I think in my heart, I knew it was probably schizophrenia. And then, when my grandma told me that was the diagnosis from a few years ago, it like confirmed it. That was a long story, but—(*chuckles*) it's—yeah. It took another conversation with my grandma that I think neither of us wanted to have.

Jesse Thorn: Something I think about a lot is something my old shrink said to me about someone else in my family who was dealing with mental health issues.

[00:25:00]

Which was he said, “You know, what it sounds like is that this other person in your family is grown up and is a different person than they used to be. And you're struggling to deal with that.” And I was like, oh, wow! (*Chuckles.*) Yeah! I mean, like I was imagining that the difference between this person then and 15 years previous was mental illness when in fact it was that I wanted to talk to the—I wanted to talk to this idea I had—this outdated idea I had of who this person was that was not who the person is.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Oh, wow. Yeah. And I—hearing that, I don't like it.

(*They laugh.*)

I—yeah, I already am finding myself not wanting to accept that.

(*Chuckles.*) And maybe that's my problem, but yeah. If someone told me that, in the moment I would already become defensive.

Jesse Thorn: This was ten years ago, and I don't wanna accept it now.

(*Atsuko chuckles.*)

Like, I wanna be clear.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah, I would've been like, “You're using gaslighting language.”

(*Chuckles.*) “You're telling me it's my fault.”

Jesse Thorn: I'm like, "Uh, excuse me. That person was a sweet, little baby. So. I think I know a little something about that person."

Atsuko Okatsuka: I mean, you kind of do, actually. *(Laughs.)* So, I'm still—see? I'm still trying to fight back. I'm like, "You do know that person better than your shrink! What are they talking about?" You know? And—but it's true. I'm constantly trying to paint a better picture of the family in the past. And that's why I bring my entire family with me on vacations.

You know? Poor husband. He's a part of it, where—

Jesse Thorn: Including your mom?

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah. I always try to bring them because I go, "We didn't have this in the past. Now, I can make money. Now, I tour with comedy. Now, I have the money to give us the things we didn't have before. I'm performing in Hawaii. We've never gone to Hawaii together as a family. You're coming with us, 86-year-old grandma, mentally ill mother. And husband! I got us a resort! We're going!" You know?

And it's always a pain in the butt. *(Chuckles.)* It's always a pain. Me and my husband end up arguing and it's hard because my mom doesn't leave the hotel anyway. And my mom and grandma fight. My grandma got covid when I brought her to Hawaii last time, for the first time she got covid. And it was a hot mess! All because I wanted to, you know, do the things we never got to do when we were living in that stupid garage. You know?

And so, it's hard. 'Cause you're always constantly chasing that like, "This is the—I'm gonna recreate the family." *(Chuckles.)* "I'm gonna remake my family into what we should have been." You know? Or what we could be. We still could be that American, awesome—I'm trying to think of a family that I watched on TV, but they were all still dysfunctional. Well, at least Full House. You know? The Tanners had fun. You know? Or The Brady Bunch. You know? I wanna be like that. *(Chuckles.)* And so—I even brought my mom and grandma on my honeymoon with my husband.

Jesse Thorn: You didn't.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah. I did. I did. And he's still with me, so I am—I guess I am that charming.

Jesse Thorn: So, you won.

(They laugh.)

Atsuko Okatsuka: That was also a hot mess. ‘Cause my dad also came, and my mom and dad have been divorced since I was one. And he also brought his ex, because I’m—I just wanna recreate that family, gosh darn it!

I was like, “Everyone’s coming! Everyone from my past.” *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: You went on like a full family homecoming trip for your honeymoon.

Atsuko Okatsuka: That’s right. Yeah. It was like *Crazy Rich Asians* except way more poor, where the entire family gets involved. *(Chuckles.)* It was insane! I was having to speak three different languages. I was having to make sure my mom and dad never saw each other. So, we were like dodging people. My best plan was, okay, if Dad ever sees Mom, uh, I’m gonna—just gonna push him into a crowd of people, and then my mom won’t see him. You know, it’ll be like that. There were handoffs. It’s like, okay, we’ll spend time with Mom and Grandma the first two days, and then we’ll drop them off at the train station where we’ll meet my dad.

It was like that. It was insane.

Jesse Thorn: I’m having like childhood flashback trauma responses; this talk about trying to keep your parents’ paths from crossing.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah, oh my gosh. Yeah. You’re also—

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. And then—and the thing about handoffs. Just the things about handoffs.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yes. We were handed off. Right? ‘Cause your parents are divorced too.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah! And then, I—but even as an adult with my wife. When both my parents were alive and we were in San Francisco, where both my parents lived, it’s like how are we gonna transition between visiting?

Atsuko Okatsuka: Right. Yes. Yeah.

[00:30:00]

Jesse Thorn: Like, we have a car! We’re adults!

(They chuckle.)

They work for us now!

Atsuko Okatsuka: Right, right. You mean because you had to see your mother separately and your father separately?

(Jesse confirms.)

Exactly. And so, I was trying to—what is it?—shorten. I was trying to condense?

Jesse Thorn: Condense?

Atsuko Okatsuka: Con—what is it called?

Jesse Thorn: Condense.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Thank you. Thank you. I always make up English words and put wrong words here and there. I was trying condense it all by being like, “Yes, you all come to us. You come to Taiwan. We’re gonna be there anyway. Dad, you live in Bali. That’s close. Grandma, Mom, you’re from Taiwan. You haven’t seen it in a while. Come on! Let’s go!” *(Chuckles.)* And yeah, it was—you know, it’s something me and my husband have talked about since. You know. It’s a sad realization, but he was like, “You’re—” He’s the one that told me, “I think you’re trying to recreate like—you’re trying to create the family that you’ve always wanted. But I think that’s not your family. You know? And they’re okay. They’re tired too. They don’t need to go to Taiwan. It’s ‘cause—you know, you want them to go.”

Jesse Thorn: And you’ve chosen a family. Your family is you and your husband.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yeah, but I don’t want it to be that way. Why couldn’t our blood be—? You know what I’m saying? It’s that sort of sentiment. Why couldn’t the family be—? Not more perfect, but it’s like I just wanna give them what maybe they didn’t have. And then, sometimes you have to realize they don’t want this new thing. *(Laughs.)* Sometimes they go, “Girl, we’re tired. I don’t even like Honolulu that much.”

(Laughs.) You know? Sometimes they tell you.

Jesse Thorn: I read in the newspaper it seems like they like going to the nice hotpot place with you, getting dandan noodles once a week.

Atsuko Okatsuka: Yes. And that’s two minutes away from their home. So, that’s nice. They’re like, “Yes, we’ll go anywhere that’s close.”

Jesse Thorn: Was it hard for you to get comfortable with talking about these things in your act? Or for that matter, putting your mom and especially grandma on social media. They’re big parts of your social media presence, which is big. Did you have to talk yourself into those things?

Atsuko Okatsuka: With talking about like my mom’s mental health stuff, yeah. I didn’t really start talking about it ‘til three years ago. Like, or maybe two years ago. During the pandemic. I was thinking about it way more because everyone was so isolated, and I was really worried about

my mom maybe regressing. You know? I was like, oh gosh, it's— (*sighs*) now there's like a pandemic and a fear, you know, that's gonna constantly be in her brain. And so, then I started just thinking about it more and writing about it more. And that's when I—my HBO special is really like the first time I have it documented that I'm talking about it, joking about it too. I'm able to make jokes about it.

Putting my mom and grandma in my social media videos, I feel like that was maybe like 2018/2019—you know—when I started wanting to create the family that I've always wanted kind of thing.

And same with my grandma too, you know. My grandma—her main thing in life has always been like, "I have control of everything," with the secrets or whatnot and the plots and the plans (*chuckles*) that she has. She's always been a caretaker, and that's a role she felt like she always had to take. And as she started—she kind of started, you know, letting me take care of things around that time. And that's when I think she allowed herself to have fun too, for the first time in her life. And so, she saw me like making these videos and she was like, "Hey! Can I do one of those too?" And I was like sure! I thought she was joking.

But then, we did a fun dance video together, and she had so much fun that I was like we can make this like a regular thing if you want.

It was like a way for us to bond, a way for her to play, a way for both of us to laugh and be silly. And it's something I do anyway, as a performer. So, that's when that kind of started. And my mom would join too when she feels good, you know when she has a good day. And so, yeah, it's really cool where in a weird way it's like—you know, 'cause on social media—right?—when you post a video, we look like that ideal family I'm talking about, that family I'm trying to create, the one that does go to trips to Taiwan together, that does go to Honolulu together. You know? 'Cause there's no money issues anymore! We can do it. We weren't living in a garage; we're American citizens now! You know? We're happy. We dance on TikTok. You know?

[00:35:00]

I think in a way, it was—I was a little bit still trying to do that. And I still am with the social media. But if you look close enough in the videos, you'll just see that—you'll see all the things we've gone through. (*Chuckles.*) And these videos, I joke, is really us just running from trauma. But I think it was helpful for all of us. And it became helpful for the viewers too. During the pandemic, a lot of people were writing saying like, "Seeing you and your grandma and your mom dance together, that means so much to me." You know, or "My Grandmother just passed away and she reminds me of her so much." Or you know, "Thanks for these videos. They really got us through the pandemic." You know, and so it's cool. It's like this weird happy but also sad, sick cycle—you know—that we're a part of, making these TikToks.

Jesse Thorn: Atsuko, thank you so much for taking this time to be on *Bullseye*. It was really nice to get to talk to you.

Atsuko Okatsuka: It was so great talking to you. Thanks for having me!

Jesse Thorn: Atsuko Okatsuka. Her standup special is *The Intruder*. You can and should watch it now on HBO Max. It's just a delight.

Transition: Relaxed synth with a steady beat.

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. Although, I did something that always makes me feel like a king. I've maybe done it like two or three times, which is the other day I flew to Oakland and back in the same day like some sort of important businessman. I was actually just visiting my mom, but I felt like a—I felt like a real globetrotter going through the Burbank airport twice in one day.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellows at Maximum Fun are Tabatha Myers and Bryanna Paz. We get some booking help from Mara Davis. Our music is provided to us by DJW, also known as Dan Wally. The theme song at the top of the show is "Huddle Formation" by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

Bullseye is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook and you can find us in all those places. 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.)