



# PART 1: A CONVERSATION WITH TIG NOTARO AND FILMMAKER RYAN WHITE ON FACING ILLNESS WITH COURAGE

[Video plays]

## **Lisa Ling**

Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining Tig Notaro, comedian and producer of this extraordinary film, and Ryan White. Thank you so much. How many of you have seen this film? A couple of you. I have to admit, I was a bit hesitant to actually sit down and watch it, just knowing that it was about Andrea Gibson's journey with terminal cancer. But I don't think I've felt so moved by a film—ever. It is so powerful and magical and has compelled me, when I'm driving around now, to just look up. And it's hard for us to do that, because we're always mired in our devices. But just to look up and appreciate what's around me and appreciate every second that I'm alive. And in so many ways, this film really is not about death; it's about life. And Ryan, you have described this as the funniest film that you've ever made. Why do you think that?

## **Ryan White**

Well, I have been looking for a comedy documentary for the last 15 years, and my producing partner, Jess, and I have known Tig for quite some time, and we've been saying to Tig, like, "Bring us a funny idea for a documentary. Why are all documentaries so serious and sad? Let's make a comedy." And Tig called a couple of years ago with the idea for a cancer poetry film, which sounded like the opposite of funny.

## **Lisa Ling**

Really comedic.

## **Ryan White**

Yeah. But Tig is one of the funniest people we know, and Tig said, "Andrea Gibson is one of the funniest people I know." And so we trusted Tig when she said that, and it was totally true. So it is a film that is very

sad in some ways. It's Andrea's final year of life, and it's Andrea's love story with their partner, Megan. But we were laughing morning till night for the entire year that we were making this film.

**Lisa Ling**

Tig, we're all so familiar with your shows and your work as a hysterical comedian. Do you think this, or did you think that this could possibly be a risk to take on a subject matter like this?

**Tig Notaro**

Yeah. It's a risk, but I was just talking about this with somebody yesterday. So, for much of my life when I was younger, I took terrible risks. But once I realized I was a comedian, I was able to focus my risks and, this being one, there's so many different risks to do it. But it's so worth it when the intentions are right and the team is right. And everything that I hoped, and I think what everybody involved hoped for, is exactly what was executed in this film.

**Lisa Ling**

And Ryan, what was it that kind of sealed the deal for you? Tig comes to you and says, "Here's the idea for this funny documentary about Andrea Gibson and their journey with terminal cancer." What was it for you? You didn't even know who Andrea Gibson was at the time.

**Ryan White**

Right.

**Lisa Ling**

So what was it that—

**Tig Notaro**

You didn't know what poetry was.

**Ryan White**

No. No, but truly, what's less funny than cancer, at least on face value, is poetry. So, we found it unbelievable that this could be a funny film, but Tig said, "Andrea is one of the funniest people I know, and they are the rock star of spoken word poetry," which I thought was an oxymoron. I'm not someone who follows spoken word poetry. So Tig said, "Just hear me out. Watch a couple links that I'll send you, and then get back to me. I understand that this is a high barrier of entry." And so Jess and I watched a poem called "Guardian Angel Fish," it's a love poem that Andrea wrote for their partner Megan after their ovarian cancer diagnosis, and it's an eight-minute poem that is the most beautiful embodiment of all human emotion. It's laugh-out-loud funny, but it is also that you are crying multiple times throughout the poem. And so it kind of blew up my preconceived notion of what poetry even was. Andrea's poetry is kind of like storytelling, a little bit of stand-up comedy. It involves music. And so we were blown away by the art form. So we said to Tig, if Andrea and Megan want to do this, because that's often the biggest challenge in a documentary, even when you have the idea, it's like, are the subjects willing to do something during this

most intimate year of their lives, their final year on Earth together? Do they want to do this? But we said, if Andrea wants to meet us, we'll fly out there next week. And I'll never forget the first thing Andrea said to me. I'd never spoken with Andrea. In the driveway, Andrea came out and gave me a hug, and Tig had told Andrea who I was, that I was coming. Andrea said, "I guess you're going to be with me when I die. Welcome to my home." And that was the beginning of the journey together.

**Lisa Ling**

Tig, was it just an idea of yours to do this, or had you spoken with Andrea about the possibility of being with her, possibly during her final moments?

**Tig Notaro**

Well, no, actually. Our other producing partner, Steph Whelan. Steph, Andrea, and I are old friends from Colorado, and Steph and I had been on the phone working on Andrea's podcast, because we were just trying to help figure out, "What is the story, where should this go, where should it live, how can people listen to this?" And Steph is the one who said to me, "I feel Andrea's life would make a really incredible documentary." And I was floored. I couldn't believe I didn't see that myself before Steph mentioned it. I work quickly. And I truly got off the phone, and I started reaching out to everybody I knew in the documentary space, and Jess and Ryan were at the top of my list. They had some of my favorite documentaries I had seen in recent years. And I had a personal relationship with them. And so, yeah, I give all credit to Steph Whelan.

**Lisa Ling**

Yeah, and this really isn't just about Andrea's journey with cancer. This goes all the way back and really sort of explores her journey as a non-binary person, as well. And one of the things that really struck me: There's a scene in this film when Andrea is doing a live show and the clips of the audience members watching her. Again, we are now a culture where we're on our devices non-stop, and there are so few opportunities to have those truly human experiences, and to watch those clips of the audience members watching Andrea on stage, just one woman on a stage. But their faces were just, like, you could hear a pin drop. You could hear Andrea's breath, and the audience was just so engrossed in this one woman's human journey, and I felt that way watching the film. Like I was hanging onto her every magical and powerful word. And I'm just so glad I actually took the plunge and watched it despite my hesitation. And so for those who haven't seen the film, Tig, can you just tell us about Andrea? Tell us about your relationship with her.

**Tig Notaro**

Well, Andrea, I mean—to go back to the rock star of it all, I remember the first time I met Andrea. Andrea was part of this group in Boulder called Vox Feminista, and it was definitely preaching to the choir. It was Boulder, but it was a social political activist group with musicians, actors, a poet, comedians, and I remember going backstage the first time. I think about it all the time. Going backstage, I wasn't performing, but my friend was in the group. My friend said, "This is Andrea Gibson. Andrea is a poet." And Andrea was sitting on this ledge backstage, and it's that idea of a poet. That's a rock star. I know what a rock star is. That's a rock star. And Andrea went on stage and annihilated the room with their depth and humor. As you said, it's part stand-up. I would tell Andrea all the time, "You could do just straight-ahead stand-up." This is somebody where everything was so deeply precious to this person, but also nothing was too precious to

make fun of or to laugh about. There was always a way to get into a topic, no matter where it was landing. And it's something I appreciate so much, not just in Andrea, but anybody. Having those hard conversations, going through those hard moments, but also just kicking back and being completely irreverent.

**Lisa Ling**

Yeah, getting back to that moment on stage and watching the film, as you said, it was just so effortless, these words that she would speak and how beautiful she would make them sound when she put them all together. And it just came out of her.

**Tig Notaro**

One of my favorite things that Andrea ever said was, "What kind of poet would I be if I couldn't make life beautiful beyond the page?" And I was like, "There you go again." And that's what Andrea did. It's like, the poetry was beautiful, but also everything around Andrea—look, like everybody alive, Andrea was also a very complicated person, and it wasn't just like—even when we talk about how it's funny, it's not toxic positivity, you know, just pushing through and laughing at everything like you're out of your mind. But there's a lot going on.

**Lisa Ling**

But also, as I said, this film really is about life and that appreciation for every second of it. It also goes into her past, which was very complicated, as you said, and even a moment when she thought that she might not want to continue living because she was so conflicted about her identity.

**Tig Notaro**

Many moments. Yeah.

**Lisa Ling**

Yeah. And Ryan, you and your crew were there for those deepest moments when she was literally hanging on to life.

**Ryan White**

Mm-hmm.

**Lisa Ling**

Tell me about the process and what it was like to be part of this journey.

**Ryan White**

It's my 15th documentary. And I loved them all, like we love all our children. This one was life changing for me, from day one. When we were flying back after that shoot, which was just a couple days, Jess and I were on the flight, crying, and saying Tig was right. Like, there's something about this person that is so incredibly special, and to me, the filmmaking aside, I feel like Andrea and Megan gave me and my crew

such a gift by allowing us inside their lives for that final year, and we were there a lot and became incredibly close with them. But they weren't afraid to go to those dark places. Like Lisa mentioned, Andrea is very transparent about how they had been suicidal throughout a lot of their life, and it wasn't until their terminal diagnosis that they recognized the beauty in life. And so Andrea would often say to me when I would ask, "Why are you doing this? This is such a heavy year for you. It's so much work, and it's emotionally draining to have a documentary crew around you this much. Why are you allowing us to do this with you?" And Andrea would always say, "Don't let it take what happened to me—getting that terminal diagnosis—to finally recognize how precious life is. And so as much as I can share that by opening my life, my final year, up to a documentary crew, I hope it awakens people." And so I feel like a personal beneficiary of that, for sure, in my own life. Totally life-changing, relationship-changing in all my relationships, getting to be around Andrea and Megan, and bringing that conversation of mortality to the forefront. That's part of the magic of Andrea, I think. A running joke in our film is that Andrea only knows five words. They weren't a super educated person. They didn't read books. They didn't have a huge vocabulary. But somehow, it is more than five words. But they joke with this limited vocabulary, they spun all this beautiful poetry over the course of decades and decades and therefore made it very accessible to people who might not normally engage poetry. And I hope that, by Andrea opening their life to cameras and what this documentary does, is something similar for the conversation around death and mortality. The way Andrea allowed us in, I know for me personally and our crew, allowed us all to be more comfortable with that conversation that I think we, especially as Americans, but probably globally, is a topic that we all don't want to look at. And Andrea and Megan, by allowing us to document her partner's death as well, hopefully invite us as a culture to consider that more. Andrea has a line in one of their poems that says, "I know mortality isn't small talk, but I wish it was." And I hope that's what this film and Andrea participating does.

### **Lisa Ling**

I think that Andrea posthumously is still wanting us to have those conversations about mortality. After I watched the film, I went down the rabbit hole, and I got on Andrea's social media, and Meg had just posted something about signs. And these signs that she was receiving from Andrea in the form of songs, and later that day I had seen this incredible—or experienced this incredible—sign. My mother-in-law just passed away on Sunday, and she was 94 years old and had a beautiful life. But her kids, my husband and his sister, even at her advanced age, were afraid to have conversations about death and mortality. In fact, fortunately, she dealt with everything. She planned all of the aftermath for them. They didn't know it at the time, but we are so scared about talking about death. But I think that if we can normalize it and talk about the spiritual peace and about what you leave behind spiritually, it can make things a little bit easier. And I really feel like she's even doing that now in her death. But I wonder about you, personally: what the experience was of what she taught you both about life and about death. Tig?

### **Tig Notaro**

I mean, this is so much. And I think any feelings I had prior to this experience have just been magnified and elevated. And to go back to conversations around death, which we were talking about before the panel, that's something that has changed in my life drastically. And I look back at my mother's death, my stepfather, my father, my cousin, all of these people that—especially my cousin—it was pushed away with, "We're just keeping hope." She was dying, and it wasn't my place to insert myself because the immediate family wasn't, but I remember being very struck by that experience, that nobody was talking about it. And after going through this process with Andrea and the openness, it really shifted. And I have children, as I

mentioned, and it opened up the whole dialog there. And to not approach it in this terrifying, dark way, but just that—as we were saying—it is part of life and this is coming for all of us, and it can be—at times and with certain deaths if you know it's coming—in a beautiful way. You can make decisions: you can choose paths that your loved ones go down after your death. But when it's pushed away, it's—that's what I've learned. Very much so.

**Lisa Ling**

And, Tig, you had your own battle with cancer. How did watching and experiencing Andrea's journey help you reconcile what you may have been going through and your concerns about cancer?

**Tig Notaro**

I think, more than anything, what I felt was tinges of survivor guilt, actually. It was wild because Andrea and I, years ago, met up in Austin and worked on this project together. I wanted to do a song around my feelings after going through what I went through and asked Andrea to help write and record this with me, and it was really something to revisit that song, and it was exactly what Andrea ended up experiencing 10 years later, 15 years later. But, yeah, I don't know if I'm answering your question exactly right, but I think—I don't know if I'm answering it right.

**Lisa Ling**

Well, just given what you experienced: How has the experience with Andrea helped you think differently about life?

**Tig Notaro**

Well, it's really like a "Where to begin?" moment. It's so human to feel connected to loss and being present in life, especially going through something like this. And then the human part, again, is losing touch with that and then bringing it back in. And that is what I'm trying to maintain a connection to always. It was already there, but it's again heightened, because this is a very fresh experience. You know, when we were talking earlier, I was like, "God, I just want to throw my phone in the river." Just the whole being present part. And it's a struggle. The world makes it a struggle.

**Lisa Ling**

Absolutely. Ryan, what do you want people to take away from this film and where can people see it?

**Ryan White**

You can watch it on Apple TV. We know it is a high barrier of entry—I only saw a few hands—but I promise it is not the saddest film in the entire world, even though it sounds like it. What we found time after time was people afterwards saying something similar to you, and Stephen Colbert hosted a screening for us. He said the same thing, even though he speaks so publicly about grief. He was like, "Secretly, I just did not want to watch this film because I thought it was going to be too hard." And we would hear that time and time again from audiences throughout the film. But I hope, when you watch it—I know one of the ways it really changed me. Andrea had a type of ovarian cancer where they would find out every three weeks—basically, they would get a test result that said if they were going to live or die. And we were there for

many of those, because we filmed over the course of a year, so maybe 14 or 15 times. But I remember one nearing the end when Andrea got a result that was a good cancer marker result, even though they were actively dying, and the joy with the idea that they could live three more weeks and how much they could fit into three more weeks. And I think so many of us are not living in the present, myself included, and we're thinking so far in the future. And to watch someone, a couple, be so gleeful that they would have three more weeks together, knowing that the next three weeks they might get a bad result, I think that's what we see audiences being changed by. How do we see our time on this earth, and how much can we maximize out of every second that we have?

### **Lisa Ling**

It certainly made me think to myself: if I only had three more weeks, what would I do? And why am I not living as though I only have three more weeks? Ryan White, Tig Notaro, thank you so much. I know we have to get out of here, but I wanted to just play one video that I want you to hear. Remember I told you I went down the rabbit hole. I just want you to hear—I'm going to put it up—Andrea's voice.

### **Andrea Gibson [Recording]**

Eight months ago, when the doctor told me my cancer was now considered incurable, the next day I woke up and Meg took me on a drive to lift my spirits, because drives typically always cheer me up. But as we drove past the llamas—with the llama that Meg calls Llama Del Rey and the silo that I usually can never drive by without saying, "I could live in that silo"—I realized that I wasn't seeing any of it because I couldn't pick my head up. And I said, "Meg, look at me, I can't even pick my head up." And she's like, "Yeah, what's going on?" And I said that I knew that if I picked my head up I would love everything I saw, and I was afraid to love what I might soon lose. And a couple of minutes later, I did what I now think of as the bravest thing that I have ever done in my life. I picked my head up, and I loved the world that I knew wouldn't always be mine. And I share this story, because—it's an extreme example—I think many of us are doing it almost all the time. We are not allowing ourselves joy or love or peace, because we're afraid to lose it. Don't be so afraid of losing life that you forget to live it.

### **Lisa Ling**

Thank you, everyone.

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