

# BONUS CHAPTER

## HOW TO CHEAT AT SECRET SANTA

So, that was something! Right? A book! I still can't believe it.

And the thing is, *I actually wrote the stupid thing!* I didn't barf my life story into a tape recorder and let some Actual Writer magically transform my ramblings into a memoir; I came up with all the words and put them in the order you just read them in! I even added in the periods and the commas! I also used a handful of those punctuation thingies that look like an exclamation point that needs to visit the chiropractor. I should figure out what they're called, because I literally just used one in this chapter! And did I actually imply that someone would dictate their life story into a "tape recorder" in this day and age? What is this, *The Conversation?*

This new chapter is a postscript for everyone who was kind enough to purchase the paperback of *It Never Ends*. The publisher asked me to consider adding some new content to this edition because bonus stuff makes this "a complete package" that will theoretically lure my faithful readers to journey back to their B. Dalton's for a "Scharpling Double Dip." Some people are gonna say that I'm

doing something fun, but I am aware that others might see this as some weird cash grab. And they're not entirely wrong. While this is hardly a cash grab—forget writing a book, you're better off heading to the dog track if you want to get your mitts on some fast money—a part of me feels slightly bad that I am making this version enticing enough for you to potentially purchase a second copy. I'm putting this chapter on the book's website, [www.TomWroteABook.com](http://www.TomWroteABook.com). (I still can't believe that URL was available for purchase in 2021! Every single one of the book-writing Toms out there could've snapped it up at any point! You snooze you lose, Tom Brady! Better luck next time, Tom's of Maine!).

I figured this chapter could ultimately serve as a means to wrap up this experience. If the book properly documents my long journey to putting my life story on the page, this postscript will cover what it was like to have that book—and all the secrets revealed in it—become available for public consumption after a lifetime of keeping all that stuff buried deep inside my brain.

I also straight-up promised to reveal how I managed to cheat at my family's Secret Santa for years. I teased it, but I never delivered on my promise. That's right, I dropped the ball. So now I would like to right this wrong. I will tell you all how your guy pulled his own holiday gift *Big Short*, because if there's one thing I'm good at, it's delivering on a promise. (I'm also good at catching things I dropped before they hit the floor, a highly underrated skill. I'm getting *very* good at eating candy and watching TV.)

Why would I feel the need to pull a fast one on my family and cheat at Secret Santa? It all comes down to me never being able to enjoy the very basic elements of gift-giving. I struggle with it every holiday season. Let me modify that: I've never enjoyed the very basic elements of gift-*getting*. I'm pretty good at buying gifts for others. Now, you might be asking yourself what my secret to that is. It's simple: I PAY ATTENTION TO THE PEOPLE IN MY LIFE WHEN THEY TALK. Shocking but true! Oh, if I had a dollar for every time one of my friends or family unwrapped a present and exclaimed,

“How on Earth did you remember that I wanted to get my hands on these old McDonald’s glasses you just gave me?” I would be using the Pikachu float from the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade as my personal hot-air balloon instead of being stuck driving a dumb car like the rest of you clock-punchers. So pay attention when people talk during non-gift-giving season. All of the answers you desire are waiting for you in the course of normal conversation.

If only that gift-giving confidence carried over to my gift-receiving. My fears all come alive when someone hands me a wrapped present, an expectant smile steadily consuming their face. I can’t handle having to react to something that might not be a good fit for me. Part of the problem comes from my ever-changing interests and my stupid insistence on buying whatever books or records I want, one of the perks of not having a child to clothe and feed. If I want it, I go and get it. Don’t mistake this for any sort of brag: I don’t have expensive tastes; most of the food I eat is served in Styro-foam containers, and my drinks of choice can be found at any gas station. But this dilemma has been a part of my life as far back as I can remember.

One time, my uncle gave me a Christmas present. I must’ve been around ten years old, so the holidays were still a big deal. I tore the paper away to reveal . . . a science kit. I’m not sure why he would think I was interested in science. Perhaps he confused my passion for *science fiction* (wisecracking robots and spaceships) with my all-consuming disinterest in *actual* science (test tubes and other likeminded crap)? Whatever it was that made him land on the science kit, I now had a job to do. I needed to convince him that I loved it! I immediately slapped an unconvincing grin across my face and thanked him as if I had just been handed the cure for chlamydia itself. (And look, I didn’t need a chlamydia cure when I was ten and I most definitely don’t need one now. It’s just a clever turn of phrase that you should admire, not criticize.) I felt phony and low and didn’t want to keep experiencing this sense of pathetic fraudulence every time I unwrapped a present. I know it makes me sound like

a world-class ingrate on some level, but I'm sorry, I simply cannot handle the pressure generated by moments like this. I'd love to be gracious in these moments, but I feel the weight of it all: the wasted money, the false gratitude, all of it.

It took a modification in the gift-giving procedure in my family for me to finally see a path toward an *Escape from Alcatraz*-style breakout. Our family kept growing through marriages and children, so buying a present for everybody wasn't financially feasible. My aunts came up with a plan: Instead of buying small presents for everybody, we would each buy one larger present for one relative. If you're not familiar with how Secret Santa works, it's simple: On Thanksgiving, everyone would write their names on a slip of paper and drop it into a bowl. Then the bowl would get passed around, with everybody withdrawing a slip of paper that revealed who you would buy a larger Christmas present for that year.

This new approach made sense from a financial perspective, but from a "I am bad at receiving presents" angle it was terrible news! In the chaos of everyone tearing open multiple presents, if my fake reaction was less than convincing, it might go completely unnoticed. If a gift sucked, everyone would still be consumed with making their way to the bottom of their small pile of presents. But if you're only receiving one gift? You're on the hot seat, Jack! The gift-giver spent fifty bucks instead of the twenty the previous administration called for, so they're gonna stare right at your face as your thumbs slide beneath the wrapping paper, just waiting for the moment you realize you've been given an autographed photo of the MyPillow guy. What, you don't like it? But I thought you loved pillows! I know you like sleeping!

This dynamic would not stand for Young Tom. No, no, no. Something had to change. I stomped into my bedroom and tried to figure out a solution. I looked upward for answers, and by that I mean I cocked my head toward the Depeche Mode poster hanging on the wall. "What should I do, Andy Fletcher? I'm tired of all this

gift-giving malarkey!” Andy Fletcher never answered me, instead choosing to maintain his detached stare. But a plan started gurgling inside my little brain. It wasn’t long before I figured out how to game the system!

Speaking of gaming the system, the world of publishing is unlike anything I have ever taken part in.

When one writes for television, it becomes readily apparent that it is a collaborative medium. You sit in a room with other writers and break stories and make each other laugh and eat snacks and generally have a good time. But writing a book? You’re on your own, bub. It’s not unlike the difference between high school and college. You can’t just walk to the bathroom without a hall pass in high school. You’re under the microscope—every single move gets monitored by the school authorities. But if you want to skip a class in college, go for it! You’ve got the power! Nobody is gonna ask where you are. This is the first inkling of what it’s like to be an adult. The only tradeoff is that if you fail to do your work, you’re going to flunk out and there is nobody to blame but yourself. That is what it felt like working on a book: I could do whatever I wanted with my days, but I had to be absolutely ruthless in my discipline to drive the project home. If I didn’t care, who else would?

Writing a memoir was without a doubt the most difficult creative thing I’ve ever done. Everything else is a distant second. The process always carried some measure of terror and stress with it; I had been waiting my entire life for the moment that I would Write a Book, and that day had come. The experience was also very rewarding, but most of the positive feelings arrived after the first draft was completed. There’s an old saying that “Everybody wants to have written a book, but nobody wants to actually write a book,” and that is as true as anything I have ever heard. Simply put, writing a memoir—especially one as chock-full of stories and confessions as mine is—will suck you dry until you’re not sure why you signed up to do it in the first place.

A typical writing day went something like this:

- 1) I sit down at my computer.
- 2) I take out a hammer and smash open the top of my head.
- 3) I reach into my cranium and scoop out my brains (along with whatever random goo is living in my noggin), dumping them onto the table in front of me.
- 4) I sift through my brains, analyzing the shameful secrets and embarrassing memories in an effort to alchemize the pain into a story.
- 5) I write.
- 6) I scoop my brains up and pour them back into my head, another day of writing behind me.
- 7) I press an ice pack or cold compress to my head and shut my eyes.

Fear was a constant and unwelcome presence with all the hospitalization and ECT stories. It was frightening to merely replay those stories in my head, let alone put them into prose. The biggest concern was that I would sell myself out for a few quick laughs, that I would take the worst parts of my life story and turn them into cheap entertainment. My pain is your comedy! I would spend nights aimlessly driving around, my thoughts always returning to the same place: Was this whole thing a mistake? Was I about to ruin my life by sharing these stories?

It wasn't and I wasn't. I'd be lying if I said there still weren't stray moments in which I regret undertaking any of this, that I would've been better off writing a television pilot about a detective that solves crimes they uncover on Etsy. But I have ultimately grown to accept that the secrets I had buried now belonged to anyone who read the book. These were my memories, but they weren't only mine. And that's okay.

There is a universal aspect to the sharing of trauma that revealed itself the moment advance copies of the book trickled out into the world. I had given the book to friends, so I wasn't completely in the dark when it came to reader reactions. But these were people I knew, people I could trust with my stories. I had gotten used to their brand of feedback. But my mind was truly rattled the first time I saw someone I didn't know on a book forum commenting on a review copy of *It Never Ends*.

*I can't go back, I realized. It's too late. Everybody knows now.*

In the end, it was all okay. People now knew about my past. The secrets that I had prepared to take with me to the grave were now diminished into trivia, no different than the factoids that play at the movies:

DID YOU KNOW that radio personality Tom Scharpling had his brain electrocuted when he was eighteen years old?

A few friends said they felt closer to me after reading the book. "I always sensed there were some missing pieces to your story," one told me. "Now I feel like I have all the pieces to the puzzle." It helped immensely to receive that kind of feedback, because that was one of the secret goals of writing the book. I wanted to tell the people in my life who I had actually been for most of my life. No more masquerading behind my *nom de Tom*: The walls were getting torn down. They received a much clearer portrait of who I am through me explaining who I was.

The response from people I didn't know was powerful, and while I thought I was ready for it, I had no idea what it would actually feel like. Apparently there are a fair amount of people out in the world wearing their damage deep beneath the surface of their day-to-day lives, and *It Never Ends* granted them permission to acknowledge their particular brand of pain. A neighbor read my book—actually multiple neighbors read it, which truly and completely floored

me—and said, “A close relative of mine went through a very similar version of what you dealt with. Unfortunately he didn’t get the help you got and he didn’t make it.” I burst into a fit of sobbing after hearing this, my gratitude for the people I have in my life front and center. (I also tried to picture me reading a book that a neighbor had written, and no matter how hard I tried, I could not imagine actually doing it. There are limits!) While I had to be the one to carry the burden of my mental illness—we all lug our own water, nobody can truly bear the load for you—I have had plenty of people supporting me and helping me over the years. I didn’t navigate those waters alone, and I didn’t get through it all by accident; people had my back in all sorts of ways.

That said, doing press for the book was a real challenge. It’s one thing to get an email from a stranger saying the book’s mental health revelations meant a lot to them. That’s a nice message to receive. It’s a little more difficult to handle the host of a radio show asking, “So you underwent a pretty severe course of electroconvulsive therapy, what was that like?” within the first ninety seconds of an interview. I wanted to climb out the closest window and crawl beneath the closest rock. How are you supposed to answer that? I can’t think of what to say, other than “It wasn’t fun.”

Some interviewers verged into Barbara Walters territory, playing a few rounds of Let Me See If I Can Make Tom Cry. For what it’s worth, I never broke down during an interview. I came close, very close, but most of the time I just ended up more angered than anything. The subject matter put me in such a vulnerable spot. Any interviewer could bring up any fragile moment from *It Never Ends* and wave it in front of my face for a reaction. But I didn’t give them what they wanted; instead I maintained a professional tone throughout, knowing that one second after wrapping up I’d bury my face into my pillow and scream until there was nothing left in my emotional reservoir.

Still, I enjoyed the process, even though I never quite got used to discussing intimate personal details with the casual conversational



tone that I would talk about my dislike of the music of The Band. (And boy do I dislike The Band! In my not-so-humble opinion they ruined rock music forever, taking a fun musical form and insisting upon reverence and a dedication to “authenticity,” apparently not realizing they were dressed like turn-of-the-century funeral home employees. But this is a subject for another book!) Everybody was pretty sweet and respectful, and I found myself having a lot of fun doing all the interviews. It was validating to hear people respond to different portions of the book. Some were drawn to my prank phone-calling skills, while others wanted to discuss my hatred of hospitals. I was pleasantly surprised by how many interviewers wanted to discuss my relationship to the music of Billy Joel. I got a few “So what exactly is it about Billy Joel that you dislike?” to which I would answer, “It generally starts with the music he writes and sings.” It was a good time overall . . . except for one experience.

Midway through the press cycle I was asked to host a segment on a website that specializes in interactive book promotion. It was a pretty simple affair: The author conducts an informal Zoom-type chat directly with their audience, answering questions about the book in the hopes that viewers will click through and order a copy. This one didn’t feel right in my bones, but I was in full promotion mode, so I agreed to give it a shot. I was giving everything a shot at that point; I declared early on that I would do an interview with literally anyone who asked, big or small, didn’t matter one bit. I even stated I would talk to a nursing home newsletter if they asked. And one did! A guy who published a weekly bulletin at a senior center reached out for an interview. It was a great conversation, and it made me realize that I will make an *amazing* retired person. The day I can move into an old folks’ home is the day I ascend, fully realized, transforming from a broken lump of a person into a human-shaped Werther’s Original, the hardest substance known to humanity.

So in the spirit of making sure I was grossly overexposed, I agreed to appear on the video book website thingy. And those bones of mine were right about the situation. This was a classic “bad fit” as

we say in the biz. It isn't the fault of the website. They do a bang-up job with personalities like Valerie Bertinelli or the *Duck Dynasty* shitbags. But I don't really need help connecting with my audience in that fashion; they have been able to talk to me every Tuesday night since the Carter administration. The interaction between me and my listeners is as good as anybody has ever had. But I had to try.

The hour I spent on this platform was my own personal *King of Comedy*—cringey moment stacked atop cringey moment. I could see myself on my own screen while talking to the audience—I had to look to read the viewers' questions—and I looked tired and defeated, like a used car salesman desperate to make his quota. The meager audience that turned out for this was truly amazing, a bunch of listeners valiantly drumming up questions for the Q&A in the service of keeping me from laying down in traffic. I attempted to hold on to a brave face throughout, but I knew in my heart of hearts that I was eating it hard. It's actually a not-unpleasant experience to truly bomb (once you get past the thrown fruit) because I remember how many variables need to align for things to go well. One false move and I'm driving in the fast lane toward Flop City, population Tom!

My sweat game was strong that afternoon, a cold and constant river of perspiration running down the center of my back. The entire thing took no more than an hour, but it felt endless. And like most things, it eventually ended, and I slammed my computer shut. "Well, I guess that could've gone worse," I rationalized to myself. Funny thing—it turns out that it *did* go worse than I thought! I found out afterward that I sold a grand total of one book that day. One! The only thing worse than one is none, which is only one more away from me actually paying someone to take a copy of the book. And to the person who bought that single copy of *It Never Ends*, I ask only this: WHY? Were you a straggler just swinging by for a looky-loo? Or perhaps you're the book-promoting equivalent of a ghoul that slows down to gawk at the wreckage of a car crash? Whatever the reason, I appreciate the sale! Every bit counts; that's why I'm writing this bonus chapter! Tommy needs to buy dog bones for his pooches!

One misconception that grew from the book is that I had lived a hard life. And look, I can see how someone might arrive at that conclusion after reading my story. But the truth is much more subtle. Maybe it's splitting hairs, but I would say I had a life. Not an easy one, not a hard one, just a life, with plenty of good times abutting the rough times. I'm not gonna deny that some bizarrely difficult circumstances were dropped on me at different points, but those experiences alone do not define me. Ultimately the responsibility is on me for not including more of the fun I had as a kid, but there's only so much room in a book like this! Was I supposed to skip over all the hospital stuff so I could talk about how I saw *TRON* every weeknight at my local movie theater when I was thirteen? I guess this is as good a place as any to tell this story—I seriously doubt my next book will be called *Tom and TRON: My Life with the Master Control Program*.

So yes, I did see *TRON* over and over at the movie theater a mile from my house, exhibiting the kind of repetitive and obsessive behavior that would fit perfectly into the psychological profile of a serial killer. But my back was the only thing getting murdered, thanks to the ancient theater seats that were seemingly made from the same material they use to build battleships. (Which would be steel, Tom. They make battleships out of steel.) But before you condemn me, I must provide some context to this admittedly pathetic story. At that point in my life, I was obsessed with anything resembling *Star Wars*. If it had a robot in it, I was there. So when *TRON* came out in 1982, I was over the moon.

I first saw *TRON* in a crowded theater that summer and was immediately hooked. I saw it again and still wasn't satisfied. Imagine how my little brain exploded when *TRON* finally arrived at the second-run movie theater a short bike ride away from my bedroom! I went to the 7 P.M. showing of *TRON* that Monday and loved it so much that I went back the following night. Except this time I came ready to combat the uncomfortable seats. I rode my bike to the theater WITH A PILLOW. I can't imagine what the kid at the

ticket window thought when he saw a thirteen-year-old kid holding a pillow, meekly croaking out those four magic words, “One for *TRON*, please.”

The pillow actually worked like a charm, cushioning my fragile frame from the industrial seating. It worked so well that I went back the following night. And the night after that. I saw *TRON* at least six nights in a row, lugging along my trusty pillow each and every time. And I sat there thrilled each and every time. The big question here is, “What was so goddamn thrilling about *TRON* that I had to see it night after night?”

I’m not entirely sure. Having seen *TRON* as an adult, I can objectively say that it sucks shit. As you watch it, you can literally feel the studio heads at Disney screaming that they need a *Star Wars* of their own and promptly pinning all their hopes on the thrilling tale of an arcade owner that gets sucked inside a game. Holy smokes, is that actually what *TRON* is about? I guess I had blocked that part out. Well, at least it will be shot in a deadening black-and-white with an equally bland color treatment that makes everyone look like a robotic Rudolph Valentino. I have no idea why I got so obsessed with this movie. I was probably drawn in by the truly awesome arcade game based on the less-than-awesome film. Either way, at this point in my life you would have to pay me at least eight hundred dollars—cash only!—to watch *TRON* again, and I’m gonna make you throw in the snacks as well. And no Junior Mints!

This is the same movie theater where one of the more infamous moments from my youth took place. *Grease* was playing at this theater, and back when the movie was released, *Grease* was, as they say, the word. The film was beloved by all ages, and it served as a perfect vehicle to introduce American youth to concepts like teen pregnancy and beach sex. My mother was game to take me and my sister, Jill, and asked her to call the theater to ask how much tickets cost. Jill was probably eight at the time, which lets her off the hook for this story (my mother not so much). She called the theater and asked how much it cost to get in. The person on the other end of the

line said, “The movie is free today!” My sister relayed this exciting information to my mom, who promptly invited all the neighborhood kids along for a free screening of *Grease*.

We all got to the theater—me and my sister and mother plus as many kids as could fit in our family car—and promptly received the news that no, *Grease* was not free, not today or any day. My sister had clearly misdialled, as a child is wont to do, and the jerkoff who picked up the phone gave her the faulty information. I remember my mother scrounging in her purse in an attempt to unearth as much loose change from the bottom in an attempt to pay for all the tickets in this pre-credit-card moviegoing era. Now one might ask whether my mother should’ve called the theater back for verification about a movie being free for everybody, an event that has never happened since the beginning of time, but that would be picking nits. She was doing the best she could. Recounting this story makes me love my hardworking mom a little bit more.

You might be screaming at this book, “I thought Tom just said he was gonna tell some stories that showed how much fun he had as a child. This *Grease* story doesn’t sound particularly fun!” Well, it was fun for me. Or at least it was funny. I know my family has laughed about it over the years, so that is enough for me. The moments when you realize you live in a Mike Leigh movie are the moments that remind you that you are not alone in this life. We all trip and fall sometimes, but it comes down to whether we can laugh about it while we pick ourselves up. Or at least that’s what I tell myself between sobs.

So in conclusion, writing the book was a challenge, but it was fun and I’m incredibly proud of it. I wrote a book! Seriously! After a lifetime of obsessing over what my book would be and worrying that I would put together a book that wouldn’t live up to the invisible standard in my head of what a book should be, I am happy to say that I met my criteria. It’s a good book. Thanks for reading it. And if this is your second copy of the book, I thank you twice. I’m gonna try to write another one of these, so keep your eyes peeled over at

[www.TomWroteABook.com](http://www.TomWroteABook.com) for updates. It's gonna take awhile, but I am nothing if not a collection of long-term goals. Thanks!

I HAD A JOKE in mind for this chapter, but I don't have the guts to play it out. I was going to see if I could get away with not revealing how I cheated at Secret Santa. It would've been funny after all the hoopla of actually titling the chapter HOW TO CHEAT AT SECRET SANTA, right? But you know that's not my style. I like a good joke as much as the next goofball, but I also like fulfilling my promises. So here is how I did it.

When the little slips of paper and the bowl got passed around the room, I would write my name on the paper then set it in the bowl. Except I WOULDN'T SET IT IN THE BOWL! I would mime the motion of setting it in the bowl, but I would actually slide the folded slip beneath my thumb. That way the slip never got put in the bowl! And when it came time to pick a Secret Santa name, I would simply reach my hand into the bowl WITH THE FOLDED SLIP STILL BENEATH MY THUMB, thus allowing me to "pick" my own name!

I would then become *my own* Secret Santa.

I would buy a gift for myself! And buy I did. Every year I would go to a record store or bookstore and pick something out for myself. When Christmas came around, I would sneakily duck out of the room for a moment when everybody was preoccupied with unwrapping their Secret Santa presents. Nobody would notice whether I had unwrapped a present or not.

TRUST ME, THIS WORKED. I got away with it until I finally told my mother what I was doing. The look of confused disappointment on her face was undeniable. I felt stupid, but not stupid enough to not be proud of my amazing technique. Unfortunately, the reality of life made it so uncles and aunts started passing away all too frequently, so Secret Santa quietly fell by the wayside. The trick served me well and now, like everything else in this book, it belongs as much to you as it does to me. Use it in good health, my friends.