

Sawbones 293: National Hotel Disease

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Intro (Clint McElroy): Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to Sawbones: a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: Um... this is a—a bittersweet episode I would say, Syd.

Sydnee: It is, it is. Uh, this episode was supposed to be done—was supposed to be performed live last week.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Uh, on our tour.

Justin: Give the short version of the story, 'cause it is very sad.

Sydnee: Uh, the—well, this particular episode, I had done all this research for our live show in DC, on our tour last weekend, and the morning that we were supposed to leave we woke up at 4 AM, because that's how early we had to get up to get to our flight, and our oldest daughter Charlie... was puking.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And puking and puking.

Justin: And puking and puking and puking.

Sydnee: And, poor thing, she was—she was so sick, and there was no way we could put her on an airplane and make her stay in hotels. That was just... it was unreasonable, so we had to put her first and—

Justin: Sadly.

Sydnee: —sad—well—

Justin: [muffled laughter]

Sydnee: —no, not sadly that we had to put her first, but sadly it meant that myself and the girls couldn't come on the tour, and so this—this lovely story about another mysterious GI illness—

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: —was supposed to be told live in Washington, DC, because it is relevant to Washington DC. But, instead... that will be this week's tale.

Justin: Well, Sydnee, I'm ready. Uh, take me—take me away.

Sydnee: Justin, have you ever heard of National Hotel Disease?

Justin: Uhh... no, but it sounds like an indie band...

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: ... from the 90's.

Sydnee: It—it—I found this, I stumbled across this National Hotel Disease and I thought, "What?" I've —now, there are some odd names for various diagnoses, like, illnesses, syndromes, viruses... there's some weird names out there, but this was—this one really—I had never heard of *this*. Uh, it seemed particularly strange.

Justin: It seems like one of those names that we come across sometimes that is, like, a colloquial name for a disease that we later understand to be like, "No, that was just chicken pox that you got at a hotel, okay? It's nothing fancy, it's just regular..." What is it he says in, um, *Waiting for Guffman*? Uh, "Well, Montezuma's Revenge is just regular old American diarrhea."

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [laughs wheezily]

Sydnee: Well, this was sort of like regular old American diarrhea that we're gonna talk about. Uh... the National Hotel—the first thing the might strike you is, you might not know where that is. Well, that's 'cause there is no National Hotel anymore, but there used to be one in DC.

Uh, and a mysterious epidemic struck the National Hotel in early January of 1857, and I want to tell you the story of this strange epidemic because, to this day, we're not 100% sure what it was. We have some pretty good theories, um, but at the time, 1857, we couldn't—we didn't know anything, really, you know... about much of anything.

Justin: Yeah!

Sydnee: I mean—well, heck! We don't know a lot now.

Justin: But we have better names for things.

Sydnee: [through laughter] Yes. Uh, so let's go back to January 1857.

Justin: We have to go back.

Sydnee: Let's go back. Uh, Washington DC is a—it's cold. It's January. It's dirty. It's a dirty place.

Justin: Ohhh, I hear ya, sister.

Sydnee: When—whe—[laughs]

Justin: That's what I keep tellin' everybody! Nobody'll listen! These fat cats!

Sydnee: It's dirty! When people talk about how you need to "drain the swamp" or the—the swamp, as it were, the concept of the swamp—do they realize they're making, like, a reference to the fact that DC initially was sort of like a—it was a swamp.

Justin: Swamp.

Sydnee: Do people know that?

Justin: I don't know. I feel like we di—didn't we discuss this in one of our presidential illness episodes?

Sydnee: Yeah, I was just curious. A lot of people talk about "the swamp" that is Washington, DC; and I don't know if they realize that, like, it literally was. It was a s—

Justin: It was a swamp!

Sydnee: —it was a swamp, and it was never properly drained. And that's not a joke I'm telling. It was a swamp that wasn't properly—it was a—it was swampy marshland with, like, no decent sewage systems. They were just—in the 1850's, they were just putting some early sewage systems in place. Prior to that, essentially you dumped your human waste into fields... scattered about the city.

Justin: Bummer.

Sydnee: Yeah. I mean, it was gross! It was a gross, dirty, marshy swamp, with, like, piles of human feces, like, seven blocks from the White House, and everybody was sick all the time. There were mosquitoes everywhere. There was malaria and yellow fever and typhoid and dysentery and...

Justin: It was gross!

Sydnee: It was gross!

Justin: It was just gross!

Sydnee: It was a gross place. Anyway, uh... then also, there was the—you know, all the political intrigue. At this point in history—I don't know if you know much about 1857, Justin.

Justin: Well, I—of course *I* do, but why don't you recap for everybody?

Sydnee: So, the inauguration of soon-to-be President James Buchanan was just weeks away at this point in history. It was going to be in March of 1857, and the country was... ill at ease.

Justin: Took 'em a while to hand over power back then, huh? Couple months. Couple months into the year before ol' James could take over.

Sydnee: Yeah. I—I guess the... I don't know.

Justin: It took you that long to drive from your house. In a stagecoach.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: "I'll be there by March, I guess! I guess I'm President, now. I'll be there by March."

Sydnee: He's just from Pennsylvania.

Justin: "I gotta walk up from Pennsylvania. I'll be there in March. It's a long walk."

Sydnee: So, he—the thing about James Buchanan, which—prior to this episode of a medical history podcast, I knew nothing about James Buchanan other than he was a President. That was the extent of my knowledge. [laughs quietly]

Justin: I—James Buchanan was a moderate. I know that from the song "James K. Polk" by They Might Be Giants, and that's it.

Sydnee: So, that's—that's kind of—okay, "moderate" is a different word than what I would use, maybe. But I guess maybe for 1857 he would be considered a moderate?

The thing about him is he was from the North, and a lot of Northerners were anti-slavery at this point in history, but he was not. He was anti-abolition, and I say that very specifically 'cause it's hard to say that he was *pro* anything? He just kind of... like, "Everybody stop fighting and let's move forward."

Justin: That sounds like a moderate to me, right?

Sydnee: Yeah, but I mean, we're talking about slavery. It's hard to call somebody a moderate who's just kind of, "Well, you know, either way. There are good—there are—there are very fine people on both sides of the argument."

Justin: Definitely in the lens of 2019 he is not—I'm not saying [laughs] it's *aged* well!

Sydnee: I wouldn't call him a moderate *now*. [laughs]

Justin: Right. In the context of the song "James K. Polk" and the times in which he lived, a moderate.

Sydnee: He was—so, he was—he didn't want the abolitionists to make all the trouble they were making. If everybody could agree to end slavery he was fine with that. He wasn't particularly concerned about any ethical issues, or any human rights issues. He was just kind of like, "I don't really care about this. It doesn't affect me personally." [laughs quietly]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: "Um, and I'd like my Presidency to go well, so would you all just stop fighting about it?"

Uh, and he was already getting pretty chummy with the Supreme Court, because they were about to issue a decision on the Dred Scott case, to decide if they could—if, like—a Supreme Court decision that could kind of restrict Congress from ever *ending* slavery.

Justin: Ah, okay.

Sydnee: And so he was, like, getting chummy with Supreme Court Justices right prior to his inauguration to try to influence this decision that they would deliver. And he also—he didn't agree with the Missouri Compromise, which was the idea that as States were entering the Union, they would have the ability to choose whether they were entering as a slave state or a non-slave state, and that kind of thing.

Um, and—and at this moment in history, the new Kansas Territory was in a huge state of upheaval, because they were trying to decide... it was kind of, like, split. About half the state wanted to enter as a slave state, and half wanted to enter as a non-slave state, as a free state, and so they were, like, fighting. It was like the—it was called "Bloody Kansas." And they were, like—there was all these, like, riots where people were killing each other over whose Constitution would win out as the State Constitution that would join the Union.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: So it was a very tumultuous moment in American history. Uh, tempers were running high. Nobody was agreeing on anything. Um, and it—it was becoming very clear that the Federal Government was gonna have to step in and kind of... *do something* about this issue. Right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Um, and we know what happens. They—they don't, and then when we do it's the Civil War, and—

Justin: Oops.

Sydnee: —yeah.

Justin: Yeah. We... yeah. We didn't get it. Didn't get it on that one.

Sydnee: So, there were a lot of people who were not looking forward to the Buchanan Presidency, because they did not see him as a figure who was going to... like, resolve this issue in any meaningful way.

Justin: That's fair. He seems to be just kind of a... kind of a... wimp. Kinda wimpy.

Sydnee: Yeah—well, I mean, I think he was just—he was like your standard—he was—from my understanding, and this is my very brief study of the Buchanan Presidency, [laughs]—he was a, like, true-to-the-bone politician, in that whatever his beliefs were, who knows?

He just wanted to get elected, stay in power, and have people, like, do what he said. And, like, whatever had to come out of his mouth at any particular moment to make that happen, he was pretty good at greasing those wheels, most of the time.

Justin: Yeah. Well, he did it.

Sydnee: Yeah. I mean, he got elected President.

Justin: [simultaneously] I mean, he got to be President, so he's, like—he was good at it, I guess.

Sydnee: I know a lot of people are wondering, "What does any of this have to do with medicine?"

Justin: Me too!

Sydnee: Well... in light of this, um... this... this air of discontent in the country, we have an inauguration about to occur. It's a big party, right?

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: All the—all the elites in Washington, and all of the supporters of Buchanan are about to descend upon the Capitol for festivities and—and balls, and a lot of, you know, political backroom dealings prior to this next administration beginning.

And a lot of the elite were going to stay in the National Hotel, because it was known at the time to be, like, *the* place to see and be seen. It was very posh. It was a very tony place. It was very high class. Uh, it was a—the owners were friends with Buchanan.

Justin: Ahh, alright.

Sydnee: They were, like, personal friends. And so himself and his family and a lot of members of his delegation and, like, his political buddies in Congress and their staff, all these people were going to stay at the National Hotel because one, it was the place to go, and two, it was, like, Buchanan's friends and, you know, they're all buddies there. And so they were all gonna hang out at the same place.

Uh, there were a lot of drinking, huge banquets—like, you would go and, like, the hotel would have a big banquet, 'cause a lot of the people staying were, like, political dignitaries, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, a very high class scene. So, you have to imagine this, like... the hotel itself—and that's—it's this dichotomy that I think maybe is intrinsic to Washington DC... itself.

Justin: What's that?

Sydnee: The hotel was known as *the* nice place to stay. [pauses] It was *filthy*, though.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: It's important to know that. It was filthy. As—

Justin: Comparatively? Or, like, everything was filthy?

Sydnee: Everything was filthy. Like, people—I mean, it's documented. It was famously dirty. F—a famously dirty hotel.

Justin: [through laughter] Okay.

Sydnee: It was gross! There were people who, like... weren't necessarily part of the Washington elite, who would come there, stay there, and say, like, "This place reeks! Why does anyone wanna stay here?" But it was still known as—I mean, like, the—it would be like really nice furnishings and finishes and stuff, but with, like, filthy sheets and dirty carpets and nasty floors and bad smells and poor ventilation and—

Justin: Just grody!

Sydnee: —it was just gross.

Justin: Just a grody hotel!

Sydnee: But, I mean, a lot of things were in DC at the time. Because, again, it was a—it was a dirty swamp land that had not been, you know, prepared for... humans. [laughs quietly] Properly. Before we moved in.

So, we have all these dignitaries. They're in their finery. He had, like—Buchanan would have, like, suits made for him. Like, hand-tailored, beautiful suits made for him. So, they were all in their finery and their frippery, if you will—

Justin: I will.

Sydnee: —having their banq—

Justin: I will!

Sydnee: —[holding back laughter] having their banquets—

Justin: Frippery.

Sydnee: —and their drinks and whatever, and it's all so posh, until the diarrhea starts.

Justin: Aw, oh boy. Ain't that always the way? Things seem so fancy until the first hint of diarrhea.

Sydnee: And it wasn't long after they checked in that the diarrhea started. This illness hit pretty quickly. Um, it was reported that Buchanan seemed to be feeling pretty okay before dinner. They all had dinner, and then, in the middle of the night, uh—

Justin: Poof.

Sydnee: —he was *seized* with abdominal pains... and diarrhea. And a lot of people were, not just Buchanan. Many people became ill. Even the doctor with him became ill. Uh, woke up in the middle of the night, thought he had been *poisoned*, actually, he was so sick.

Um, went and immediately took something to make himself puke, which would've been the...

Justin: Yep!

Sydnee: ... remedy of the time.

Justin: 1857. That's what we were doin'.

Sydnee: Yeah. Make you—make you puke, make you poop. Um, what do you do when the problem *is* vomiting and... [holding back laughter] diarrhea.?

Justin: [laughs] The ouroboros!

Sydnee: Oh. [laughs quietly] So, he—

Justin: "I should be getting better! [through laughter] I don't understand! This should be fixing me!"

Sydnee: Uh, but the doctor couldn't tend to himself for very long, because Buchanan was sick, and he had to go tend to Buchanan, and... so, uh, the vomiting, nausea—uh, swollen tongue was a symptom.

Um, and everybody, all these political dignitaries, all these very fancy people, spent the night throwing up and having horrible diarrhea and cramping. And the next morning, uh, it was a bad scene at the National Hotel.

Justin: Yeah, I would guess.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Grodier than normal!

Sydnee: So, initially the doctor says, "Ah, it was probably the soup. I think it was the soup we all ate"

Justin: Uh, was it the soup?

Sydnee: Well, Justin, we don't think it was the soup. There's more to this story. This is not where it ends. It does not just end with this bout of diarrhea.

Justin: Did you le—are you doing a *soup* cliffhanger?

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] No! I'm just saying—

Justin: Is this a soup cliffhanger? Was it the soup? Was it not the soup? Check in next time!

Sydnee: [pauses] After we go to the billing department!

Justin: No! You're gonna tell me if it was the soup *now*.

Sydnee: I—Justin, I'm—

Justin: You can't leave me like this, Smirl!

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Was it the *soup*?!

Sydnee: [holding back laughter] The soup is not poisoned at this time.

Justin: I'm canceling HBO now, because of this. You've mistreated the fans for the last time!

Sydnee: Who killed Laura Palmer, and was it the soup? [laughs]

Justin: Was it the soup? They used soup to do it. [pauses] Let's go.

[theme music plays]

Justin: I wanna talk to you, Sydnee, if I could. I hate to take up any of your valuable time, but I *do* wanna tell you about Policygenius. Uh, Halloween is on the way, and we're all afraid of all the ghosts and goblins and [Dracula voice] spooky scares, [normal voice] but there's something a little bit scarier out there, and that is: [spooky voice] shopping for life insurance!

Sydnee: Ooooh...

Justin: [spooky voice] It's booorriing! [laughs] [normal voice] Uh, nobody likes to do it 'cause it's boring and it's not fun to do.

Sydnee: You coulda done something with boo—[spooky voice] bor—boo-oring!

Justin: [spooky voice] Bor—oorring!

Sydnee: There you go.

Justin: Uh, what—but you know what? It's important. You gotta do it. But you know who's there to help you swallow this bitter pill? Why, it's Policygenius. Uh, Policygenius is the easy way to shop for life insurance online in minutes. You can compare quotes from top insurers and find your best price. The Policygenius team is gonna handle all the paperwork, the red tape, all the stuff that makes it really annoying, so you can just get it over with, and—and, uh, have some fun.

This October, take the scariness out of buying life insurance with Policygenius. Go to Policygenius.com. Get quotes and apply in minutes. You can do the whole thing on the phone right now. Policygenius: the easy way to compare and buy life insurance.

Uh, I am thrilled to present our sponsor, Blue Apron—our second sponsor, I should say, but not second in our hearts, because Blue Apron has been ride or die with us for many, many years now.

Sydnee: First in our hearts and tummies.

Justin: Uh, they—you know Blue Apron, at this point! It is a meal delivery service. They are gonna send you a box with all the ingredients you need to make delicious meals. Tell 'em your, uh—the things you eat, the things you don't eat, and they are gonna hook up a box just for you, and it's gonna be delicious and fun to make, with lots of pictures.

Um, it really does make cooking kind of like—you know it reminds me of? How satisfying it can be to, like, put together furniture. Uh, it's like that, 'cause you have step by step instructions, and you just follow the directions, and it comes out great!

Sydnee: Except imagine if you got the eat the furniture at the end.

Justin: Eat the table at the end! How about that? What—

Sydnee: Or don't. Eat the Blue Apron.

Justin: Oh—yeah, you *should* eat the Blue Apron. Don't eat the table, unless Blue Apron sent you a table and it's, like, an avant-garde recipe they're trying?

Sydnee: That looks like a table?

Justin: That looks like a table. Start making delicious, brag-worthy tables at home—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —without the hassle. Try Blue Apron. It's not just table—edible tables anymore. They've got a lotta different foods you can eat in addition to delicious tables. Check out this week's menu and get 60 dollars off when you visit blueapron.com/sawbones. That's blueapron.com/sawbones. Blue Apron: a better way to cook.

Okay. Sydnee.

Sydnee: [laughs] The soup.

Justin: We've waited long enough. Was it the soup?

Sydnee: [pauses] I mean, I could've been the soup, Justin! I don't know—I—at the end of this, I'm gonna tell—I already alluded to the fact that we'll never know for sure what it was.

Justin: Sydnee, can I ask you—

Sydnee: But we—

Justin: —one—one question?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Was it the soup?

Sydnee: Maybe.

Justin: Okay. It might've been the soup.

Sydnee: It might've been the soup. One way or another, the doctor thought, "Ah, it was something we ate. We all got sick 'cause it was something we ate."

'Cause a lot of people got *very* sick with the same symptoms, but it's important to note that if we're just talking about, like, "Oh, we just ate something bad, no big deal." It wasn't a little tummy bug. Some people got sick and got better. *Some* people got sick and continued to suffer effects of this for months! I mean, would have, like, relapses and recurrences and would just feel weakened by it for—I mean, up to a year later, you know?

Others stayed sick and eventually would succumb to the disease. Uh, the first death was Major George McNair, who was 64, and he also ate at the banquet around the same—ate—ate at the hotel around the same time. It's not known if he had the soup. It's not known if he had the exact same food that President-elect Buchanan had.

But, uh, he did get the same illness, the National Hotel Disease, and eventually died. He was the only one who got an autopsy... I don't—no one else—

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: —there are more deaths to come. I guess I have given that away.

Justin: I wonder how common that would've been back then. I have no idea.

Sydnee: Uh, he—you know, I'm not sure. I—I don't know. I'd have to look into that. But, uh—but he did get an autopsy, and they noted that there was some inflammation, and what they called "the onset of gangrene in the stomach," already. So, like, tissue death. Uh, but there was no—there was nothing obvious to them at the time. Now, of course, your ability to do any studies to say what happened at the time was fairly limited.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, I mean, the germ theory of disease was not... you know, a thing. So I don't know what they were looking for, really. Kind of a weird idea. They did an autopsy without really any clue what—

Justin: "What does this look like to you guys?" [holding back laughter] They were checkin' for his soup levels.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: "Was there soup in here? 'Cause that would narrow it down."

Sydnee: "Boy, I wish we knew what any of this stuff was." [laughs quietly]

Justin: "Wow. What is this one? The squishy one?"

"Uh, it's all squishy."

Sydnee: "Why—why do we do this?"

Justin: "Why are we doing this? This is actually disrespectful. I'm actually getting skeezed our right now... from doing this."

Sydnee: Uh, so they couldn't figure out a cause. Um, and, like I said, other people were becoming ill. Buchanan decided, "Uh, I think I'm gonna get back to Pennsylvania [exhales heavily] for a while to recuperate?"

Justin: Lay low?

Sydnee: You know, just wanted to be in his own bed for a bit.

Justin: I hear ya.

Sydnee: Um, and as he left the National Hotel, went back to Pennsylvania to get better, I guess eat some chicken soup and rest, um—

Justin: Wai—wait, what?

Sydnee: [pauses] Oh.

Justin: Chicken—no, James, no!

Sydnee: [laughs] Not the soup again!

Justin: Not soup!

Sydnee: Uh, the cases stopped! People stopped getting sick.

Justin: So was it just that one...

Sydnee: So—

Justin: ... magical night?

Sydnee: Well, here's—could you guess what people began to think?

Justin: [pauses] Um... that there was a—

Sydnee: It is a tumultuous time in American political history.

Justin: It was a—

Sydnee: The President-elect stayed at a hotel—

Justin: It was an assassination attempt on James Buchanan.

Sydnee: That's exactly what people began to think. Was this a poisoning? Did somebody try to kill James Buchanan?

Justin: With...

Sydnee: Soup.

Justin: ... the soup.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: They knew how much he loved a nice soup.

Sydnee: So, a lot of people—

Justin: His barley vegetable. I'm—I'm editorializing here, but I feel like with speculative nonfiction that's okay.

Sydnee: He liked—I've read that he was not a particularly healthy guy anyway. He wasn't a particularly healthy eater, and he also was a bit of a drinker, and generally speaking was not in great shape, even before all of the... diarrhea.

Justin: [quietly] Kind of a—maybe a donut whiskey soup.

Sydnee: [laughs] That doesn't sound appealing. I like those words you said, "donut," whiskey," and "soup," but not together.

Justin: Perhaps a Hot—a Hot Pocket vodka...

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: ... soup. Gazpacho.

Sydnee: That's—

Justin: A nice Hot Pocket gazpacho.

Sydnee: —it's 2019. Where is the Hot Pocket vodka? It's about time, I think.

Uh, so anyway, people began to theorize, was he poisoned? Was this a poisoning attempt? Uh, somehow the rumor that it was arsenic got out, and people were saying it was arsenic, which there wasn't evidence for but, you know, people talked about it. Uh, and nobody was quite sure. Like, "Well, none of that really makes sense, but at the same time, it did stop after he left and went home."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: "Um, so maybe it was related." And they began to wonder who could've tried to assassinate the President. There were different rumors that went around. Uh, was it a political rival? Was it maybe an abolitionist, you know?

Justin: Ooh, yeah.

Sydnee: Uh, there was a lot of talk that—they started to blame it on staff members of the National Hotel, specifically, like, former freed slaves at the National Hotel, except the problem with that theory is that there were, in fact, none employed at the National Hotel.

Justin: It's definitely a hiccup.

Sydnee: Uh, the entire staff was white, so there was—that was absolutely not the case. But, these theories went wild. Uh, you know, who could have tried to kill James Buchanan?

Now, all of this talk is not great at the beginning of someone's Presidency.

Justin: Right, yeah. A lot of...

Sydnee: So...

Justin: ... t—tumult.

Sydnee: Exactly. A lot of intrigue. It's gonna—it's really gonna distract from your ability to, like, guide policy, or whatever James Buchanan was interested in doing. Who knows? It doesn't sound like he was very successful in doing much of anything, so whatever his plans were, he thought they were going to be dashed by all of this intrigue. So—

Justin: I thought you were gonna say "diarrhea," but...

Sydnee: [laughs] That too, but he mainly was concerned about the talk, and he didn't—he needed to find a way to kind of squash it. He didn't really think it was an assassination attempt. He was not particularly concerned.

Justin: That's also a bad look. Like, "People hate my guts so much that they're willing to take me out before I'm even in office."

Sydnee: Well, and also, like, kill a bunch of innocent bystanders.

Justin: Yeah, right?

Sydnee: You know? Uh, so—

Justin: Innocent soup-lovers.

Sydnee: [laughs] So, I mean, that could've been me! I love soup.

Justin: Yeah! Right! Now you've gone too far!

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] So, he decides—it's a combination of his concern about all of the gossip, and the fact that he was good friends, as I already mentioned, with the people who owned the National Hotel. He decides that the best way to squash this rumor was for him to show that there was nothing to fear, but staying at the National Hotel again.

Justin: Ohh, I love this!

Sydnee: He's goin' back to the scene of the crime to prove that he ain't scared.

Justin: He ain't scared of the National Hotel.

Sydnee: And he—he—that way—

Justin: "I'll take—I'll take *two* soups!"

Sydnee: [laughs] And it was probably—the thought, historically, is that it was mainly because he didn't want the National Hotel to get a bad name, because he's buddies with them. But either way, he went back, and he stayed there right before his March 4th inauguration, to show that there was nothing to fear. And, as you may have guessed... [through laughter] he got sick again.

Justin: Yeah, of course. Yeah, no, no, we all knew this was where this was goin'.

Sydnee: Yes. Uh, he—he was never completely recovered from his initial bout, uh—

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: —and now he was sick again. It was actually, uh—he was very ill on the day of his inauguration. The—his speech, everything, he was barely making it through, because of how nauseous and—and the diarrhea and the weakness and everything, the abdominal pain, everything that had followed this illness, and then its—[holding back laughter] the recurrence of it.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Uh, he actually had his naval surgeon with him throughout the entire ceremony. Like, near his side, just in case.

Justin: Just in case he... wow.

Sydnee: Um, he would keep this surgeon, by the way, with him, for weeks and weeks after this illness. And, like, he kept promising him, "If you'll just please, like, stay here with me just in case, I don't wanna die, please just stay nearby and tell me what to do so that I get through this. If you just please do this, I'll give you a really great position in the government."

Um, he never did.

Justin: I'm—

Sydnee: He kept promising this poor doctor—

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: —uh, "I'm gonna do this for you, I'm gonna do this for you, I'm gonna give you this favor if you'll just, like, take care of me and hang out," and then he never did, and eventually the doctor got fed up with him and left him, like, months later.

Justin: Okay. I'm confused, because you said that, like—okay. A bunch of people got sick, and then it just kind of stopped, right?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: But the *he* goes back, and he gets sick?

Sydnee: He got sick *again*.

Justin: That's so strange.

Sydnee: So, the initial bout was in January.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: He went back to Pennsylvania—

Justin: It wasn't, like, a recurring problem, though, when he wasn't there, right?

Sydnee: No.

Justin: In the intervening months.

Sydnee: No, nothing happened in the intervening months. And then when he comes back on March 3rd—

Justin: He gets sick.

Sydnee: —he gets sick again.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Wow, that's so strange.

Sydnee: I know! Exactly! Exactly. So anyway, uh, he makes it through the inauguration—'cause it's not just the speech, right? It's all, like, the parties and everything that follow. Um, and he credited that, by the way, to the fact that the doctor was giving him little sips of brandy [through laughter] all throughout the day. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: And he thought that that's what fortified him against... the illness.

Justin: What a hero. Thank you for keeping me on the straight and narrow, doctor.

Sydnee: And enabled—that's a pretty cool doc. Enabled him to make it through. But, this second outbreak, so to speak, was not just isolated to the newly inaugurated President. Other people got sick again. Um, and this was especially weird, too, because it is thought that this second time he stayed at the National Hotel, as far as we know, all he ate there were, like, crackers.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: But somehow, he got sick again!

Justin: There's one thing that I love with my crackers. That makes me a little suspicious.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Justin: Maybe he just didn't wanna admit that he ate the soup again.

Sydnee: [simultaneously] He ate the soup again. He just—

Justin: "Uhh, just some crackers, I think? Let me think..."

Sydnee: "[incredulously] Did you eat the soup again?"

Justin: "No, I don't *think* I did?"

Sydnee: "[incredulously] Did you seriously eat the soup *again*?!"

Justin: "There *was* soup..."

Sydnee: "[loudly] How could you eat the soup again!"

Justin: "I don't *think*... there was—"

Sydnee: "[loudly] How much do you love soup?!"

Justin: "Just love the crackers with it, but you gotta have a dip... of them, or they get so dry. [smacks lips] You know how dry crackers get?"

Sydnee: So, the result of this second—

Justin: "Hold on, I have to go have incredibly powerful diarrhea. If you'll excuse me."

Sydnee: "It has nothing to do with the soup."

Justin: "It's soup—[through laughter] it is soup, uh, irrelevant. It's not—not fixed to the soup."

Sydnee: Uh, so not only—like I said, not only did he get sick, but a lot of other people *again* get sick, and the result of this second outbreak are even more deaths. Um, Representative John Montgomery of Pennsylvania dies in April. Representative John Quitman of Mississippi died in July of the following year from, like, ongoing aftereffects of the disease. And then, uh, former Representative David Robeson of Pennsylvania dies in June of 1859, again, of complications from the same disease that all started at this March outbreak in 1857.

And, uh, people—this just continues to, like, get the rumor mill going—

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: —because two of these Representatives, as I mentioned, are from Pennsylvania—

Justin: Very suspicious.

Sydnee: —as is Buchanan. And the other Representative was politically aligned with him.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Uh, *and...* another person who perished to this outbreak was James Buchanan's nephew.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Who was supposed to be his personal secretary, but died before he was able to actually fulfill his role.

Justin: I'm assuming he wasn't, like, traveling with him.

Sydnee: He *was* traveling with him, yes.

Justin: Ohhh! Interesting.

Sydnee: Yes. So, as all of this happens, people are just certain this has to be this poisoning attempt, this—certainly it was, 'cause all these people from Pennsylvania are dying, and James Buchanan's own family member, and James Buchanan is sick, and...

So, uh, all these rumors are going around. At the same time, the hotel is shut down for a period of time for some cleaning, at which point they find a dead rat in the water tank at the hotel.

Justin: Aww, [through laughter] that could be your problem, right there!

Sydnee: Which it seems like a strange thing to publicize, but I guess if the alternative is "There's a murderer in our hotel..."

Justin: The dead rat is like, "Hey, good news!"

Sydnee: "We can get *that* out." [laughs]

Justin: "On the bright side, we know a guy who knows a guy to get rid of dead rats."

Sydnee: Um, and it's weird, because that was kind of, like... that was published as, like, "See? It's fine. We found the dead rat, it was just the dead rat, we got it out. Everything's good now."

Justin: "There was only one."

Sydnee: There is an argument, though, that—

Justin: "It wasn't even that cute, so it's not, like, a big deal."

Sydnee: They didn't—apparently the water tank was just for, like, bathing and stuff. It wasn't actually for drinking, it wasn't potable water. So then the thought was like, "But nobody was drinking that water."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: "So why did they blame it on the dead rat?" Either way, they did find a dead rat. Um, other doctors said, "No, no, no. It's nothing—it's not murder. It's not a dead rat. It wasn't the soup. It was a miasma," because this was a period in history where the miasma theory of disease was very popular, which was basically the idea that diseases were, like, these bad smells that drifted, bad air that drifted, you know, through the air, and could just, like, make you sick.

And they could specifically come from things like dead animals or rotting garbage, or—gross things, human waste, could give off these airs of.. disease, and then you would inhale them and get sick.

And so a lot of doctors said, "Well, if you go inside the hotel, you'll notice how bad it smells there, that it smells very bad inside. It's a bad-smelling hotel." [laughs quietly]

Justin: "Yeah, very stinky hotel."

Sydnee: "It's very stinky."

Justin: "Stinky!"

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] "It's *very* stinky." And it was noted that, um, because of—like, additions had been built on the hotel over the years, and the additions had been built in a really haphazard way, and so the ventilation didn't actually, like, go—it didn't ventilate properly.

Justin: This doesn't go anywhere.

Sydnee: No, this doesn't go anywhere.

Justin: [simultaneously] This is just a tube out of your room, into—

Sydnee: Into another room.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And so, like, bad smells would be forced from one room to the next, but not, like, out of the building? And specifically, some of the vents went the wrong way. And so, like, periodically, guests would report just, like... sewage—like, air that reeked of sewage just, like, blasting through a vent at such speeds that they would say it would put candles out in their rooms.

Justin: Oh my God.

Sydnee: So, like, your room is being pumped full of, like, sewer gas periodically. Um, so the whole place smelled so bad you could see where, if you thought the miasma theory of disease was real, you'd go in the hotel and smell these, like, foul-smelling gusts of wind and go "Well, it's just that. Disease is just seeping in to all the rooms and making everybody sick."

And then, of course, there were still people who insisted, "No, no, no. It was murder," because of the timing. Um, and this was even, for a while, listed as an assassination attempt on Buchanan. You could see, like, "Buchanan assassination attempts" and "National Hotel Disease—"

Justin: [unintelligible]

Sydnee: —they used to call it the Buchanan Grip, sometimes.

Justin: Oh, that's unfortunate.

Sydnee: Um, what was it r—

Justin: You know that's a bad President if one of the things that you can be named for is the diarrhea that you had that one time.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Like, that's a tough legacy.

Sydnee: Uh... it's interesting—on a side note, it's thought that this probably shaped—somewhat, maybe not to a large extent, but it did help shape the Buchanan Presidency, because he was quite sick, uh, for a while. Like, he suffered the aftereffects of this disease throughout at least the first year of his Presidency, if not longer.

Um, and it—it definitely made him less capable of, uh, like, withstanding long meetings or big, you know—doing, like, tough negotiating and that kind of thing, and so there's some thought that, like, this—this physical illness may have impacted his abilities as a President, which is only interesting in the sense that it changes the course of human history, and it's disease, which is neat to think

about. But, on the flip side, it sounds like James Buchanan also wasn't very—like, wasn't a very good President, period. Like, diarrhea notwithstanding.

Uh, what was the National Hotel Disease, really?

Justin: I don't know!

Sydnee: Well, it was probably just plain ol' dysentery, is what we think now. Um, as I mentioned, the hotel was gross. DC was gross. Uh, it was—I mean, if you look just beneath the surface of all the finery and all of the, you know, politicians and their hand-tailored suits and all that, you just saw, like, human... refuse, in the streets. So, like, it would've just been—it would've been very easy for some of that to contaminate the food, and—or somebody's hands, or the sheets, or towels, or—

Justin: You name it. You name it.

Sydnee: —the surf—any surface. I mean, like, everything could've been covered in poop and you wouldn't have known. Um, so it was probably just dysentery. Uh, there were doctors a few years later who started referring to it as a light cholera. [laughs quietly] "Just a light cholera."

Justin: "A [kiss noise] of cholera—" A kiss of cholera—

Sydnee: [laughs] Diet cholera.

Justin: [through laughter] A di—diet cholera!

Sydnee: It probably wasn't *cholera* cholera itself, but—

Justin: God, diet cholera is such a good Twitter username. Good—best of luck. Fortune favors the bold, y'all.

Sydnee: [laughs] Uh, but it probably was just some sort of dysentery that somebody picked up from not washing their hands when they went number two, got it on something that somebody else touched and got in their mouth, and... fecal-oral route, bud. There it goes.

James Buchanan went on to become one of the worst Presidents in United States history—

Justin: Oh nooo!

Sydnee: —according to people who know these things. I am not making that—that is not a subjective statement. That's not my opinion. These are just things I have read, that historians have written.

Justin: Not a Sydnee original, there.

Sydnee: No. Uh, people who are smarter than me about history and the Presidents have said that, and I guess that sounds pretty true, because he never really seemed to weigh in on the issue of slavery in any effective way, and of course this was 1857. What would happen in the 60's? Well...

Justin: Bad. Bad stuff.

Sydnee: The Civil War.

Justin: Well, I mean—yes.

Sydnee: I mean—yes, bad that—

Justin: Bad in the sense that, like—

Sydnee: —I mean, good in the sense that it ended slavery, but bad—

Justin: Would've been totally groovy to end slavery without it, though! [laughs]

Sydnee: Without all the killing.

Justin: [through laughter] Would've been choice.

Sydnee: Would've been better not to have it, but... uh, but James Buchanan didn't seem to help much with any of this. The National reopened, and it did well until it was torn down during World War II. It was just—not because of World War II, just the time period that it—

Justin: What's there now?

Sydnee: —uh, it is now the cite of the Newseum. So if you've ever—

Justin: For another—for another, uh, three months, 'cause it's closing at the end of the year.

Sydnee: Is that when it's closing?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: I didn't know if it'd moved. But anyway, if you've ever been—

Justin: They're looking for another—as I understand it, at least, they're looking for another, uh...

Sydnee: But if you've ever been to the Newseum, that is the cite of the once beautiful, but pungent, National Hotel, and the dysentery that almost took down President James Buchanan.

Justin: Diarrhea so bad they named it after him.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Good Lord, please, if anybody is due that fate, it is probably me. Uh, but *please* don't let me have a diarrhea named after me? I—I just—I just would like to be spared that fate, uh, if I could.

Sydnee: I guess if you're ever at the Newseum, don't eat the soup.

Justin: Don't eat the soup!

Sydnee: You never know.

Justin: You never know. Uh, folks, that's gonna do it for us. Thank you so much for, uh, listening to our program. If you liked what you heard, there's a lot more on our website.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: You can head on over to dietcholera.com—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —and you can see all of our, uh, episodes. I just grabbed that—

Sydnee: That's not—you did?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Oh no.

Justin: It's fine. It's a good use of our family's money.

Sydnee: Oh no...

Justin: It's fine. Totally fine. Uh, you can see more of our episodes there. Uh, leave us a rating or review or what have you. We would really appreciate it!

Sydnee: There's a—there's a really cool book—I've been able to read part of it. I couldn't read the entire thing in preparation for this episode, but I read part of it. Um, Kerry Walters wrote *Outbreak in Washington DC: the 1857 Mystery of the National Hotel Disease*, which is an entire book dedicated to this outbreak. It's just a cool, like, little story of the outbreak itself, and then the history of time. Anyway, if you're fascinated by this story, which I... was... I would recommend this book. So far, I've really enjoyed it.

Justin: Um, October 19th, we are gonna be at the King's Theater with My Brother, My Brother, and Me. That is a newly added show, so you can still get tickets to that. All the other shows... pretty much for the year, are sold out, especially—at least on the Sawbones front. Um, so if you wanna get tickets to those, you can do that at mcelroy.family, and then click on "tours."

Uh, we also have, on mcelroy.family, is where you can find a link to merchandise. We've got a new "cure-alls cure nothing" t-shirt that is very cool that I think that you will very much dig. Um, and there's also a pro-vax enamel pin. It's a design my Megan Kott that was previously just for Max Fun donors, and she's reworked the design, and we're selling those to benefit the Immunization Action Coalition, which spreads awareness and information about vaccines, so it's a very cool organization.

Sydnee: And it's the time of year to get your flu shot!

Justin: Get your flu shot! Sydnee and I got ours today! High five.

Sydnee: Yes. Woo!

Justin: And, uh, you should get yours now, too. Go to a drugstore. You know, it'll take you ten minutes. Just—just go get it done. You don't need to go to the doctor's office if you don't want to.

Uh, that's gonna do it for us—oh, thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program, and thank you to you for listening! We're gonna be back with you next week, but until then, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And, as always, don't drill a hole in your head!

[theme music plays]

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