

Sawbones 338: Nostalgia

Published September 4th, 2020
[Listen here at themcelroy.family](https://themcelroy.family)

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 you 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 am your cohost, Justin... Tyler... McElroy I.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy. That implies that there will be a second.

Justin: You never know, Syd? You never know! A lot of people—

Sydnee: Oh, I know! No, I—[laughs]

Justin: Oh, I know.

Sydnee: Oh, I know! [laughs]

Justin: I know, Dr. Wild knows, everybody knows. Uh, that there will not be a Justin McElroy II.

Sydnee: We got all the kids we can handle.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Who's Dr. Wild?

Justin: I don't know. I couldn't remember the actual name of the dude who did my vasectomy—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —so I know there's a dentist in town called Dr. Wild, and I just thought it was so funny to go to a dentist named Dr. Wild. That just seemed like, uh, kind of a stretch. You know, it's funny. I've been thinking a lot about, um—

Sydnee: When you had your vasectomy?

Justin: Yeah. Um, fondly thinking back to it, 'cause it's the last time I was able to sit for two days, and play v—and do nothing, um—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: —with ice—

Sydnee: With frozen peas.

Justin: —yeah, frozen peas on my... [quietly] genitals.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Um, and I've been thinking back fondly to it. It was a very relaxing time in my life. I could—now, the difference—I could've gone anywhere, which makes it a lot nicer, but I didn't, and that's a key difference to where we're at right now in our lives.

Sydnee: Right. I—I think what you were experiencing, maybe a lot of people are experiencing, although probably not longing for a surgical procedure that they've had in the past, perhaps. Perhaps remembering fondly a—

Justin: Not the procedure, the recovery.

Sydnee: —the recovery period—

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: —of a surgical procedure. Perhaps. You never know. Um, I never had my tonsils out, but I always remember everybody talking about how you got popsicles afterward.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: So it seems like something you may remember fondly. Uh, would you say you're experiencing some nostalgia?

Justin: That is more than fair, and not just about surgery recovery, Syd. I've been experiencing a lot about a lot of things that I feel like I maybe didn't appreciate, uh, when I could do them. Uh—

Sydnee: Leaving the house.

Justin: Le—yeah, that's a great one.

Sydnee: Going to the store, or the mall.

Justin: The mall—oh, don't say the mall!

Sydnee: The movies. Restaurants. [laughs quietly]

Justin: The movies! Oh, I miss movies, Syd! I miss 'em!

Sydnee: Uh, being in crowds. I always, uh—I did not enjoy being in crowds, until I couldn't, and now [holding back laughter] I miss being in a crowd.

Justin: Can you imagine what that would be like?

Sydnee: No.

Justin: It's wild. It's wild to think about.

Sydnee: Uh, I got an email requesting that we talk about nostalgia, which I didn't know had a history as an ailment, as a diagnosis, not just a feeling, uh, until I received this email. And I was very—I am very grateful that I did, because I find this fascinating. This is really... uh—

Justin: You've gotten into this one. I love it when Sydnee gets excited about a topic, um, especially when she reads a lot about it, 'cause it means we get to, uh, have a lot of conversations about it, and I love to see you captivated. It's one of my favorite Sydnee modes.

Sydnee: Aww. Well, thank you. I'm reading a whole book about it now, which I'll talk about.

Justin: A whole book?!

Sydnee: A whole book about it!

Justin: No need to brag, Dr. McElroy!

Sydnee: [laughs] Uh, and I also felt like it was timely. I think a lot of us are probably experiencing that longing... for a time... before. [crosstalk]

Justin: Oh yeah. Any other time, pretty much.

Sydnee: Thank you—when I looked back, I realized several people have recommended this. Thank you Miranda, and Matt, and Britney, and Anna, and Lauren, and Jeremy, for emailing and mentioning this. I did not—like I said, I had no idea of this history, of the concept of the word nostalgia. Um, and maybe you don't either, so—

Justin: Safe bet.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Safe bet, if you didn't.

Sydnee: The word itself—

Justin: Unless it had an article in *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader*, I am not aware of anything medical that you don't know about.

[pauses]

Sydnee: Okay. You're not aware of anything—no, that's fair. Yes. That is true.

Justin: *Unless...*

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: ... there was an article in *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader*. One of the many volumes I've perused.

Sydnee: The word comes from the Greek. Uh, I knew the algia part from algos, which is pain. Anything with an algia is hurting. A myalgia, your muscles are hurting. An arthralgia, your joints are hurting. So, algia usually means pain, so that's the algia part of nostalgia.

Um, but I didn't know the other part, nostos, coming—comes from the Greek for homecoming.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: So it's an interesting concept. Homecoming pain, the pain of homecoming. Pain associated with homecoming.

Justin: [holding back laughter] I experienced that quite a few times in my high school years.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [amused] A lot of rejection, there!

Sydnee: [through laughter] I believe I was one of those.

Justin: Yeah! We don't need to dwell on that.

Sydnee: That's a story for another—you'd broken my heart—

Justin: We don't—

Sydnee: —at church camp, and—

Justin: I just said—you said we didn't need to dwell on it!

Sydnee: Okay. Anyway, I think it's interesting because, as—we'll get into how this term came about, but it's—it's actually not a homecoming, right? It's, like, a psychological homecoming that you're experiencing—

Justin: Right, you're—you're mentally going home, and that's causing you pain.

Sydnee: Yes. But the origin of it comes a lot—is a lot more literal. The idea of pain because you *can't*, because a homecoming is not occurring. You can't go home.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So the term almost wasn't. It's really weird to think about, like, the history of this word, because I think the idea of nostalgia means so much to us now. And I feel like especially as a kid of the 90's, seeing, like, the fashion trends and things of today, it feels very poignant to me, 'cause I see a lot of people that I'm like, "You're walkin' straight out of a Delia's catalog from 1996 right now."

Justin: [laughs] I have friends like that I can enjoy and appreciate.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] But, uh, I don't think—I don't think Johannes Hofer knew about Delia's catalog either. Uh, he was a medical student in Basel, Switzerland in 1688. He was studying a mere 17 miles from his hometown of Mulhouse, uh, but 17 miles was a lot harder to travel back then, I guess.

Justin: Sure, yeah.

Sydnee: You know. Like—

Justin: What are you gonna do?

Sydnee: —no cars.

Justin: Get a horse? No thanks.

Sydnee: Well, yeah, I mean, I think...

Justin: They're expensive.

Sydnee: ... like, a horse.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Or a buggy, probably.

Justin: They were probably lying all over the place, though, horses back then. Probably not as hard to come by.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] He had previously read in theology and philosophy in university, but he had decided to pursue medicine as his career, and that's where he went to medical school. Um, and at the time, it was required that medical students present sort of a preliminary dissertation about some sort of disease state or treatment, and then you would have to, like—you would write your paper describing it, and then present it to a panel of physicians and defend, like a dissertation, right? Um, and typically you would choose something that was known. Like, "I'm just going to do a deep dive into this already well described and understood condition." Or, well, [holding back laughter] we thought we understood it at the time. "And then I'm gonna present it, and they're gonna ask me some questions that—just to prove that I know about it, and that will be the whole thing."

That was kind of the idea. Uh, and these were called disputatio. What he presented was called a dissertatio, which was a whole new idea. The idea, "As a medical student, I'm going to present to you a whole new disease that I have named myself."

Justin: That's a pretty big swing, I feel like.

Sydnee: It is a big swing! It's—it is! It's a—I mean, if you can imagine, if you are in medical training, doing that right now, like, "Hello. Hello, doctors. I came up with a disease. [laughs quietly] And I'm going to tell you about it now."

That'd be wild. Uh, he—now, the idea that there was this illness that had not yet been named was already out there. Obviously he didn't, you know—

Justin: Invent the idea.

Sydnee: Right. Um, there was the idea of heimweh, or homesickness, or what the French called la maladie du pays, which was a disease state. The idea that you could get so homesick that you were sick, literally sick. Not just, like, "I miss home." Like, "I'm in bed, I have a fever. I—"

Justin: Like broken heart syndrome, the idea that you could be—

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: —you experience something emotionally so much that it would cause physical symptoms.

Sydnee: Although at that point you have to understand, the idea of, like... how the mind connects to the body and, um, not just the emotional part of that, but the actual, like, chemical, you know, neurotransmitters and things—none of that was understood, right?

Justin: No, we had no—we had no idea.

Sydnee: We had no—right. This was all before those concepts. Um, he, uh—he was also inspired by stories of, like, soldiers, or servants, who would commonly be sent from their home—you know, hometown, maybe their little village, to go work in, like, a rich person's house in a city or something, and so be very far away from home, and probably not—you know, if you're a soldier, you can't go home until you're given the order to. And if you were one of these servants, you were not allowed to. Maybe never!

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Depending on what the—you know, what you were contracted or whatever to do.

Um, and these people would be removed from their native lands, and then would get very, very sick, and until they were kind of repatriated, put back home, they—some of them would die. That's how severe this illness was.

And so he wanted to describe that. What was that?

Justin: It's also probably, I would imagine at this point, like, more... like, brutal. Because you didn't spend time away from where you were. Like, these days, you know, we have planes and cars and what have you, so you would—you know, it wasn't—it's not uncommon, I think, for people to travel far away from their home for periods of time. It must be very—much more jarring if you're lived your entire existence in one place to find yourself, you know, halfway across the world.

Sydnee: You see a lot of this—and I—I was gonna get into this a little later, but I think it's good to bring it up now. What you're talking about is one of the reasons why they thought initially the people who got this illness got it. This concept that,

especially people in rural communities or mountainous areas, grow up sort of isolated, and only know their families, the people immediately around them. And so when you take them away from home, they feel that a lot more intensely than people who grew up in cities, who maybe are used to the idea that you leave your families at some point. It is just normal. Like, "I will move away and I'll—you know, we'll write letters or whatever, but this is just not—it's normal."

Um, and you can see as this idea of this as an illness is more and more understood, that kind of argument. Like, "Well, it's just these rural mountain people who get it."

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Um, which I felt—I feel like is very interesting, because I see echoes of that in the way we talk about West Virginians today, and probably other regions of Appalachia.

Justin: How so?

Sydnee: The idea that people always come back.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: You've heard this, I'm sure. West Virginians, they always end up coming back home at some point. They might move away, but they come back home. I've heard that concept. I have no idea if that's true. I don't know of any evidence for that. But you'll hear that idea that, like, "Well, people from these mountainous areas feel that pull to go back home."

Justin: [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: Um, and it's weird, 'cause you gotta wonder if there aren't, like, cultural... you know, that this is kind of reverberating throughout time, this idea. But anyway, uh, he tried out different ideas for how he would name this. Um, eventually he tried—er, initially he tried nosomania, which means return madness—

Justin: [laughs] That's a little much. That's a little intense, I feel.

Sydnee: He tried philopatridomania, which is literally madness caused by yearning for the homeland.

Justin: Little verbose.

Sydnee: But nostalgia was the one that he liked the best. It was the one that stuck. And it makes sense, it sounds nice.

Justin: It's a nice sounding word, yeah.

Sydnee: He also wanted to separate it from a mania, because a mania at that point was a clinical entity that seemed a lot less—you couldn't understand it, and you didn't quite know what to do about it at that point, all the different things they called a mania, 'cause there were lots of different things that are not what we would describe today as, like, a diagnosed manic state that would fall under the heading at this point of mania. And he wanted something that you could fix.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And nostalgia was known to be fixable, as we'll get into. So he presented his paper with his definition, his name, his treatments, his case studies, the physiology of it, whatever. He defended it. His mentors, Jacob Harder and Theodor Zwinger, both thought he did a great idea, and they took—er, did a great job, and thought this idea was so important that they took an unusual step. They published it.

This would've—this was not done for a preliminary medical student dissertation.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: This was not typical.

Justin: So, my first research project.

Sydnee: Exactly. The fact that this was published was very strange. Um, and Zwinger would go further later, when he published a collection of important papers. He included this in there. And it is fair to say that both these other guys would kind of take credit for this at different times.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Um, but I guess at this point in history, that was not uncommon. Things were kind of generated from, like, a student and a professor collectively, and it was not unusual for a professor to maybe take credit for a student's work, and things, as to exactly who wrote what was always sort of nebulous. So that—these are not bad guys. This was the time.

Um, the symptoms that Hofer laid out were very varied. Some had what you would expect. Sadness, obsessive thoughts about their homeland, anxiety, insomnia, weakness, loss of appetite, those kinds of things, right? Things we would expect with someone who—uh, what we would probably call depression, right? Um, others would progress to things like fevers, or breathing problems. Some might have clotting issues, or—

Justin: Really? Wow.

Sydnee: —brain inflammation, rashes, bleeding, irregular heart rhythms.

Justin: This seems like a lot.

Sydnee: Things that we probably would not call nostalgia now, right?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So you can see where this idea of nostalgia encompassed... a longing for home, probably psychiatric diagnoses of things like depression and anxiety, and then also some other... uh, illnesses, that were just kind of thrown in there.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, but if they happened in somebody who was missing home, they called it nostalgia.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: His theory—Hofer lays out as to why this happens. What is going on in the human body? Because this was very much—

Justin: Physically speaking, you mean.

Sydnee: Yes. What is—what is the physiology of this? Because this is as medicine is moving away from the humors, and moving in to this sort of, like, mechanistic view of the human body. So this was at a—this moment in history is a transition point in our understanding of what's happening.

So it would be typical for you to try to explain... on, like, a microscopic level, what is happening in the brain when this happens. He believed that our animal spirits... our anima, our soul, if you will—animal spirits is what they would've called this, and this was not a spiritual concept, but this is—but, I mean—and there's a lot of overlap there. Whatever we're talking about, these animal spirits, were walking along the white tubules in our brains, and would get stuck in the oval center, which is where our memories are.

Justin: In the oval center?

Sydnee: These were the names that—anyway, so, in the oval—

Justin: I like that, it's accessible.

Sydnee: —[laughs] in the oval center of our brain, where our memories—

Justin: [simultaneously] The delicious candy yolk.

Sydnee: —[laughs] where our memories of our home and times gone by all live, the animal spirits would be wandering down those tubules. They'd kinda get stuck there on one specific memory of our home, typically. This was very much associated with, like, your home, your homeland, your home... town, your house, your—you know, your home.

And they would get stuck there, and kind of clogged up, and they would excite that one region, over and over and over again, just that one, until, like, as you—as you can kind of envision, you're focused on it. You're hyperfocused on it. You're obsessed with it. And what would result from that, your imagination would be stimulated. And you would begin to visualize and, like, vividly imagine this memory, that these animal spirits in your brain are stuck on.

Justin: You know, I was ready to get all smug when, uh, it was—you said, "We're moving away from humeral medicine into a more mechanistic view." I was like, "That's right! Here we go, real science! Show them how it's done!"

I did not expect you to be like, "So anyway, we got a brain yolk, and there's a bunch of, uh, tiny brain dogs, and they latch on to a memory, and they clog up your brain pipes. You know, just basic science." [snorts]

Sydnee: I think it's beautiful. I—I'm not—

Justin: It's beautiful, it's just, like, I'm not sure how—how much we've improved over the humeral system with this particular—at this particular point.

Sydnee: I think it's so evocative! The idea that your—I mean, and this is at a time where things like passions and imagination were, um, dangerous ideas. Because they led people to behave in ways that weren't orderly, and to think in ways that weren't orderly. And so when you say it stimulates the imagination, that's not like, "[cheery voice] Imagination!"

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: It's like, "Uh-oh. Now we're in trouble." So these were very serious ideas that were being communicated, and I know it seems silly, but it's kind of a beautiful way of imagining nostalgia.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Your passions get focused on something that you remember, until you can visualize it. You see it, you're experiencing it, and feeling it so strongly, but you can't have it, and so the longing becomes so intense.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Um, this was his idea. But anyway, because of this it blocks the flow of these spirits throughout the body, through what was known at the time as the common sensorium, which is what was thought to connect your mind and your body. Um, because all the animal spirits get clogged up in your brain.

Justin: Sure, right, yes.

Sydnee: So the rest of your body suffers. So your blood becomes thick and clots, your phlegm becomes too thick, breathing problems—

Justin: From the dog—from the tiny spirit animals.

Sydnee: Well, no, because they're not there. They're up in your brain.

Justin: Oh, right, okay.

Sydnee: They're stuck up in your brain.

Justin: And normally they would be—

Sydnee: All over.

Justin: —thinning out your blood and mucus, okay.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm, thinning those things out. Your gastric juices are diluted of all the things they need, and so you—that's why you don't have an appetite, 'cause you can't digest food, because nothin's workin' properly.

Justin: 'Cause the tummy dogs aren't there.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] In terms of treatments, what he proposed was the usual stuff first. Some mercury—

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: —maybe some wine, uh, try this thing that might make you puke, a variety of tonics for things like fevers, or a heart tonic, things like that. If all else fails, bleed 'em. Right?

Justin: Bleed 'em!

Sydnee: Bleeding was always recommended. Um, and all the while, while you're doing this, distract them. Try to get them to focus on now, and here, and where they are. Don't—Tell them, "Well, you gotta forget about home. You gotta—you can't think about that place anymore. That's gone. That's over."

Justin: Wow, yeah.

Sydnee: Um, but there was only one cure. And that was the nice thing about this, and why I think you could theorize he would wanna present it, is that there was a surefire cure to nostalgia. Send 'em—send 'em home.

Justin: Go home.

Sydnee: Just send 'em home. And that's what he says. At the end of the day, wherever your patient is in the world, no matter how sick they are, if you have to put 'em on a stretcher, get them home, and they will always, 100% of the time, be cured of their illness.

Um, what's weird about it is that—so, he puts this out there into the world, creates this word, "nostalgia," this idea, "nostalgia," like, solidifies it as a concept. He finishes his medical studies. His final dissertation, like, his big work, by the way, was about uterine dropsy, which was... the uterus filling with fluid and becoming inflamed. Anyway, nothing to do with nostalgia, is my point.

So, he goes on to never write about, or talk about, or lecture about nostalgia again. He goes back to his hometown. He becomes a doctor. Um, I thought you would appreciate this. He later decides to leave his medical career for public service. He becomes [holding back laughter] Burgermeister.

Justin: [whispering] What?!

Sydnee: It's like—the head of the town council was called the Burgermeister.

Justin: Aww, dang it! I cooked up a list in my head of, like, ten different things Burgermeister could be, and that's, like, the—not even in the top 100 coolest.

Sydnee: So he was the Burgermeister, and then he ascended to—

Justin: [bursts into laughter] Can I be Burgermeister?

Sydnee: You can be the Burgermeister of our house.

Justin: Yes!

Sydnee: Um, he ascended to other levels of public service, and spent the rest of his life—and, I mean, he did important work in his town, but he never addressed nostalgia again! He just, like, threw this idea out into the ether, and then went back to his life.

Justin: And then—

Sydnee: And then, of course, we've never heard of nostalgia since then.

Justin: Uh, no. That's not actually what happened, Sydnee.

Sydnee: No. I'll tell you what happens next, but first, we gotta go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go!

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin: So, nostalgia has been, uh—is runnin' wild, is set free. The idea has been unleashed on an unsuspecting populace.

Sydnee: It's interesting. The power of, um, language, and using—if you want to persuade people, if you want to convince people, make sure the words you pick sound nice, is really illustrated here.

Justin: And having a word for it.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Like, it really does condense the—there's a lot of ideas that I think it would be easier to communicate if we had words for them. Do you know the one I was thinking about yesterday? I wish there was a word for, "I know it looks like my hands are really full and I need help, but if I let any of these things go, I'm going to drop them all, so please just let me go to where I need to go."

Imagine we had one word for that very complicated concept—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —that we need to communicate to people—for me, like, on a weekly basis. Like, I know it looks like I'm carrying a lot of things and I need help, but if I let one of these things go I'm gonna drop 'em all, so please let me go on to where I need to go. Give me one word for that, *please*.

Sydnee: Well, I mean, that's on—come up with it. Make it.

Justin: Well, I don't have that kind of power. Maybe if it was a hashtag.

Sydnee: I don't know if Dr. Hofer did, but he thought he did, and he did it. So...

Justin: I guess that's true. Maybe I should just believe in myself.

Sydnee: I'll give you a magic feather later.

Justin: The problem I've always had is confidence.

Sydnee: [laughs] [through laughter] I don't think that's true.

Justin: As a cis white man, I have always struggled with confidence.

Sydnee: [laughs] Anyway, nostalgia was out there. And it's funny, because there were further publications of his paper, like in collections and things, where authors would try to change it to other words. They would change the word "nostalgia" to other terms, but nostalgia kept coming back. That was the one that stuck. And it does sound nice, especially compared to the other ones we've talked about. It was a nice-sounding thing.

It's weird, 'cause you really—what you talked about, why didn't he just write about a subset of melancholy? Melancholy was a well known diagnosis at the time, which, again, similar to depression today, but kind of a more nebulous idea. But, uh, you know, this could've been looked at as a subset of melancholy. A lot of the symptoms were very similar. Other than returning home, the treatments were pretty similar. Um, although with melancholy, you usually told people to travel.
[laughs quietly]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: What you need is a good travel. That'll make you feel better.

Justin: Shake it up.

Sydnee: Um, the idea was really important for a few different reasons. Like I said, this was a time where we were shifting in our understanding of disease and what caused it, away from the humors. Uh, we've talked about before ontology, the idea that we need to classify, like, in taxonomies, all of—that was the era of that. We're moving into the time where people sat down and just made big trees of medical diagnoses. This is part of this tree, and this is a subset of this diagnosis, and all that kind of thing, to try to classify everything that could go wrong in the human body.

Um, our—like I said, our concept of emotion and passion and all this was changing. Is it good or is it bad? Um, if you have these kinds of problems, are you a weak person? That was initially thought. Like, if you were prone to nostalgia, are you—is there something wrong with you? You're weak?

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Um, and there's something wrong with, like, the way that you think and feel, your emotions are bad. Or moving into, as the years pass, this idea of sensibility as being a good thing. Someone who was able to cry, and experience emotion and passion, was thought to be more in touch with their pure self, more in touch with nature. Um, again, there's this tie to, like, people who live in rural areas are able to cry like this because they have been—they haven't been, like, diluted by city life yet.

Justin: Right, right. Untouched. Like myself!

Sydnee: Yeah, this kind of, like, longing for nature and connection. That idea was big at the time, and nostalgia spoke to all of this, you know? And so I think it really captured a lot of people's imaginations as, like, "Oh, maybe this explains it. Maybe this is the key. This is the thing we have not been able to figure out, and as our world is changing so rapidly, this is why we're not adapting. If I don't feel good, I have an answer now."

Um, and soldiers got it a lot. It's interesting, Hofer didn't write about soldiers at all in his dissertation, which is a weird thing to leave out.

Justin: Yeah, it's almost like a built-in control group, almost, that you would have. You know what I mean?

Sydnee: And it was—it was known to occur most commonly among soldiers, specifically Swiss soldiers, which may be why Hofer didn't mention it, is because the Swiss soldiers did not like this connotation. 'Cause when this idea was first introduced, it would have insinuated, like, our soldiers aren't very good, [holding back laughter] because they get homesick, and they get nostalgia, and then you have to send them home.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So you wouldn't—it's kind of like you're undermining your military might by putting out this idea that, like, "Hey, you know what a lot of our soldiers get? A debilitating illness that will necessitate you to send them home!"

This was also a time where Swiss mercenary soldiers were very commonly rented out by other nations, you know, to be used in their wars. Especially France, but other countries as well. Swiss soldiers were sent all over the place, 'cause they were known to be, you know, an elite fighting force. So, Hofer doesn't talk about soldiers, but they were by far the most common patients to get nostalgia.

Um, and—and to the extent where there was this story that was passed around that there was a certain song you could not play around Swiss soldiers. There are, um—

Justin: "Who Let the Dogs Out"?

Sydnee: [laughs] No. There are, uh, shepherd songs, simple melodies that would be played out in the fields to call the sheep back in, and that if you played these songs around a Swiss soldier, they would just dissolve into tears and, like, be unable to function, and you would end up having to send them home.

Um, the—they were called ranz—ranz de vaches is what they're called, these songs. You've heard one. Um—

Justin: Is it "Baa Baa Black Sheep"?

Sydnee: Do you know—it's the—it's—[laughs quietly]

Justin: "Mary Had a Little Lamb"?

Sydnee: It's the flute solo in the third section of the Overture to Rossini's *William Tell*. [hums briefly] [laughs quietly]

Justin: Yeah, oh, okay.

Sydnee: [laughs] Just click, and we can play it here.

Justin: Yeah, uh, okay. I'll—I'll just do that for you, Syd!

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

[flute solo from the *William Tell* Overture plays]

Justin: Ohhh, okay, yeah.

Sydnee: That. And if they would hear it they would dissolve into tears, because it would remind them so strongly of their homeland.

Justin: I have that for, "[singing] Nick nick nick na nick nick nick, Nickelodeon!" So I get it. That makes me very nostalgic for my youth.

Sydnee: It's like when a West Virginian hears "Country Roads."

Justin: No.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: No. It's not like that. We get a—we get a bellyfull of that. [laughs]

Sydnee: Uh... as the—now, as the wars continued throughout that century, you would see nostalgia diagnosed among soldiers from all countries, so it less and less became associated with the Swiss, to the great relief, I'm sure, of the Swiss people.

Justin: [simultaneously] Of the Swiss.

Sydnee: [laughs] Um—

Justin: Our thing is chocolate and knives, and we don't need to talk about nostalgia any more.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: And the clocks, yes. Okay, fine. Chocolate, knives, and clocks. That's us. And the cheese! The hole-y cheese, you guys love that! There's lots to offer. Forget about our [through laughter] debilitating homesickness!

Sydnee: Uh, it was the only thing you could be sent home for in some armies, particularly in France. Uh, that was the one thing, like, that you just had to discharge the soldier and let them go back home, at least for a temporary leave. Uh, because there was no other cure, and it would be completely debilitating to the military force if you left them there.

Justin: Think about how much easier things would've been on Klinger if that had been the case. He could've just walked around—instead of, you know, trying to get discharged for mental illness, he could've just walked around like, "I miss my dad! I really miss my dad!"

Sydnee: You know, he talks about home so much. Like, they order ribs from his hometown at one point, 'cause he misses them so much.

Justin: I'm sayin', this time period, he would've been fine.

Sydnee: In the Civil War time period, or in the times of these—the Napoleonic Wars, he could've been diagnosed with nostalgia and sent home.

Justin: We should do a fanfic—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —ep of *M*A*S*H* where we, like—he digs out this obscure and he's, like, trying to employ it. That'd be a good ep.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: And then the other characters do... doctor stuff.

Sydnee: It was not uncommon. If you look at, like, discharge papers from the time, nostalgia was a diagnosis, um, that was given. And, uh, there were other

cures, of course. Especially because of the military connection, you would see things like, "Just bully them out of it."

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Um, unfortunately. Especially as we move into, like—this was common in the Civil War in the United States, too, and the idea that you would shame them or bully them until they—

Justin: You'd be homesick for your half of the country [holding back laughter] that you're not in anymore.

Sydnee: Um, there were also ideas about altitude. There was this—for a while, people thought, well, since it mainly happened among Swiss people, maybe it's because they're used to being up in the mountains, and now they're at these lower altitudes. So what we need to do is put them in a tower. So they would, like, try to take them up to a high building.

Justin: [simultaneously] Store them in a tower, perfect.

Sydnee: That didn't work.

Justin: Probably not a high building. [wheeze-laughs] At this time period, I would imagine.

Sydnee: Well, as high as they had.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Uh, people tried, like—

Justin: "It's three stories! What do you want?! Why don't you feel better? You're 30 feet off the ground like an eagle!"

Sydnee: They tried to, like, give them dairy products, 'cause they thought it had something to do with hardy mountain breakfasts. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Sure, granola, grape nuts.

Sydnee: Um, but none of that stuff helped. Uh, and this was a huge point of contention in the military, because doctors would be saying, "Listen, they have nostalgia, we gotta send them home, there's nothing we can do."

And a lot of the military officials were like, "You're depleting our forces. You can't do this!"

So, hence the shaming, the bullying. There was one commander who was rumored to bury soldiers alive... if they suffered from nostalgia.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: As a threat to everybody else, basically. "This is what happens if you—if you have this."

Justin: How we're curing your nostalgia.

Sydnee: Yeah. So—but a lot of doctors, you'll see—a lot of soldiers did get sent home for this reason. Um, as—there were a lot of associations with nostalgia and tuberculosis. Tuberculosis we've talked about on the show before, was a romantic disease for a while. It was thought a very poetic, beautiful way to...

Justin: Beef it.

Sydnee: ... go. [laughs quietly] Um, and lovesickness, homesickness, nostalgia—all this. If you were a truly sensible person, if you were really in touch and able to experience real emotion, these were acceptable ways to go. Nostalgia got tied in, and there were probably people who had TB who were diagnosed with nostalgia.

Justin: Being nostalgic for not having TB.

Sydnee: I would think.

Justin: I would imagine.

Sydnee: Um, and there were other ideas. That it come from, like I said, the mountains, from certain foods. People thought maybe it comes from masturbation, so you shouldn't do that. There was an idea for a while—doctors looked for a

certain bone in your body that caused nostalgia, and they were never able to find the nostalgia bone. Um, but—so, too, changed over time our understanding of nostalgia as an illness as opposed to a benign emotion. And so that's—that was, like, the first step. You saw doctors begin to separate it out as to, like, "Well, maybe there are people who are sick from nostalgia." Or, as we would eventually learn, from many other diagnoses. "But there are also just people experiencing nostalgia. It's just a benign thing. It's just a feeling, and it's okay."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: "And it's not a sickness." And from that split, nostalgia became more and more associated, the word, with a normal, global emotion that we feel from time to time, and not an illness.

Justin: I think it's interesting that at some point we made the juxtaposition from it being based on a location to being based on time.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: I mean, at some point—right? They were in no way, at this point, talking about... the past—longing for the past, right? You're longing for your homeland, a place where you lived, where I think we commonly use it to refer to, like, a time period that we cannot return to.

Sydnee: Well, and I think that was—

Justin: Which is interesting, because that's the kind of nostalgia that, going by this, has no cure. You can't cure that.

Sydnee: Exactly—well, and they would argue is not an illness, either.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: And that was—as we began to move away from this disease concept of nostalgia, the word "nostalgia" began to encompass these other ideas, like you said. Not just a place, but a whole... a time, a state of being, like childhood. You know, people that were with you or things you felt or smelled or tasted in those moments. All those things nostalgia became associated with, once it was disconnected from disease. It was also, like you said, disconnected from location.

Um, and there were also, like, political implications that came with this as well. People thought nostalgia was longing for—you'll hear this language today, right? A simpler time, a gentler time.

Justin: Sure, right.

Sydnee: These sort of, like—what were associated with conservative ideas, whereas progressives were not nostalgic, because they were future-looking, you know, moving forward.

Um, the weirdest part—'cause I think we've come to a point now where we understand nostalgia as a distinct emotion that you experience and feel, and is not necessarily connected to a location, or a nationality, or a political leaning. [laughs quietly] It is just a feeling that we all have.

Here's the weird part. Not only do we now know it's not a disease, we now believe it might be good for you, perhaps. Maybe. There are researchers all over the world—there are researchers in Japan, in England, they're a couple places in the US—where they've studied the effects of nostalgia on the human brain.

And what they have found from these different studies is that it seems like activating the memory center of your brain with one of these specific nostalgic memories, not just any memory—not just like, "Do you remember earlier today when you were in the bathroom?" [laughs quietly]

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: A memory that would've—

Justin: And I do, yes, fondly.

Sydnee: Are you nostalgic for it? [laughs quietly]

Justin: In a way, yes.

Sydnee: So, a memory like that. Like when you were in the bathroom earlier and you're feeling nostalgic for that moment. It also—not only when you experience that memory are you activating that part of your brain, you're activating dopamine in your brain. Pleasure centers. You're releasing these feel-

good chemicals that bring you pleasure and joy from experiencing nostalgia. So you get mood enhancement from experiencing nostalgia.

Justin: It's like a pain that... feels good.

Sydnee: Yes

Justin: Like a good feeling [unintelligible]

Sydnee: Like a positive longing. Um, beyond that, there was another study who said people who experience nostalgia more often tend to be more empathetic. They tend to socialize more. They tend to find more meaning in life than people who don't experience nostalgia very often. And there was even a study suggested that cold weather tends to trigger more nostalgia, which I thought was very interesting, 'cause I would say that's—anecdotally, I would say I—I have experienced that, you know? And I always assumed it was connected with, like—for us, cold weather also equals certain holidays, and perhaps that was why.

Justin: I get it more in summer. I think about, like, backdoor—like, backyard, uh—

Sydnee: That's interesting.

Justin: —backyard, like, barbecues, and playing outside, stuff like that.

Sydnee: There is—they've seen some ideas that perhaps it is connected with cold weather, and that nostalgia can make you remember times when you were warm.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: And can actually make you subjectively feel warmer as a result of activating those centers in your brain.

Justin: That's cool.

Sydnee: Um, not that that's going to—like, if you are exposed to the elements, remembering a warm time—I feel like this is *The Giver* now that we're in—[laughs]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: This is not The Giver! You still need to get to a warm place. I'm not suggesting otherwise. But, like, it might make you think you're warmer than you are.

Um, there is actually, at the University of Southampton, there is a whole nostalgia group that's studying all these different effects on the human brain. And, like, also, what could we learn about memory from this? Um, they've tried this out with patients who have Alzheimer's or some other form of dementia that has caused them some memory loss. They have found that accessing musical memories, they can remember those a lot more clearly than other memories that are from the same time period, and you would assume both would be gone. So, there's something special about certain sensations and things we can remember. Um, the way we record those memories, and perhaps when it comes to things that are nostalgic, like a song that meant a lot to us or a show that meant a lot to us or something, maybe we can use those tools to help patients with memory loss access those memories.

Justin: Hm!

Sydnee: Um, there's an adult daycare called Town Square that is all modeled after 1950's America, um, because it looks like the environment that these patients are nostalgic for, and so they function better within it.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: They remember more of what you do in certain environments because of that. So, there's all sort of interesting implications. Um, and, you know, all of this evidence, all of this research is very preliminary, suggestive. I know on our show we're all very clear that we don't... one study does not mean something is necessarily true. But I think this is a good example of something that is benign. To indulge in nostalgia is... you know, at worst, a nice way to spend a few minutes. [laughs] And at best, perhaps cathartic in an important way. Perhaps, um, gives you a good feeling. You know, helps with your mental well-being, helps with your ability to cope with a stressful situation, which I would argue we are all in right now.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, it's a pretty—nobody's trying to sell you anything, which is nice.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: They're not trying to—[laughs] to sell you a nostalgia kit. Uh, you can experience it on your own.

Justin: I would actually argue there are many, many monthly subscription boxes that are doing precisely what you were telling me, but...

Sydnee: Well, and the moment that they start saying that they have research-based reasons to do this, and that they have medical evidence that these things are good for you, I'll be the first to decry them. But as long as we're all just in agreement that sometimes it feels nice, and it is not harmful to be nostalgic for something that made you feel good once, long ago. Um, I think that that is—that is okay. Maybe our animal spirits do need to spend more time there. Maybe that wouldn't be harmful.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: There's a great book I'm still reading—I don't usually name sources, but this book explores all these ideas, and then a lot more. So if this is something that interests you as much as it's interested me, it's called *What Nostalgia Was: War, Empire, and the Time of a Deadly Emotion* by Thomas Dodman. I'm reading it, and... if this kind of—I don't know. This just fascinated me, and if this fascinates you, um, this has been a very interesting read.

Justin: Um, thank you so much for listening to our podcast. We hope in the future you look fondly back on this time, wherein you were enjoying it. Uh, thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program.

And, uh, thanks to the Maximum Fun Network for having us as part of their podcasting family. And thanks to you for listening! We really appreciate it. Um, we will be back to you again 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]

Maximumfun.org.
Comedy and Culture.
Artist Owned.
Audience Supported.