

Sawbones 202: The Glass Delusion

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[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. Hey, Justin.

Justin: Yes, Syd?

Sydnee: You know how, you know, whenever we're hanging out, like, relaxing, we get an hour or so just to chill, watch some TV and be together you, know how you always look at me and say, "Syd, I really wanna know more about the history of French royalty in the 15th century."

Justin: No, Syd, I can't say I recall ever asking you that, ever, in our entire lives.

Sydnee: I think— I'm pretty sure that you looked at me before and said, like, "I don't feel like I know much about the royal family from that period. Uh, or the Hundred Years war... or—"

Justin: Syd, I know we've always taken the long way around with these intros, but I feel like your just lying is a new low.

Sydnee: I— I'm sorry. I apologize.

Justin: It's okay.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: I forgive you.

Sydnee: I just did it—

Justin: But I feel like you're trying to nudge me into a topic for our medical history podcast, Sawbones. I can feel your hand... nudging the small of my back closer to the precipice of edification.

Sydnee: I couldn't think of an organic way where you would ask me about that. Or, uh, about kind of an interesting, but for the most part gone, medical condition that existed largely in 15th and 16th century Europe, and pretty much there's not much documentation of since.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: I just couldn't see a way that you were gonna ask me about that!

Justin: No, I— no, there was no way around it, but I think you did the best you could with what you had.

Sydnee: There aren't— it's not in any video games, I bet.

Justin: What? People—

Sydnee: The— the condition I'm talking about, which is called the glass delusion.

Justin: No. *Skyrim* has, like, swords made of glass. Somebody's probably gonna tell me, like, "[goofy voice] What about the one *Zelda* where everybody was glass?" Keep it to yourself.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Nerdlinger. [laughs] I don't need you—

Sydnee: Was there a *Zelda* where everybody was glass?

Justin: No, but I'm saying— like, if I could recall that, Sydnee, I would just say that. But I'm saying, like, somebody's gonna be like, "[goofy voice] What about— you said your favorite video game was *Glass Friends!*"

Just stop.

Sydnee: Is that your favorite video game?

Justin: No, Sydnee, that's not a video game— just tell me about this dumb delusion!

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] Well, first of all, thank you Nuri for recommending this topic. I had never heard of the glass delusion and I was very excited to learn about it, although I don't know— I don't know that it's one of the topics that I will apply to my daily medical practice.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, let me take you back to Charles VI of France.

Justin: Let's go, Syd.

Sydnee: Uh, he was king from 1380 to 1422. He was initially called Charles the Beloved.

Justin: Aww! Well, that's nice.

Sydnee: Yeah! He assumed the throne at age 11, so it's hard to— I mean, you're kind of automatically beloved when you're 11, right?

Justin: Um... I actually cannot think of many 11-year-olds I've enjoyed [laughs] especially.

Sydnee: Oh, I don't think if you're the 11-year-old king, like, everybody instantly is like, "What a jerk."

Justin: Yeah, but I also think that there's probably something like, "Uh, are we screwed? Like, can we all agree that he's 11? Are we all... are we kinda screwed a little bit?"

Sydnee: He actually— part of the problem was that all of his uncles kind of ran the country, even though he was king.

Justin: So, like on *Elena of Avalor*.

Sydnee: Yeah, sort of like that. Like a Grand Council kind of think.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And they weren't very good at it, and they made a lot of bad decisions, but then he brought in some really important advisers and kind of got things under control, and seemed to be headed in a direction to be a really wonderful, transformative king.

Justin: Sounds like in this situation *they* were the ones who weren't ready to rule.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: That's a great *Elena of Avalor* reference. If anybody enjoys that program, that was just for you, this time.

Sydnee: There are some— I guarantee there are some parents out there right now—

Justin: Who will have it stuck in their head.

Sydnee: "[singing] This I know..."

Sydnee and Justin: "[singing] I'm ready to rule!"

Sydnee: Uh, anyway... so, things seemed to be going pretty well, until his 20's. So, in his 20's, in 1392 to be exact, he didn't seem to be doing very well. He was— it was noted that he seemed, uh, kind of hyper in his actions. He couldn't stop doing things, talking. He seemed, um— feverish is the way he was described in a lot of older writings, just meaning that he—

Justin: They had no idea what that meant, though.

Sydnee: [laughs] No.

Justin: They just picked a word.

Sydnee: They didn't mean an actual fever. They just meant he seemed, uh, not quite like he was in this world. And he was moving very quickly and making

maybe not the best decisions. And in the midst of this he decided to lead a military expedition to capture an assassin who had attempted to murder his friend.

Justin: Wow! That's a very active role for a king. You think he'd have people for that.

Sydnee: Yeah! Yeah, that's what I would've thought, too. But maybe back then that was just, like, the king was in on that stuff.

Justin: You know how it is in your 20's, though. You start trying to hunt down every assassin that comes across your path.

Sydnee: So—

Justin: [holding back laughter] Think you're invincible.

Sydnee: So his friend, Olivier de Clisson had— this assassin attempted to murder him, and then the Duke of Brittany was hiding the assassin.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Being kept there. I don't know what their relationship was. I don't know what the deal— I don't know if money was exchanged. Some sort of favor.

Justin: Classic duke.

Sydnee: They just hated each other.

Justin: Maybe.

Sydnee: There are just all these people— as I read through, like, the history of the monarchy, it's just— people just hate each other sometimes. It's like *Game of Thrones*, right? This is what *Game of Thrones* is about!

Justin: Oh, there you go.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: Now you got it.

Sydnee: Okay. I get it now!

Justin: Now you understand the entire plot of *Game of Thrones*.

Sydnee: [laughs] Anyway, so he's riding to kill this assassin. He's got his little group of men that he's bringing with him. Not the entire army, I'm assuming.

Justin: That would be foolhardy.

Sydnee: Just, like, some of them. And as they're riding through the forest, a man comes running up to his horse, like, grabs on to the saddle and looks at the king. He's a man who obviously has leprosy, he's in tattered clothing. He was terrified and yelling and kind of scared everybody, freaked everybody out, and said, "You need to turn back, good king. There's a traitor among you. You will be betrayed. Turn back."

Justin: This is a very— I just wanna say, Syd, and I don't recognize this enough. This is a very, um... good framing. A lot of the stories that we do don't have this kind of nice framing.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: This is, like, very visual. It's very in the moment, very cinematic. I'm really enjoying this story.

Sydnee: Thank you.

Justin: I'm sorry I broke the flow of the story to mention that—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —but I just wanted to make sure I called it out. It was very evocative and I'm really enjoying myself here. I'm having a great time.

Sydnee: Well, I'm glad. I do have to be clear. I did not write this story or make up this story. I just am telling it. It is true.

Justin: Now, Sydnee... [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: We're at episode 202. Did you just clarify for me—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —that these stories have been nonfiction the entire time? Because I was—

Sydnee: Surprise!

Justin: —okay. It was not—

Sydnee: Double cross. [laughs]

Justin: —I know I play kind of a— kind of a goofster on this show, but that would be quite a misconception on my part.

Sydnee: So, the soldiers pushed the man away, and— but they didn't arrest him, so he kind of just tagged along behind everybody on horseback yelling.

Justin: If my people... if my court of people is not there to keep people with leprosy from accosting me, what exactly are they being paid to do?

Sydnee: That's a good question.

Justin: Job one, y'all. Job one.

Sydnee: Yeah. So this guy's kind of yelling. They're continuing on their journey. The king already, as I mentioned, was in this kind of unusual state of behavior, and things were getting intense. And as you can imagine, as things got more and more intense, the king was getting more and more agitated, and then one of his pages accidentally dropped, like, a helmet or a sword, something— conflicting accounts. Something loud that clanged a lot. Dropped something. There was a big loud clang, and the king just snapped, and began to attack his own men.

Justin: Whoa!

Sydnee: Calling them traitors. He actually— he began swinging his sword around. He actually killed several of his men.

Justin: Dag!

Sydnee: And then started to attack his own brother, Louis.

Justin: Who I bet put him down.

Sydnee: No. Uh, he was tackled by his men at this point.

Justin: Yeah, like, that's a tough one, man! If the king comes at you with a sword, what are you gonna do? If you try to defend yourself, the other haters would be like, "Uh, no you don't!"

Sydnee: Well, I'm assuming that's why he got so many before he was tackled.

Justin: Yeah, like, that would be an ignoble way to die. Like, you're just kinda standing there like, "Well, I guess I should just— uh-oh! Here it comes! Uh-oh!"

Sydnee: So, he was subdued by his men, and he went into a brief, coma-like state, and then he kind of came out of it. But this was the beginning of a lot of similar episodes. And looking back on this now, applying kind of the lens of medical history to this now, this was probably the beginning of some underlying psychiatric diagnoses that they would never have been aware of at this time. Maybe, like, it's been theorized before that maybe it was something like schizophrenia. This could have been. That would make sense for his age, and the way it— the onset, and things like that.

There's also some mention that he was sick right before this happened, so then the thought is, was this some sort of residual brain injury from a meningitis type illness, or something like that?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, either way, clearly something changed at this point in his life, and he began to have these kinds of episodes where he would— sometimes he would forget who his family was. Sometimes he would just refuse to bathe, or change his clothes, for weeks at a time. Um, various ways that it would kind of manifest, and then he would seem more like himself for a while, and then it would come back.

On a side note, during one of these episodes, when he was refusing to bathe, his doctor's plan to treat him for it was— this is a good one— to have a lot of his, like, have a lot of the men in the castle, the men who worked there, kind of hide in rooms where he was going to come in...

Justin: Uh-huh?

Sydnee: And then jump out and scare him when he entered the room?

Justin: To...?

Sydnee: Scare him out of it?

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: I don't know.

Justin: That's so buck wild.

Sydnee: Like, startle him from his—

Justin: Like, startle him out of his insanity?

Sydnee: Yes. Yes.

Justin: Like, you just spook him a little bit, and then he'll be like, "You're right."

Sydnee: And they record that at one point, this worked, and I—

Justin: No, it didn't. You're lying, history.

Sydnee: I do not believe— yes. I do not believe that that worked.

Justin: Nice try, history. No, it didn't. Like, that's the one thing that I think could be the worst thing to do.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Is just jump out and scare someone.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Like that. You shouldn't do that to anybody, let alone someone with delusions that there were people trying to get them. Are you kidding me?

Sydnee: Exactly. So, you're probably wondering at this point, "Okay, where does the glass come into the picture?"

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: This is— this is one of the most notable episodes that he had. It was actually written about by the pope at the time, Pope Pius. That he began to have the fixed delusion, meaning kind of a false belief that he could not let go of, that he was made of glass.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: That his entire body was made of glass. He became certain that if he bumped into something, or someone, or if he sat down or, you know, went to lie down too quickly or too hard on a firm surface, anything like that, that he could just shatter.

Justin: And he thought Bruce Willis was out to get him—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —with his *Unbreakable* powers. That kinda thing.

Sydnee: "It was the kids! They called me Mr. Glass!" I got that reference.

Justin: That was a great— yeah, you were right on it.

Sydnee: Thank you. I was on it.

Justin: With a great, great Samuel L. Jackson impression too, Sydnee!

Sydnee: [through laughter] Shut up!

Justin: Two for the price of one!

Sydnee: You can— [laughs] you can imagine, if you're reading articles about the glass delusion on the internet, that lots of people like to post pictures of Mr. Glass with this.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Just to— I don't know, emphasize that?

Justin: You're making me feel unoriginal now, Sydnee.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: I thought I was coming up with a real bon mot.

Sydnee: No, I just meant it was on my mind.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Uh, so he— also, he went to the extent of having his tailor sew iron rods into his clothing, with the thought that then if he ran into something or bumped into somebody or something like that that those would protect his body from breaking.

Justin: A cybernetic exoskeleton, basically.

Sydnee: Exactly. Exactly. And then he also would wrap himself in many, many blankets. There are, like— there are paintings of him wrapped in tons of blankets when he went to, like, lie down or sit down—

Justin: [laughs] There are paintings of him doing—I'm assuming not posed portraits—

Sydnee: No.

Justin: —because that would mean that like, "Let— hold on. Put the brush away. Let me take off my blankets."

Sydnee: There was this, like— there was this one— or maybe it was a tapestry. Either way, it was a depiction of him, and he was, like, lying in a bed, and if this is

not, like, a bunch of blankets— or if this were, like, typical king robes, they don't, they don't make sense to me. It looks like something that would be difficult.

Justin: A bunch of blankets. It looks like a bunch of blankets.

Sydnee: It looks like a bunch of blankets and, like, a bunch of men standing around the bed guarding it. So, there you go. I mean, that's what it looked like. It looked like a depiction of that. Even to the extent, like, where if he was— he was particularly afraid of his... his bottom, his rear end, his buttocks...

Justin: His glass butt.

Sydnee: His butt shattering.

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: He was particularly afraid of that happening, and so he would wrap his— like, especially around his waist and his butt, in blankets every time he went to, like, sit down anywhere, because he was very afraid— and this is actually, as we kind of talk about this, not an uncommon delusion to have. Like, the specific fear. The delusion is very uncommon. That specific fear within it is not.

Justin: That your butt will break?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: I did not know that.

Sydnee: So, as a result—

Justin: I'm trying not to chuckle, because there's— I understand, as someone who lives with mental illness as well, and has spoken a lot about the need to talk more publicly about that and destigmatize it, I'm trying very hard not to laugh at the king who was afraid he would break his glass butt. But it's very hard for me to do that, so I'm sharing my struggle with you all, so you know where I'm coming from right now. There.

Sydnee: Thank you for sharing, Justin.

Justin: Okay. I've just shared my struggle.

Sydnee: So, as a result, he would stay in his room most of the time. He tried to hold very still. He would sit there, motionless, for hours, to protect himself from breaking. He didn't let people touch him. His wife wasn't allowed to touch him. Um, they did—

Justin: You know, that's sad. Now it's sad again.

Sydnee: —but they did have a lot of children, just on a side note. Like, 12 kids or something. A ton of kids, so—

Justin: "[posh voice] Gently!"

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] And as a result of this, he became known as Charles the Mad, instead of Charles the Beloved. And as you can imagine, with his struggles with untreated, undiagnosed, un-understood mental illness, he had a lot of trouble being an effective ruler.

Justin: Yeah, I can imagine.

Sydnee: From there forward. Just on a side note, as I kept reading stories about Charles and his, you know, his delusion and his illness and his other issues, a story kept popping up that had very little to do with his illness, but I just think is a crazy story.

So, the king and queen at one point were having a fancy party. It was, like, somebody got married. And they were having this big party, and the king and some of his, like, dudes, some of his guys, went and dressed as wild men.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Wild men were, like, a specific thing. There were in, like, they were some sort of demonic creature in folklore at the time, so it was an actual thing, to be a wild man.

So, they went and they put on these clothes made of linen that were soaked in resin, and then covered in flax that was really long so it would look like wild, hairy stuff all over them, and they put it on, and they came bursting into the ballroom, into the party, and started dancing around, scaring everybody, freaking everybody out. It was... a joke. Everybody was supposed to laugh, whatever.

Until the king's brother Louis, who he had tried to kill earlier, came walking up to one of them with a torch to stick it in his face and get a better look to try to figure out who it was, and of course they're covered in resin... so he set the guy on fire? And then, like, three other guys got set on fire as a result of this.

Justin: Uh-huh.

Sydnee: And this is now known as the Ball of the Burning Men.

Justin: And that's where Burning Man got its start.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: Listen—

Sydnee: No.

Justin: Listen, y'all. I'm very sorry you got burned. Your king... got told by somebody with leprosy that people were out to get him, and now he thinks his butt is made out of glass. Maybe we don't need to add extra levels of fantastic adventures to a ball. Maybe you should just calm down and wear a nice t-shirt and some khakis, and maybe not dress up like Animal from The Muppets, and try to harangue him and his guests. Because he's skittish, and he doesn't need that business!

Sydnee: He was the— the king was one of 'em!

Justin: What?

Sydnee: The king was one of the wild men!

Justin: I would never have agreed to that! No way!

Sydnee: King Charles was one of 'em! And that's what— there's a whole other layer of intrigue, because then there's the thought, was Louis doing it on purpose because he knew the king was one of 'em, and he was trying to assassinate his brother, to take the throne?

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: Actually, it would've— actually, the thought was to take his woman.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: They thought he was after the queen.

Justin: Now this is like *Game of Thrones*.

Sydnee: I think he did have an affair with the queen later, but they thought he was after the queen. And so, there was this thought, like, maybe he was trying to kill the king. Anyway, that has nothing to do with his glass delusion, I just think that's an extra little very interesting story about King Charles.

Justin: That feels like the end of the story about King Charles, though.

Sydnee: That is the story of the—that is the end of the story about King Charles, but it is not the end of the glass delusion, which would persist for about 200 years before it kind of vanishes from medical literature.

Justin: Well, let me hear about it!

Sydnee: I'm gonna tell you more about it, but first, let's go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go!

[ad break]

Justin: So, Syd, you were gonna tell me, apparently this delusion continued to persist?

Sydnee: So, the strange thing about it is that it almost sort of spread as if it was contagious, especially among nobility, and then the upper class.

Justin: What we experienced with the dancing plague, right?

Sydnee: It's very similar to that, where there's no reason that this should be contagious in the infectious disease sense, but for some reason— and, you know, we've talked about this before, actually, with the anal fistula story of—

Justin: Where anal fistulas got trendy.

Sydnee: The king who had the anal fistula who, you know, it got very trendy to have an anal fistula, so people would pretend they had one, even if they didn't. So, part of that is that if royalty had any kind of issue, everybody was talking about it. Everybody's always talking about the royal family, right? We don't have one, but we talk about... you know, other people's. Cause we're jealous, I guess.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Anyway, so you started to see it pop up among other members of the nobility. Specifically, there was a French prince who was recorded soon after to have—

Justin: The French prince of Bel-Air?

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [holding back laughter] You say?

Sydnee: [holding back laughter] I wouldn't— I wouldn't say. I wouldn't. Who was recorded to have the same delusion by the court physician who took care of everybody. And basically, the doctor said, "Well, you should probably sleep on straw all the time, and keep— stay on it as much as you can."

Because part of what makes this difficult to treat is that if you're dealing with royalty, and especially if we're living in a time period where said royalty could look at you and say, "Oh, you don't think I'm made of glass? Off with your head."

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Then you get some of the physicians who were kind of just saying, "You're right, you are made of glass. Let's come up with ways to protect you."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Without really understanding what was going on or attempting to do anything helpful.

Justin: Or trying to, yeah, they're just placating.

Sydnee: Exactly, because they're too afraid—

Justin: Cause they don't want to get beheaded.

Sydnee: Yes, they're too afraid to contradict them. "I am made of glass."
"Okay, you're the king, you're the prince, you say so, we'll go with that."
Um, this particular French prince was cured when a fire, I think, on his straw mat that he was stuck on all the time, made him second guess the whole plan, and—

Justin: So maybe he wasn't glass.

Sydnee: "Maybe I'm not, after all. Cause this straw seems like a bad idea."
And then you start to see other accounts pop up again—

Justin: What was he sleeping on before that? That was less flammable?

Sydnee: Just like a— yeah, like a— I don't know. Like, a bed?

Justin: A bed?

Sydnee: I don't know why straw is better than— I mean, beds were probably filled with straw, right? Like, what did they have?

Justin: Yeah, they're all flammable! I don't understand this anecdote.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] So, other accounts started to pop up of other noblemen who had this delusion, and scholars. It was specifically associated with, like, really intelligent people who would get melancholy, and then begin to believe they were made of glass. Melancholy being kind of a catchall term for probably depression, by today's standards, but also just sadness, or kind of disillusionment. You know, it was one of those things where it doesn't exist today. We don't diagnose people with melancholy.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, it was a— it meant many things that we would identify today. Some people believed they were made of glass, as King Charles did. Some felt they

were trapped in a glass bottle. Some believed they were very specific glass items, like, "I am a glass urinal."

Justin: A g— hmm. Sorry, back up. A glass urinal?

Sydnee: A glass urinal. It was, like, a small flask.

Justin: That you pee into?

Sydnee: You could pee, yeah, mm-hmm.

Justin: [holding back laughter] You could?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: [wheezes] I mean, I *can* pee into a lot of things, Sydnee.

Sydnee: [laughs] Yeah. Like a small flask that you could pee into. Or an oil lamp, that was a specific delusion that some people had. So, like, "Not only am I made of glass, but I am a glass object."

Justin: That's so inter— you would think, and again, I'm no mental health expert, but you would think that that would be... if someone was not already, uh, prone to— and this is what you're saying, right? These aren't necessarily people who have—

Sydnee: No.

Justin: —any amount of psychosis or mental illness. It seems like that would be a very easy thing to treat.

Sydnee: Not necessarily. Now, like I said, there was this association with this term, "melancholy." So, did a lot of these people actually have underlying severe depression, or something? Bipolar disorder, something else? Possibly. Probably some of them. But maybe not all of them, because some people didn't have any other symptoms until they just began to believe they were made of glass.

Many initially centered around, like, glass extremities. "My arms are glass, my legs are glass."

"My legs are glass" or "My feet are glass" was a very common fear. Um, but later accounts included things like, "My heart is made of glass," or "My... my h—" [laughs] it's a song. That just occurred to me. [laughs]

Justin: Yeah. Yeah, it is also a song.

Sydnee: That is also a song.

Justin: You think that's where Blondie got the idea?

Sydnee: I don't think so.

Justin: Probably not.

Sydnee: And "My chest is made of glass." So specific fears. Or "My head." Fears that your head was made of glass, that your head was too heavy for you to hold up, so it was going to fall off went along with that. That was kind of similar to the glass delusion. "My head's gonna fall off and shatter."

"I can't hold my head up if I stand up. It's gonna tilt to the side until I fall over." Those kinds of fears—

Justin: Because it's glass.

Sydnee: Because it's glass. There was one physician, again, who wrote another account of a patient who specifically had the delusion that it was just his buttocks that were made of glass, nothing else.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Only his rear end. And so he spent all day, all night, with a pillow attached to his butt. Cause it was just that that was made of glass. This physician claimed to have healed him... by spanking him.

Justin: [wheezes and snorts]

Sydnee: And then when he said, "Did that hurt?" And the patient said, "Yes!" He said, "Then it must be made of flesh, because if it was glass, that wouldn't hurt."

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: It is thought that this was anecdotal exaggeration on the part of the physician, and probably not completely true.

Justin: And maybe some of the earliest medicinal spanking.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Probably.

Sydnee: Right, right. As opposed to all of the current medicinal spanking that occurs.

Justin: Right. This is the— you're probably wondering where the bedrock of medicinal spanking came from, and here we are.

Sydnee: Please don't spank anyone. Uh, Princess Alexandra Amalie of Bavaria had a very—

Justin: What was— it was Ama— what was it?

Sydnee: Amalie.

Justin: [quietly] Okay. I just wanted to make sure I heard right.

Sydnee: Can you hold yourself back?

Justin: Mm-hmm, yeah.

Sydnee: Uh, developed a—

Justin: [high pitched voice] Amelie.

Sydnee: [laughs] A very specific glass delusion in her 20's. She was really interesting. She was a writer. She was a translator of stories to different languages. Uh, she spent tons of time publishing books, translations, and writing stories. And she probably also had some underlying mental illness. There were some documented incidents of her, like, compulsively cleaning things, and needing everything to be very clean all the time, and kind of having that obsession. And there's also some documentation that she would only wear white, because it was cleaner. She thought it was cleaner. So, there probably is some

other condition that was underlying this. But she came to believe that she had swallowed a glass grand piano when she was a child.

Justin: Mm-hmm?

Sydnee: And that it could break at any time, and so she had to be very careful how she moved through the world, because this glass piano inside her could shatter at any moment.

Justin: You know, being a parent is hard, but I think if you're inattentive enough to let your child swallow a glass grand piano, you probably need to hang up your spurs. I think that you have gone awry.

Sydnee: She was notice— they figured it out because she was walking through doorways sideways, and someone in the castle noticed it and said, "Are you... why are you walking like that?"

Justin: God, you know, it's— I... it's just a great reminder of, like, this stuff is so— it sounds silly to us, but it's, like... imagine trying to live that way. I think the thing they're— the reason it's sort of bumping for me— or, not bumping. I don't know the— the thing that I'm struggling with as we're talking about this is, like... how do you draw the line between people who— I mean, obviously this is a different case. But, like, how do you draw the line between people who do have some sort of underlying mental illness, and people who are just... I don't know. Trying to be odd, or fashionable? Because when these things happen in these waves like this, it starts to set off alarm bells a little bit for me, that, like, maybe we're not just talking about mental illness.

Sydnee: Well, there's some thoughts on what we could be talking about, that I'm gonna tell you—

Justin: Alright, well I won't get ahead of you.

Sydnee: —towards the end. But again, a lot of this is just theories.

Justin: I just don't want anybody to get mad at me for havin' a little fun at these people's expense, because I think it's funny to think you have a glass butt. But obviously I don't think it's funny to live with mental illness. But again— so I'm sort of torn, and I'm really struggling.

Sydnee: And with the thing we're documenting, it's so long ago and the records are so poor, and the language— and I don't mean, like, language as in English or French, I mean language as in medical language. The way we talk about conditions and diagnose things obviously is completely different now. So, there's not an easy corollary to— what exactly did this person have? What was wrong with them, or did they have any condition at all? Did they just— the king had this delusion, so... because as we said, people pretended to have anal fistulas, so...

Justin: Right, right.

Sydnee: That's not— that's not outside the realm of possibility. Some theorize that Tchaikovsky may have had this.

Justin: Really?

Sydnee: Because he wrote once of a fear that his head would fall to the side and fall off while he was conducting, and that he would hold his head up with— hold his chin while he was conducting to combat this.

Justin: Oh, interesting.

Sydnee: But I don't know if it was specifically the glass delusion. There's just been some theorizing. The majority of cases of this occurred between the 14th and 16th century. There have been a couple recorded since then, in the 1800s. Uh, a couple of women who were institutionalized who were— people went looking for this, and specifically interviewed asking these questions, and a couple of women were identified who thought maybe their legs or feet were made of glass. But not really widespread, certainly, like it was previously.

There was a case in 1964, supposedly, where a psychiatrist interviewed a young man who felt he was made of glass. But when he talked about what his feeling was, like, "Why do you think you're made of glass? Tell me what that's like," it was more like, "I feel like I'm transparent, and that sometimes people see me and sometimes they don't, and sometimes they're just looking through me to what's beyond, and I am not visible." But it wasn't the same, you know? It was necessarily that fear of shattering. It was more the fear that, "I don't exist and I do exist at the same time."

So, there have been many stories written about it, by the way. You'll find this used a lot in fiction, especially fiction that came soon after the time period when

it was most prevalent. Um, like Cervantes wrote *The Glass Lawyer*, which was completely about a man who had the glass delusion. So, you can find these kind of, like, poetry, and philosophical writings, and stories about it. And like I said, there are scattered reports in more recent years of possibly the same thing, but not— not at all like it used to be.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: There's been some discussion. Like, could you see a resurgence of this? And I'll tell you why. So, when we start to wonder what in the world was going on, one, this was probably a manifestation of some underlying mental illness that they didn't understand at the time.

Justin: Of course.

Sydnee: Like I said, Charles VI probably had schizophrenia. Maybe— I'm not saying for sure, I don't know, but probably.

Justin: I wonder if part of this is, you know, the connection between anxiety and depression and what have you. I wonder if, like, the brain does so many things to compensate, so many weird things to compensate. I wonder if, like— if we didn't have the language to talk about anxiety and depression that we do now, like... your brain probably would cook up things that seem a lot odder to us today—

Sydnee: That were tangible and would make sense at the time.

Justin: Yeah, some way of processing the information. That makes a lot of sense.

Sydnee: Well, the idea of mental illness was kind of vague at the time. Like, the idea that it is a thing was hard at the time. You know, people didn't understand that, let alone what that meant or what that felt like.

Like I said, many of these patients were noted to have what they called melancholia. This would probably be depression in most cases, but could've been other things. And then specifically when you talk about royalty, there was this big fear of being harmed or dying, being poisoned, being assassinated, you know, that persisted among royalty. They were constantly being scrutinized for their ability to perform their royal duties, for their ability to produce an heir. I mean, their physical well-being, their sexual lives, everything was under a magnifying

glass. And so, this could create a lot of fear and anxiety, along with the pressure of ruling a country.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: And so, you know, maybe this is why you see this delusion more so among royalty, because they get this sense that... they are very fragile, that they are something that everyone is constantly watching and checking and keeping account of to make sure they're okay, and you begin to feel very fragile. Because there are so many threats towards you, as well.

So, maybe that was part of it. They also had no privacy. And then you also—a lot of historians will make the point that glass was actually, especially transparent glass, was relatively new, at this point in history, to Europe. This would've been a time where more and more was finally being ordered, and only rich people probably would've had it, like royalty. So, you start to see this kind of interest in glass as this kind of exotic, exciting, expensive, luxury material.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: Um, so there's this association with that. And there was something almost magical about it, still, even though people knew it wasn't. It was almost kind of connected to alchemy in a way. Like, what is this amazing thing that's transparent?

Justin: So, it's like, kitschy and kind of... trendy.

Sydnee: Glass was very trendy.

Justin: Glass was very hot.

Sydnee: Um, and we see this, that delusions can be centered throughout history around things that are seemingly miraculous substances that came about at the same time. There was a concrete delusion that followed its introduction.

Justin: Wow, really?

Sydnee: Where people believed they were made of concrete for a while. After the Cold War, we saw the rise in this delusion that you were being bugged, that the government was watching you, that they could hear your thoughts, that there

were transmitters somewhere in your house that were going to— that kind of delusion has only grown with technology. As we have more technology that watches us more closely, we see more and more of that kind of delusion among people who suffer from delusions.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: So, the idea is, could we see another glass delusion? Because our lives today feel very transparent. We have no privacy.

Justin: So, are you predicting a trend? A hot take comeback for the glass delusion?

Sydnee: Nah, these are just— these are just, like, fun things that I think people who think about such things like to write about on the internet. I haven't ever— I haven't seen this. Nobody's writing about seeing this commonly in modern times. It seems to be just one of those things that— a medical condition that occurred at a very fixed point in history, and for the most part kind of vanished afterwards.

Justin: Huh. Um, that is gonna do it for us, folks, this week. We hope you have enjoyed yourself. Thank you to the Maximum Fun Network for having us a part of their extended podcasting family.

Sydnee: Um, and can I just say, by the way, the— I talked about the princess who thought she swallowed the glass grand piano. *Stuff You Missed in History Class* did an episode about just that.

Justin: Oh, cool.

Sydnee: If you're interested in hearing more.

Justin: Um, we want to say— some folks sent us some stuff in the PO box. Thanks to Morgan for the cuddly Poppy. Joe and Sarah and Declan sent some books. Carrie sent her friend's book. Dana, Dustin, Stephanie sent Charlie shirts and a bottle opener, so thank you so much.

Sydnee: Thank you, all.

Justin: For that. Thank you to Max Fun— I said that already. Thanks to The Taxpayers for letting us use their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our

program, and thank you to you so much for listening! If you get a chance, please go to iTunes and rate and subscribe to our show, and, uh, that's— what's wrong? Did you hit the mic with your cup?

Sydnee: I hit the mic with my water cup, sorry.

Justin: Hey, that happens, Syd.

Sydnee: Just trying to get that water in.

Justin: Luckily... it's made of plastic.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [amused] So until next week, 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]

[MaxFun ad plays]

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