

## Sawbones 399: The Green Children of Woolpit

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**Clint:** *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:** I'm Sydnee McElroy. I'd like to note that in between Justin and McElroy, Justin has put a hat on.

**Justin:** Yes. It is a... a large hat. Extra large, excuse me. From a company called Tidal Tom. If that gives you an idea of what kind of vibe this hat's bringing. Got it in the— in the River Street area of Savannah, Georgia while I was enjoying a traveler from Wet Willie's.

**Sydnee:** What— what is that hat called?

**Justin:** Uh, what would you call thi— is this a Panama hat?

**Sydnee:** [hesitantly] Yeah...

**Justin:** Would you say it's a Panama hat?

**Sydnee:** I'm not really sure. I don't know.

**Justin:** Let's see. Panama hat—

**Sydnee:** I'm not up on my haberdasheries.

**Justin:** Yes. Yeah, this is a Panama hat. Yeah, is what you'd go— call this.

**Sydnee:** Justin's been wearing this a lot lately.

**Justin:** I've been wearing it a lot lately!

**Sydnee:** Uh-huh.

**Justin:** I don't see people anymore. I do my own thing.

**Sydnee:** It's his— it's his own vibe.

**Justin:** I'm in my— I'm in— I'm entering my, like— when I have sunglasses, uh, on, and my mask, and this, I look like— like if John Hammond got burned by acid and had to go incognito. It's great. It's a great aesthetic.

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly] Throughout this, uh, pandemic, most of us have gone the route I did, which is I just wear pajamas in various configurations all day long, but not Justin.

**Justin:** Not me.

**Sydnee:** He got a fancy hat.

**Justin:** Spicin' it up.

**Sydnee:** Uh, Justin, it's almost Halloween, basically.

**Justin:** Yeah. I mean, it is—

**Sydnee:** It's October.

**Justin:** —I will say, I would make the argument that the season— the season is here.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** We've been embracing it since Oct 1.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. Well, I mean, it's just fun.

**Justin:** It's just fun.

**Sydnee:** It's just fun.

**Justin:** It's just fun.

**Sydnee:** It's fun to watch scary stuff and decorate your yard with Halloween-themed, you know, inflatables, and other decorations that aren't inflatables, but mostly inflatables, 'cause that's how we roll. And, uh, you know, watch spooky things, and maybe tell spooky stories.

**Justin:** Ooh!

**Sydnee:** Ooh!

**Justin:** Ooh, do you have a spooky tale for me, Sydnee?

**Sydnee:** It's a little— I— it's not— I mean, it's a little spooky, yeah. I thought— I thought it would be fun to do something— this is— I promise you there is a medical aspect to this. But, like, primarily it's not— it's not just a medical story.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Um, there are— there is a medical element that we'll get to. Um, but I got this story from—[laughs] a couple listeners have actually written and suggested it, but the first person to bring it to my attention, the first to lay this at my, uh, feet, was my father, who has a calendar, like a page-a-day calendar, that tells him, like, interesting trivia and stories. [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** [holding back laughter] Yes?

**Sydnee:** Um, Rileigh got that for him. And sometimes he'll come across something that he thinks will make a good *Sawbones*, and he'll save the little calendar page, and the next time I see him he'll bring it to me. [laughs]

**Justin:** Fantastic.

**Sydnee:** And he brought me this on a little calendar page and said, "I thought this would make a good *Sawbones*." And I decided, you know what? This would be a fun little— a fun little story for *Sawbones*. Maybe a respite from the real world.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** Justin, have you ever heard of the green children of Woolpit?

**Justin:** No? No, that sounds unnerving, though. It's a very spooky story.

**Sydnee:** It does sound—

**Justin:** Sounds like a *Doctor Who* episode, honestly.

**Sydnee:** It does. It does.

**Justin:** Doesn't it?

**Sydnee:** It's— I'm... I can't think of any that would've drawn on this, but since this is, like, sort of a British folk story, I wouldn't be shocked if that hadn't inspired something, some— some aspect of something at some point.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Um, well, you can thank my dad, as I do, for bringing this to our attention. Uh, so this is a story that comes from the 12th century.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** It takes place in Woolpit, of Suffolk County, England. Um, and it also occurred under the reign of King Stephen, and I really love the idea that this sort of spooky story... comes from a time when King Stephen was in charge.

**Justin:** Oh, King Stephen, spooky stories. I love this.

**Sydnee:** Right?

**Justin:** I love this.

**Sydnee:** Do you get it?

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Do you get where I'm, like—

**Justin:** Bangor, Maine's favorite son, the master of horror. Joe's dad, Stephen King.

**Sydnee:** Right, exactly, and he tells scary stories. And this is a scary story.

**Justin:** Scary story from the time of—

**Sydnee:** King Stephen.

**Justin:** —King Stephen.

**Sydnee:** And I say "scary," it's not scary. It's just, like, unnerving.

**Justin:** Oooh, even—

**Sydnee:** It's a mystery.

**Justin:** The scariest scare is the one that refuses to scare you, and merely unnerves!

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** What do—[laughs]

**Sydnee:** Um, the— by the way—

**Justin:** [through laughter] You know, what is it— what is it that Ken— Kenan says at the— in the elevator? "You don't— you don't understand frights, you fear them!"

**Sydnee:** [muffled laughter] Uh, yeah. David S. Pumpkins.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** So, do you kn— the name Woolpit, by the way, of the town...

**Justin:** Yeah?

**Sydnee:** ... comes from wolf pit.

**Justin:** Whoa! That's a cool name for your town.

**Sydnee:** Becau—[laughs] they had a wolf pit there.

**Justin:** One would hope. [wheezes loudly]

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** [through laughter] I would hate to think it's aspirational!

"Someday, son, I'll have a beautiful wolf pit, right here in the middle! I'm calling my shot now!"

**Sydnee:** They— they kept— I was reading a bunch of different articles about this story 'cause I was trying to look for new elements. And, like, it's such an old story, and we only know— we only know, like, what this one thing we know. Like, these are the facts. This is what was written about it, that's it. And so after that it's just a lot of conjecture. So I kept reading sort of the same things over and over again, but everybody kept saying, like, "Woolpit, named for, you know, the wolf pit there." As if everybody's like, "Oh, of course, the wolf pit."

**Justin:** The wolf pit.

**Sydnee:** The wolf pit that's there. It was a pit used to trap wolves. Which, I mean, yeah, I coulda guessed that, but I didn't know that was a thing people did!

**Justin:** Yeah, does every town need one of those? You know what? Also, the other thing I'll say is that I bet it was a hard day when they finally had to close up the wolf pit.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** That must've been quite contentious. "Hey guys, listen. Nobody else has a wolf pit anymore. We've come up with other ways of dealing with this. It's time to close it up."

**Sydnee:** It's time to close the wolf pit.

**Justin:** My grandfather looked at—

**Sydnee:** I don't know. Is it closed?

**Justin:** Is it closed?

**Sydnee:** Is— does Woolpit still have a wolf pit? 'Cause it was famous for its wolf— it was named for its wolf pit. Uh, the story originally, while you investigate if Woolpit still has a wolf pit, uh, the story was originally told by Ralph of Coggeshall, who wrote it all down. Um, around the time it would've happened. So, like, he— he, like, knew... one of the, like, main characters of the story, right? So, like, he had some firsthand knowledge of the whole thing, and so he wrote it down.

Um, it would be repeated a lot through the years by different writers and historians, and that would kind of change it, of course, right? As it's been retold. The monk and historian William of Newburgh wrote about it, like, 31 years after it happened. And the— what's important is that these two versions are where we glean a lot of the details of the story, from these two writings.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Um, and one is obviously much later, but he's like, "Listen. I had a lot of trustworthy sources, so... don't worry."

**Justin:** Trust me on this.

**Sydnee:** "This is— I know— I know what happened."

So, okay. Here's the story. Two young children arrived in the village of Woolpit.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Okay? Nobody's with them. No adult. Just these two little kids. Uh, they— you know, depending on how you interpret the story, like, they're speaking a language that seems... otherworldly or something to the— to the people of Woolpit. They don't recognize it. It sounds like

gibberish. It is a— they seem to be speaking a language to each other, but it's nothing that anyone there understands. It's not English. They don't know what they're talking about.

**Justin:** Twins. Twin language.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Well, no, they're not twins.

**Justin:** They're not twins.

**Sydnee:** They're not twins. Uh, also, their skin is green, so there's that.

**Justin:** Oh, okay. I figured it was gonna be John and Hank Green. I thought they—

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** —this is their origin story.

**Sydnee:** [through laughter] This is— and now you know... the rest of the... No. That's not... that's not how we got John and Hank Green. Um, so their skin is green, they're speaking a language they don't understand, their clothes seems different, strange, odd, they don't recognize the clothing, it doesn't look like clothes anybody else wears. It's, like, super cool and fashionable and... like, way ahead of their time.

**Justin:** Really?

**Sydnee:** No, it's just—

**Justin:** Now I know it's not the Green brothers.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] It's—[laughs loudly]

**Justin:** [laughs] Got him!

**Sydnee:** You got 'em!

**Justin:** Got him! TikTok that, Stank!

**Sydnee:** Um, no. I don't know. Their clothes are different. And also they, um— they try to feed the kids, and the only thing that they'll eat are broad beans straight from the ground, like, growing out of the ground. Like, just pull 'em right out of the ground and eat 'em.

**Justin:** Can I say, I love broad beans.

**Sydnee:** You love broad beans?

**Justin:** I love broad beans. There's a snack company...

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm?

**Justin:** It's called Bada Bean Bada Boom. And they make this broad bean snack. Oh, man! It is good.

**Sydnee:** I have heard other people— I have read other versions of this where it's just green beans.

**Justin:** Don't like those as much.

**Sydnee:** I know. Which is different, I believe, from broad beans.

**Justin:** That's probably my least favorite bean.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** And it's gonna shock people to hear there's a bean I'm not wild about, but these green beans, especially if you... [shudders]

**Sydnee:** French cut.

**Justin:** [dry heaves] Don't say it!

**Sydnee:** Those are the ones Justin—

**Justin:** I'm trying to podcast!

**Sydnee:** Those are the ones Justin really doesn't like.

**Justin:** You don't see those— actually, it is probably— I'm so viscerally opposed to them, it has probably been... 15 calendar years since I have, like, seen them.

**Sydnee:** Hmm.

**Justin:** I don't think they do it anymore. Like, I don't think—

**Sydnee:** I'm sure they're out there.

**Justin:** Have you seen it on a menu? You would point it out to me and probably intimidate me with it.

**Sydnee:** I wouldn't. I would— no. I mean, the only reason—

**Justin:** [crosstalk]

**Sydnee:** —I would point it out is to, like, steer you away from that. I like a good garbanzo, myself.

**Justin:** That's a great bean.

**Sydnee:** It's a great bean.

**Justin:** That's a great bean.

**Sydnee:** So— anyway, so these kids are taken in and sort of cared for, work as servants in a manor. Like, cared for in the sense that, like, "You can come work here and you'll be— you'll get food and shelter and, you know, you'll be okay."

Um, a manor owned by Richard de Calne. But over time, he got them to, like, eat other food. And as they started to eat, like, more of a regular, balanced diet, slowly their green color started to fade away.

**Justin:** Hmm.

**Sydnee:** He also worked to teach them English.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** And eventually, once they had learned English, they were— which must've been quite a challenge, since they didn't— he didn't know what language they were speaking.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** But anyway, he was able to, um, teach them English, and then the girl, who was the older of the two, told them the story of where they came from. At that point, when she learned English.

So, what she said generally, um— and you can read, like, the exact text— they come from a land that they called St. Martin.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** This is according to one of the accounts. This is—

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** —this is in question. Um, and they don't know how they got there exactly. They're a little confused as to how they came from St. Martin to Woolpit. Um, they were out, like, herding their father's... cattle, or sheep, or something, depending on what you read. They were herding

animals, right? Tending to their father's fields. And they heard the sound of bells.

And this is, like, in some accounts they— the cows start to wander into a cave, and they try to follow the cows into a cave and they get lost in the cave and they hear the sound of bells and follow them... to basically arrive in Woolpit. In another, they're just sort of out there. They hear some sound of be— they hear some bells and they follow the bells and they end up just standing by the wolf pit, and they don't know how they got there.

Um, one way or another, they clearly don't have an explanation for how they got from their dad's field to standing next to a wolf pit... in this—

**Justin:** In Woolpit.

**Sydnee:** —in Woolpit, in this new place. Um, but what they do say is that in St. Martin, they— the sun doesn't shine fully. It's, like, always twilight.

**Justin:** [thoughtfully] Okay.

**Sydnee:** It is a land where there is no real sunlight, and everything is green. And that is where they come from.

**Justin:** That's wild. That's wild.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** I wouldn't— it's weird, though, that they had a name like St. Martin for the place they came from, considering they didn't know English.

**Sydnee:** Yes. It's—

**Justin:** That's sketch.

**Sydnee:** There's a lot about— I mean, this is— this is why this story is usually considered sort of like folklore, is, like... it's— you know. There's a lot of [laughs] questionable bits to it. Um, it's supposed to be somewhat fanciful, I think. I don't think you should, like— I mean, like, the whole point is I'm gonna try to figure out why the kids are green, but... I'm also gonna tell you that the point of a story like this is not to figure out any of the facts. [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** Okay, that's fair.

**Sydnee:** It's just sort of to accept it. Um, so anyway, Richard de Calne takes them in, employs them. Um, since they weren't from around there he decides, like, "You guys need to be baptized. That's—"

**Justin:** Got to. Got— thank goodness. I was on pins and needles over here trying to figure out when these kids were gonna get baptized.

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly] And after they get baptized, sadly the boy falls ill and dies.

**Justin:** Syd!

**Sydnee:** Sorry.

**Justin:** Come on!

**Sydnee:** I mean, it's just the story. Uh, the girl, who became known as Agnes, I don't know who named her Agnes, I don't know if it was— like, if she got to pick her name, or if Richard named her. But, uh, she continued to work in the household. She eventually got married to the Archdeacon of Ely, Richard... Barre?

**Justin:** Ohh.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** Dick Barr.

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** Love that guy.

**Sydnee:** Um... they may have had a kid. She was known to be, um... wanton.

[pause]

**Justin:** [laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** [fake laughter]

**Sydnee:** She was known to be a *wanton* woman. Yes. But, um, and— and lived out the rest of her life. And that's sort of the whole story.

**Justin:** Well, I mean, sort of.

**Sydnee:** Except, I mean, ever since then this story has been repeated, like I said, by different storytellers and historians, and it's become part of, like, British folk legend. But, like, what was going on? That's been the question. 'Cause it's been interpreted to mean a lot of things. Like, should we take this, like, literally? Were there's some green kids by a wolf pit? Or is it some sort of allegory that we're supposed to figure out what that means? Like, what about their greenness, what does that symbolize?

**Justin:** Yeah, how literally should we interpret this— this tale?

**Sydnee:** Right. And so— and it's been the inspiration for different works of fiction, mythology and stuff ever since then, because it is this sort of weird, unsolved mystery that is, I mean, kind of disturbing.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Um, and so it has captured the imagination. So, I want to talk about the various, both mystical and not-so-mystical, medical explanations for these green kids. But before we do that...

**Justin:** Oh yeah.

**Sydnee:** ... we gotta head to the billing department.

**Justin:** Let's go! Let's get *our* green. Right?

**Sydnee:** Oh, yeah. Hey.

**Justin:** Yeah. The green, 'cause the money is...

**Sydnee:** I gotcha.

**Justin:** Okay, let's go.

[ad break]

**Justin:** Alright, Sydnee. Um, you told me during the commercial break, when the other folks were talking... which were also us, but pre-recorded us, that you had this one cracked. You said "Case clo— I'm excited to announce—"

**Sydnee:** I didn't say that. I didn't' say that.

**Justin:** "Case closed. The fi—" and you said— you held up a big banner that said "Mission Accomplished."

**Sydnee:** No, I definitely didn't do— I didn't use any of those phrases, or... [laughs] put them on banners.

**Justin:** Don't you love when people write Jack the Ripper books like that? And it's like, it's— the title's always, like, "It's finally solved."  
[laughs] Like, "We did it."

**Sydnee:** Wait, wait, wait. What book did you read that the title of the book about Jack the Ripper was *It's Finally Solved: We Did It?*

**Justin:** Uh—

**Sydnee:** Was there an exclamation point at the end?

**Justin:** Hold on. I— the book is by— okay. One book— there are several books like this.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** But the one I'm referring to came out in 1976, called *Jack Ripper: The Final Solution*. [laughs] I mean, it is, like, "We so— I did it." It's 19—

**Sydnee:** Jack Ripper?

**Justin:** Jack the Ripper.

**Sydnee:** Oh, there— okay.

**Justin:** No, Jack Tripper, the final member of Three's Company. No, Jack the Ripper.

**Sydnee:** I thought you said— okay.

**Justin:** *The Final Solution*.

**Sydnee:** You said Jack Ripper.

**Justin:** It's absolutely possible.

**Sydnee:** Which if Jack the Ripper was actually a guy named Jack Ripper and nobody—

**Justin:** [laughs and applauds] It was right in front of us!

**Sydnee:** And nobody figured that out until 1976, that's a shame.

**Justin:** "If it's Jack Ripper, I'll eat my hat! There's no way that he— it would be so c— so cavalier! [laughs] As to call himself Jack *the* Ripper!"

"Yes, my— my middle name is Daniel. Jack D. Ripper! That's me!"

**Sydnee:** Anyway...

**Justin:** I'm sorry.

**Sydnee:** So, I— Jack the Ripper does not play a part in this story, as far as I know.

**Justin:** Oh, [laughs] does he?

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** No, he doesn't.

**Sydnee:** No, he doesn't. So... if you look—

**Justin:** I'm gonna start inserting him into your stories. [wheezes]

**Sydnee:** If you—[laughs] if you look into the, uh, folk answers, the mystical answers, the magical answers for this, you'll get a lot of, like—

**Justin:** That's always what we seek out here.

**Sydnee:** Right? Like, theories as to why this would've happened. Um, a lot of people are like, "Well, it was— they're fairies, obviously, and they came from fairyland and they got mixed up with humans."

And there's, like, a lot of that, if you read, like, traditional British sort of stories and tales like that. You'll find these stories of otherworldly, you know, sorts of beings who wander through some portal and end up in the human world. And so, like, that would not be out of place, especially for that time period, and the various people who told the story. Um, there are some who that they were, like, aliens, and somehow their planet got stuck in some sort of, like, orbit nearby, and then they got accidentally transported to Earth.

**Justin:** We all considered the alien angle.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm. Well, I mean, they're green. [laughs quietly] So.

**Justin:** Well, there you go. And aliens, as we all know...

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Uh, there's, like, a lot of interpretive sort of— like, a lot of people have looked at it as, you know, they're trying to tell us something about the people who lived of the time and about different traditions and, like, there is a concept in Celtic lore of green spirits, which are like sinless spirits, you know? These, like, wholesome spirits. Um, and

especially there's this whole, like, well, later Agnes marries this guy who is from a place called King's Lynn, and Lynn or Lyn is also the Celtic word that means evil. And so, like, basically this wholesome fairy marries an evil human.

**Justin:** Yeah. Gotcha.

**Sydnee:** Which sounds— I mean, that's like a lot of...

**Justin:** That's probably the one.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** That's the one I'm leaning towards currently.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. That— that's the one that makes the most sense. There's a connection to— have you ever heard the— the babes in the woods story? Do you know where that phrase, babes in the wood— you've heard that before.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Okay. This is another English folk legend. Uh, it comes from a ballad that was written in 1595 by Thomas Millington of Norwich. Um, and the story of the babes in the wood is— because I had never heard this story before but, uh— which, by the way, what he called it was "The Norfolk gent his will and Testament and howe he Commytted the keepinge of his Children to his own brother whoe delte most wickedly with them and howe God plagued him for it."

**Justin:** They used to really go all in on the titles.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] But the tie-in is that— so, the story of the babes in the wood is, there is a couple. They're both sick. They're dying. They have two kids. The dad, before he dies, looks at his brother and is like, "Please promise me you'll care for my children."

And the brother's like, "You got it, bro. I'm gonna take care of your kids."

And then as soon as the couple die, the brother's like, "I am definitely not taking care of these kids. Moreover, I want their inheritance, so I gotta get 'em killed, but I don't wanna do it."

So he basically gets two murderers to take the kids into the woods to kill them, except one of the murderers is— feels really bad about it and is like, "I can't kill these kids," so he kills the other murderer, and then looks at the kids and is like, "You guys can just take off into the woods, okay? Just run away, and we'll pretend this never happened."

Except they're little kids, so they die in the woods.

**Justin:** Guys!

**Sydnee:** It's a really sad story. [laughs]

**Justin:** What are you doing, Sydnee?

**Sydnee:** I'm just saying, this is the story!

**Justin:** I've been having a rough week and you're, like, piling it on!

**Sydnee:** This is the stor— I don't know— listen.

**Justin:** You chose to tell the story. You included this story.

**Sydnee:** You talk to Thomas Millington about his story.

**Justin:** I can't, he died, too!

**Sydnee:** There's, like, a— there's a whole ending where, like, the uncle gets his comeuppance and is punished by God.

**Justin:** Have to be a heck of a comeuppance! It's some pretty wack stuff he did!

**Sydnee:** So anyway, in the version that would tie into this, the kids are actually poisoned by the uncle with arsenic. Why is this important? Well, chronic arsenic poisoning can do many things, but among them is that you can have skin changes, if you have chronic arsenic poisoning. One, or you can actually, like, form skin cancers. But another is that you can get something, arsenical keratosis. And this is basically like a change in the pigmentation of your skin over time. And you can look at— it looks different. You can look at pictures of this if you're curious, 'cause it can be either hyper or hypo-pigmented, meaning less or— you know, you can lose or gain pigmentation of your skin. Um, and a lot of the pictures that I looked at looked a lot— 'cause I, as you may imagine, I've never seen a case of chronic arsenic poisoning in real life. A lot of the pictures I looked at looked, um, like, splotchy, you know? It wasn't just like your entire skin changed color. It looked more like you were spotty.

**Justin:** Gotcha.

**Sydnee:** Um, but it— that change in pigmentation maybe gave their skin sort of a green cast or a green hue, which is why these children— and I guess this is a happier end to the story of the babes in the wood, because instead of them dying and getting, like, covered with leaves by birds, they

wander into Woolpit and get taken in by Richard, and don't... you know, they eat regular food.

**Justin:** Yeah, that's a cheerier tale, for sure.

**Sydnee:** Well, I mean, I think it's better than the original.

**Justin:** Certainly, yeah.

**Sydnee:** Um, so that is one theory. Like, is that what was wrong with these kids, they had chronic arsenic poisoning?

**Justin:** Well, you're conflating, like, a... you're kind of in the area between, like, fact and myth of this, right?

**Sydnee:** Oh yeah.

**Justin:** 'Cause, like, the story of the uncle and the kids, that sounded like a kind of messed up little fairy tale type deal. But...

**Sydnee:** Fairy tale is a weird word for that.

**Justin:** Fairy— well, they used to be— we watched that thi— you know. They used to be pretty dark.

**Sydnee:** What was that called? Oof, be careful.

**Justin:** Oh, man. A grim...

**Sydnee:** There's a— there's this Hansel and Gretel story.

**Justin:** *Grimm Tales*, something like that?

**Sydnee:** On Netflix.

**Justin:** It's a series, right? With, uh—

**Sydnee:** It's cool. Don't get me wrong.

**Justin:** It's cool.

**Sydnee:** It's very cool, but be careful with...

**Justin:** My dear friend Ron Funches is in it, but you gotta be— you gotta be careful over this spooky show. It's *A Tale Dark and Grimm*. Whew! You see that pop up? You may wanna get that— get a quick watch of that.

**Sydnee:** It depends on your kids'— your kids' sort of sensibilities. Like, Cooper loved it. I mean, she's three, and she absolutely adored it and wanted to watch it again.

**Justin:** Oh yeah.

**Sydnee:** Charlie, who's seven, was pretty freaked out.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** So... anyway, yeah. And that's what this story, you know, it's Halloween time. I'm operating here in the realm of...

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** ... myth. I just think— I think it's kind of interesting to theorize. Like, let's say that they really did find two green kids. Why were they green?

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** And one possible explanation would be... chronic arsenic poisoning. Now, that is not the most commonly thought explanation. So, let's say for a second that these are just two human children.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Nothing mystical. They're not fairies, they're not aliens.

**Justin:** Alright. Seems a stretch, but go on.

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly] They're not some sort of allegory. It's just, let's take this story at face value. Literally, two little kids who are green are found by a wolf pit. They speak in a language we don't understand, and their clothes look different than ours. What could that be? Well, the most likely explanation is that these were two Flemish children.

**Justin:** Hmm.

**Sydnee:** Okay? So at this—

**Justin:** Excess of phlegm made them green...

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly] No, as in from, like, Flanders.

**Justin:** Got it.

**Sydnee:** Like, Dutch kids.

**Justin:** Got it.

**Sydnee:** So, there had been at this period, in the 12th century, there was a lot of immigration. Like, a lot of Flemish immigration into England, so you would've had a lot of Flemish people who had recently come there. Um, and they were being persecuted. Uh, after 1154, Henry II became king, and a lot of them were being killed.

So, uh, one theory is that one of the battles was nearby, and maybe these two kids— like, maybe their parents had been— had been lost in this battle nearby, right? And the kids had sort of wandered away, like, trying to escape danger but didn't know where to go, and got lost in the woods.

Um, especially since there was a village not too far away called Fornham St. Martin, which was slightly to the north of Bury St. Edmunds, where the battle took place.

**Justin:** Oh, right, yeah.

**Sydnee:** Anyway, the point is, there's the St. Martin connection.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** So these two Flemish kids, orphaned by war, wander into the woods. Uh, and get found. And so when they find these kids, they dress differently, because they're immigrants and they have different cultural traditions, different clothing, so they don't look like the people of Woolpit, 'cause they're dressed like Flemish people.

Um, also, they're speaking Flemish.

**Justin:** Okay, but why were they green?

**Sydnee:** Well, right. That's still a problem. [laughs]

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** And I will say, the part about them speaking Flemish, a lot of people have problems with this story, only because the guy who took 'em in, Richard de Calne, would have been, like, an educated man. Like, he was the Lord of his manor and he would've been— at the time, you would assume, would be, like, educated. And he probably would've known at least— like, he might not have spoken Flemish, certainly, but he would've recognized, like— he wouldn't have said, like, "What is this strange alien language?"

He would've said, like, "Oh, that's Flemish."

**Justin:** Flemish, yeah.

**Sydnee:** "Yeah, I think that's Flemish." Um, but anyway, why are they green? If all of this is just two kids wander into the woods and get found somewhere... and taught English, and fed broad beans, why are they green?

**Justin:** [giggles]

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Well, green sickness... is another explanation for this, or chlorosis is the other name for this. Now, the name green sickness or chlorosis would not come along as a colloquial term for a few hundred years.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Um, but that doesn't mean people didn't turn green before then. Uh, and basically this was the name given to some sort of condition that it took us a lot of time to fully understand. Where people would become weak, and pale, and lethargic, have very little energy, just be very tired. Um, sometimes it would be tied in with, like, irritable, grumpy kind of thing.

Uh, and there was not a really good explanation for why this would happen, but they would be— their skin would change so much that some of them, depending on, like, what their natural skin color was, would take on kind of a greenish tint, which is why it became known as green sickness eventually. Um, it would be eventually tied really strongly to, like, young women. And it— and we've done a whole episode, by the way, on this. We— there's a whole episode of *Sawbones* if you're interested in, like, the history of green sickness, and all the really wild stuff we tried to do to treat, so to speak, green sickness.

Um, but it became associated with young women, especially young virginal women.

**Justin:** Oh.

**Sydnee:** And, uh, any— basically any grumpy young woman could be diagnosed with green sickness after a while. And there was this whole— there were a lot of theories, like, "It's because all of your humors are, like, stuck in your uterus, and... they're... making you sick."

Um, there was a thought that, like, since it was so closely associated with virginity, like, "Well, you know a great solution for that?"

**Justin:** Ew.

**Sydnee:** We did a whole episode on this.

**Justin:** I remember!

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** I mean, it— I told you, it was gross. It was bad.

**Justin:** Yeah, you're right.

**Sydnee:** Anyway, what we would eventually find out in the 1930's is that this green sickness that literally turned some people sort of green is actually probably iron deficiency anemia.

**Justin:** Hmm.

**Sydnee:** Uh, there are some other anemias, but for most of the people who were diagnosed through the decades and centuries with green sickness, they probably just had this anemia, because they weren't getting enough iron. And, uh, and that can make you weak, pale, tired.

**Justin:** It makes sense for kids that have been on their own for a while, trying to, like, live off... the— the land.

**Sydnee:** Yes. It makes sense that these kids would have had some sort of nutritional deficiency, um, that would have led to iron deficiency anemia or some other form of anemia, that they would appear somewhat green, and that once they were taken in and adapted to a proper diet, their green color would fade, because the anemia would resolve.

But— so to put it in medical context, some anemic kids were found in the woods, and they fixed it with diet.

**Justin:** But that, my friends, would not make a podcast episode, [emphatically] which is what you've just listened to!

And thank you so much for that, by the way. Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song, "Medicines," as the intro and outro of our program. And, uh, thanks to you for listening. We very much appreciate you being here. Um, if you want to buy stuff that is related to this program, you can go to [mcelroymerch.com](http://mcelroymerch.com). That's us. [M-C-E-L-R-O-Ymerch.com](http://M-C-E-L-R-O-Ymerch.com), and you can get some— some *Sawbones* paraphernalia. We've also got a book. If you go to anywhere you buy books and look for *The Sawbones Book*, that's where you'll find it. Case closed.

**Sydnee:** Read a book.

**Justin:** Read a book.

**Sydnee:** Books are great.

**Justin:** Read any book, but read ours... first.

**Sydnee:** Well, that too. Yeah.

**Justin:** Um, and, uh, we got a pro-vax pin on there, some other great stuff, so check it out. That is going to do it for us, so—

**Sydnee:** Um, no it's not.

**Justin:** My mistake!

**Sydnee:** It wouldn't be *Sawbones* if I didn't remind you, as much as it's been fun just to tell scary stories about the past, in the present there are two great vaccines out there you could get.

**Justin:** Ooh!

**Sydnee:** One is for COVID, if you haven't gotten it yet. And there— man, you got a whole variety there. But pick one, and get it, and tell a friend. And a flu vaccine!

**Justin:** Yeah!

**Sydnee:** That you should be getting too, so two shots.

**Justin:** Two shots.

**Sydnee:** Two shots for the price of one, right now. The price is... free, generally.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** I mean, generally for— yes for the COVID vaccine, most places for the flu vaccine.

**Justin:** Cool.

**Sydnee:** So go get your vaccines.

**Justin:** That's gonna do it for us. Until next time, 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]

[chord]

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