

Sawbones 393: Alka-Seltzer

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[theme music plays]

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

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: This is a busy time of year, folks, and you never know what's gonna be... coming down the pike at you.

Sydnee: Holidays just spring up out of nowhere.

Justin: The holidays spring up out of nowhere. Who knew it was Thanksgiving? I look outside my window, in my spacious New York condominium, and I see frickin' Garfield [wheezes] out there!

Sydnee: Was there a Garfield float?

Justin: Garfield was just floatin' by with his old friends Snoopy and Wimpy Kid, and I was like "Oh my gosh!"

Sydnee: [laughs] Gotta have that Wimpy Kid.

Justin: "Oh my gosh!"

Sydnee: Every year.

Justin: "It's Thanksgiving! Already!" And then I left my spacious New York condominium that I have, and uh, I went and bought a turkey. Uh, for me, uh... my wife, Victoria, and our 18 children that all live in my spacious New York condominium.

Sydnee: This is a weird fiction that you've...

Justin: I'm Daddy Warbucks in this. So I got Annie and the other kids in this.

Sydnee: I don't— But the woman isn't named Victoria, is she?

Justin: Later marriage. This is later on.

Sydnee: Oh, okay.

Justin: This is in my— Have you not read my *Annie* fanfiction?!

Sydnee: [laughs] I was— Every time we see that *Annie* is happening again somewhere around us, I always have to ask Justin like “Does he help anybody else by the end? I always forget. Like, I know he helps Annie, but he—”

Justin: He helps everybody.

Sydnee: “Does he help anyone else?” And he does.

Justin: He helps, he helps lots of pe— Gets with FDR, they make a new deal for Christmas. Come on. *Annie*.

Sydnee: Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. No, no, no. So, are we supposed to believe that the reason we got the new deal was Daddy Warbucks?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: The fictional character named—

Justin: Well, I would argue it’s Annie.

Sydnee: Named not “Mr Warbucks”. Daddy.

Justin: Daddy Warbucks.

Sydnee: Daddy, who made his money off the war, so Daddy Warbucks.

Justin: Okay. [sighs] Listen, we’ve lost—

Sydnee: It’s rough. It’s rough, Justin.

Justin: We’ve lost the plot. Sydnee is trying to derail me because this is a special treat. We do it every once in a while when, uh, I have the time in my busy schedule. Uh, it’s not about whether or not Sydnee is very busy helping people.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: It’s about me and my busy schedule, but luckily for you folks, I had enough time to, once again, open the door into the Medical Brands Hall of Fame.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Welcome to my very special Medical Brands Hall of Fame episode, the second one of these.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: If you'll remember last time, we took uh... a long journey through the halls of— Well, why don't you tell me, Syd. I'm sure it made an indelible impact on you. Where did we go last time in my tour of brands?

Sydnee: We did... Um...

Justin: Sydnee.

Sydnee: We did...

Justin: This is—

Sydnee: Vicks VapoRub?

Justin: Thank you.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: So here's what occurs to me. We all— A lot of us here in the States.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Uh, just had a Thanksgiving meal. And... maybe over-indulged in food stuffs. Is common around—

Sydnee: Mmm, turkey.

Justin: Turkey.

Sydnee: Various casseroles. Stuffing. All the potatoes.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Big ol' mess of vegetables.

Justin: Mm-hmm. Sweet potato casserole. My mom's recipe, Sydnee's nailed it. You guys gotta come over and try it, it's the best. But, uh, what we are— Uh, what do we reach for, when we're over-indulged? Well, that's right, Syd. The one and only, Alka-Seltzer.

And it made me think about Alka-Seltzer is one of those brands that would be perfect for this segment, because it's almost more powerful as a brand than it is as a... as a medicine.

Sydnee: I like that you di— I don't wanna mess up your bit.

Justin: Aw, thanks.

Sydnee: But I like that you're, um. You love brands so much.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: You feel such a loyalty to, like, just brands as a concept.

Justin: Love brands.

Sydnee: That you said that "we reached for Alka-Seltzer".

Justin: Well.

Sydnee: [while laughing] When we objectively did not.

Justin: Yeah, we didn't, but it's like a bit.

Sydnee: We don't own Alka-Seltzer.

Justin: We don't own Alka-Seltzer. Well, we own some Alka-Seltzer, the heartburn and relief chews.

Sydnee: Ohh.

Justin: The ones that look like giant Skittles. They're great.

Sydnee: Yeah! Okay. Yeah.

Justin: So, we're gonna be talking about Alka-Seltzer. And like, I'm not as good as Sydnee at this, so like bear with me, my friends. It's the holidays.

Sydnee: You did a good job last time.

Justin: Thank you, but that is no indicator. You know, past performance is no indicator of future...

Sydnee: I'm not as good at making jokes, so.

Justin: Well, I think you're great at them. You make me laugh all the time. Okay, so, listen. Alka-Seltzer. This is— Like I said, folks. Just hang in there with me. I'm doing my best. And I hope you enjoy this rollicking tour of Alka-Seltzer.

So, I wanna take you back to 1884. We're in Indiana, which has a lot of medical ties. Remember when we were in Indianapolis, we did an episode about Eli Lilly.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Justin: So there's a, there's a big thriving medical business there.

Sydnee: I wonder why.

Justin: I don't know. Do you know?

Sydnee: No, I don't.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: No, I was really saying, I wonder why.

Justin: Dr Franklin Miles, he opens up "Dr. Miles Medical Company" in Elkhart, Indiana. Later it changed its name to "Miles Laboratories" in 1935.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: Uh, one of the first products was a big success, a patent medicine tonic called "Dr Miles' Nervine".

Sydnee: Ooh.

Justin: Which claimed to treat, quote "nervousness or nervous exhaustion, sleeplessness, hysteria, headache, neuralgia, back pain, back ache, epilepsy, spasms, fits, and St. Vitus' dance".

Sydnee: Wow!

Justin: [whispering] What's that last one?

Sydnee: That's quite a... quite a, uh, an array.

Justin: It's quite an array, isn't it?

Sydnee: That's quite an array of things that it will... cure. St Vitus' dance... So, uh, St Vitus' dance is actually, I— I usually think of it, or what I think most people would recognize it in medicine as Sydenham's chorea.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Is the other name for it, but it was also referred to as St Vitus' dance. But it's like this, um... The reason it's called a dance is it's a bunch of sort of uncoordinated movements, like usually like jerking-type movements. Um, and it, typically, is associated with, uh, like a childhood infection with strep. A childhood strep infection. Um, and you can get this sort of like auto-immune condition that results from it. So that's what it— But it looks like a dance, so that's what it's related to.

Justin: Ah. So, this Dr Miles Nervine became a big, a big seller! Allowed him to develop a sort of thriving mail-order medicine business. And he's always looking for new products. New things to come out. Now this is, this is in 1928, so this is a good, I don't know, 40 years later.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: The company is still, uh, operating. It's creating new drugs and coming up with new products.

Sydnee: Probably navigating the fact that, like, laws were being made as to...

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: ...what you could put in drugs.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah.

Sydnee: And what you had to tell people was in there.

Justin: The Wild West days of medicine were coming to a close.

Sydnee: You couldn't lie about what they do quite so openly. [laughs]

Justin: 1928 there was a big flu epidemic, okay? Very severe flu epidemic. And, uh, a guy named Hub Beardsley was running—

Sydnee: Hub Beardsley.

Justin: Hub Beardsley! Was doing—

Sydnee: Beardsley!

Justin: The only thing that someone with his name could do.

Sydnee: Powerful name!

Justin: Running a medical company in the 1920s. So, he's the president of Miles Labs then, and he hears this story about a— You're looking at the notes.

Sydnee: Sorry.

Justin: Look at me. 'Cause I— if you're looking at the notes, you'll read ahead, and then I'm gonna be like "Ta da!" and you'll be like "Yeah, I read that five minutes ago".

Sydnee: Okay, okay. Hub Beardsley.

Justin: Hub Beardsley hears this story about a newspaper where the employees aren't getting sick.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: The employees aren't getting sick with the flu.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Uh, the severe flu that's going around. And so he actually travels there and he meets Tom Keane, who's the editor, who tells Beardsley the secret is that when the first sign of illness comes on, these employees took a mix of aspirin and baking soda, and then didn't get the flu.

Sydnee: [laughs] Okay.

Justin: Okay?

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: So, Beardsley goes back and he's like "What's up, my friends here? At the chemical company. Where I work." Went to his chief chemist, Maurice Treneer. He says "Listen... Have you heard about the newspaper?" He's like "Yeah, we're all talking 'bout it". He's like "I need you to come up with a pill that is like this. Like, I wanna sell this to people."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. And—

Justin: And Maurice is like "Absolutely".

Sydnee: Or— Are you sure? Are you sure he first wasn't like "That's nothing. There's no way that's anything. You know that's nothing."

Justin: No. He's like, "That's interesting, let's make that sexy."

Sydnee: Oh.

Justin: "Let's get it sexier." Right?

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: So what does he add in there? Citric acid.

Sydnee: Ohh...

Justin: So what we have then is citric acid and baking soda, which when the water is introduced, when it's dropped into a thing, it fizzes up and it makes effervescence. Right? From the chemical reaction.

Sydnee: Was that just to make it cool?

Justin: What?

Sydnee: I mean like, that was the only reason?

Justin: No.

Sydnee: Like just so it would look cool?

Justin: No. It does other— It does effervescence. You know, it's better. It dissolves quicker.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: And it's like better, 'cause it feels good— The fizzing is good, and...

Sydnee: The fizzing is good?

Justin: This isn't about the efficacy of Alka-Seltzer, which we can all agree is very good.

Sydnee: No, I just think it's interesting that the fizz was only put in there for the—

Justin: The fizz was not only put in there for that. The citric acid is— it aides in soothing your sour stomach.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: `Cause it's anhydrous.

Sydnee: "Aides in soothing a sour stomach" is a very specific way of putting that, that doesn't actually claim any medical benefits, and it makes me think, it makes me think... That it was carefully chosen... for that reason.

Justin: Well, Sydnee, I mean everybody's allowed to be kind of a negative presence. Every party has a pooper, that's why we invited you. So, citric acid is great for the sour stomach, and we can all agree it's great and helpful. Okay. Good.

Sydnee: [laughs] For whatever, whatever you deem a "sour stomach".

Justin: So, in— Treneer works on these tablets, right?

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: And he creates these Alka-Seltzer tablets.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Beardsley is going on a cruise.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: In, like—

Sydnee: Of course Hub Beardsley's going on a cruise.

Justin: Of course Hub Beardsley's— It's the Hub Beardsley family reunion cruise that he goes on. And in a really, like, getting ready like, late 20s cruise.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: Which I'm just was just like debauch.

Sydnee: Do you think he wore...

Justin: Central.

Sydnee: Like a captain's hat?

Justin: Oh abso— No.

Sydnee: If his name was Hub Beardsley.

Justin: You're not allowed to wear a captain's hat on a cruise. They throw you off for that, 'cause there's an actual captain.

Sydnee: There's no way they throw you off for that.

Justin: They do. I've tried to wear one.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: They'll getcha.

Sydnee: There's no way that's true.

Justin: Ask Paul. It's true. Can't wear a captain's hat on a cruise. [chuckles] It's illegal. Uh, so Hub Beardsley takes—

Sydnee: [chuckles] Mickey does it all the time on those Disney cruises! I've seen it on TV!

Justin: Hub Beardsley— Well, Mickey's the captain. Sydnee.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: He pilots the boat while you're sleeping! Listen, Hub Beard— You're distracting me. Hub Beardsley.

Sydnee: Well, now you know how it feels!

Justin: Started so charming— Yeah.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Hub Beardsley takes a hundred of these tablets and any time someone starts showing signs of illness, he's like "I've got a tablet". Now, this is the anecdote that I've seen repeated many, many times.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: This particular version was from a site called the Prisoner of the Penguin, but like I've seen it repeated many times. But like no-one stops to like really slow down and examine this, like "Have you heard about the guy on the boat?"

"Yeah, wait, Hub Beardsley? Yes, I met him!"

"He's just going person to person, asking how people are feeling. He's got a huge pocket full of tablets and he's just passing them out to anybody who feels sick. How is Hub Beardsley tracking who is ill on the boat?!"

Sydnee: Does he— Is he just asking?

Justin: Just asking.

Sydnee: Is that like a conversation opener?

Justin: "So, how you feelin'?" [wheezes] "You heard about anybody that's sick?"

Sydnee: "It's a great cruise, huh?"
"Yeah, yeah, you sick?"

Justin: "You sick? You got the flu?" 1931, Alka-Seltzer is brought to the market.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: February 21st 1931, which means it just celebrated it's uh 90th anniversary.

Sydnee: Goodness gracious. Now, did they immediately come up with "Plop plop, fizz fizz", or does this come later in the story?

Justin: Oh, honey. We've talked about the medicine all we're going to.

Sydnee: Uh-huh.

Justin: The rest of this episode is going to be devoted to a thorough and loving examination of the ways in which Alka-Seltzer has been marketed to the general public.

Sydnee: Now you say we're done talking about the medicine itself.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And maybe you'll get into this, and if so you can stop me, but does it change formulation?

Justin: Uh, the current formulation is like, slightly different. It's got— You know what, let me tell ya. And you can tell me what the— So the active ingredients now...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Let's see; anhydrous citric acid.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Which is an antacid. So it's not just a... a fizzing agent. Hmm.

Sydnee: Hmm.

Justin: Uh, aspirin. And sodium bicarb.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: So, same stuff.

Sydnee: So it's the same stuff.

Justin: Same stuff. Basically. Unchanged.

Sydnee: Wow.

Justin: Now that's in the main formulation.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: There is, uh, also, we'll talk about this a little bit later, but uh Alka-Seltzer Gold, which is marketed without aspirin, 'cause not everybody tolerates aspirin.

Sydnee: And it has other pro— there are other products too.

Justin: We'll get there.

Sydnee: Yeah, okay.

Justin: We'll get there. We have a thrilling amount of ads, and we're going to be listening to some ads.

Sydnee: Oh!

Justin: A little old-time media presentation for you.

Sydnee: Oh, boy!

Justin: Just to like— 'cause some of these are such classics. Um, but that is the story of how it came to be, and after the break we're gonna tell ya how we sell it.

Sydnee: Well. Then I guess it's time for me to say, let's go to the Billing Department.

Justin: Let's go.

[ad break]

Justin: Billing Department's appropriate in this case, Syd, 'cause now it's all about money. Very early on, Alka-Seltzer as was marketed as, [whispers] this is gonna surprise you, [normal] kind of a cure-all.

Sydnee: Yeah, well, everything was, back then.

Justin: Um, the brand, in the earliest ads, the brand was suitable for, it says here, "colds, headaches, gas in the stomach, sour stomach, simple neuralgia, muscular aches and pains, that tired feeling, the morning after feeling, rheumatic fever, and muscular lumbago".

Sydnee: "That tired feeling".

Justin: We're gonna get there, actually.

Sydnee: "That tired feeling".

Justin: That does not— That is not a thing that we'll leave in the 30s, uh, as Gene Wilder will prove here in a little bit.

Sydnee: Why would it—

Justin: The first icon of advertising in Alka-Seltzer's history, uh the first like real— And one of the most lasting icons of marketing, really, from this period came about in the late 50s. A guy named Speedy. Now he was originally named, um, Sparky.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Uh, created by George Pal of the Wade Ad Agency, designed by Wally Wood. Originally named Sparky and then they changed, uh, to fit with the campaign of like speedy relief.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Speedy was in a series of ads with Buster Keaton, who was a very famous silent film star.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Who had sort of a resurgence during this period. And basically, Buster Keaton would be some sort of employee of some sort who was suffering from some sort of malady, and Speedy would appear to help him, uh, through the troubles.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Speedy has a, uh, an Alka-Seltzer for a head and an Alka-Seltzer for a body, which, if you think about it for more than five seconds, is... troubling. I mean, doesn't—

Sydnee: Like the tablet?

Justin: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So, uh, we're gonna listen to one of these ads right now, featuring Buster Keaton and Speedy.

Ad Narrator: Pity the poor mailman. Walk, walk, walk. No wonder he's so tired. Good thing this is his last letter.

[advertisement music dramatically swells]

Justin: The house is driving away.

Ad Narrator: Hey! Uh-oh. What a spot. He's got an aching head, an upset stomach, and an empty lot.

Speedy: [in a young child's voice] What you need is some Alka-Seltzer! You know what they always say.

Buster Keaton: Yeah. The mail must go through.

Speedy: Oh no, I mean about Alka-Seltzer! [sings] "Relief is just!"

[cheerful bass notes]

Speedy: [continues singing] "A swallow away!"

Buster Keaton: Where?

Speedy: [continues singing] "Down, down—"

Justin: Now.

Sydnee: Woah.

Justin: Yeah, it's a rough jingle. It's doesn't quite hit—

Sydnee: Who says "The mail must go through"?

Justin: Who says "Relief is just a swallow away"? I mean.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Not, not anybody you should trust. Let's finish the ad.

Speedy: [continues singing] "Down the stomach through. Round, round, round the system too. With Alka-Seltzer they always say, 'Relief is just!'"

[cheerful bass notes]

Speedy: [continues singing] "A swallow away!"

[sounds of a Vespa running]

Buster Keaton: Bless that relief-giving Alka-Seltzer.

[triumphant, cheerful music]

Speedy: That's what everybody says! With Alka-Seltzer, [sings] "Relief is just!"

[cheerful bass notes]

Speedy: [continues singing] "A swallow away!"

Justin: So that's Speedy, as you can see. He's uh—

Sydnee: He's uh, he's on a Vespa.

Justin: [chuckles] He's on a little Vespa.

Sydnee: And that's what the mailman gets.

Justin: The Ve— The mailman gets—

Sydnee: The mailman gets a Vespa at the end, and he's able to catch up with the, with the... house.

Justin: He was in over, um, 200 ads that ran for over ten years.

Sydnee: People really love that guy, huh?

Justin: People love this. People love this guy!

Sydnee: Did they— Now, this entire time, did they go with the tagline "Relief is just a swallow away"?

Justin: No. Are you kidding? No, no. Speedy, yes. That's, absolutely. So, that was—

Sydnee: Was there nobody who was like "Are we sure about that?"

Justin: This was the earliest, uh... legacy of Alka-Seltzer advertising was Speedy.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: He was their first icon. He has returned periodically. Um, they were looking to spice things up in the early 60s, and they found their new, uh, spokesperson in an up-and-coming actor, named Gene Wilder.

Sydnee: Can I just say real quick that I do appreciate then in that ad they're were like "It goes through your stomach, and then... the whole system".

Justin: [wheezes] "Trust us on this one."

Sydnee: "The bo— The body sys— You know, the human system. Of body."

Justin: "The whoooooole—"

Sydnee: "The body of— The system body. Body system."

Justin: "Don't get hung up on the specifics. It's just the whole thing!"

Sydnee: "The whole one."

[dramatic advertisement music plays]

Gene Wilder: Alka-Seltzer invents a new disease. The blahs.

[melancholy violin riff]

Gene Wilder: The blahs is kinda like the blues, only physical. It's when you're down in the dumps, and you don't know a cold is working on you. It's when you're not feeling right, but you don't know what's wrong. It might be... a headache on its way, a stomach ache on its way.

[sighs dejectedly] Oh, the blahs. Who needs `em? You know. We wouldn't have invented a disease unless we had something to take for it. Alka-Seltzer.

[sounds of a drink fizzing]

Gene Wilder: If Alka-Seltzer can take care of real big upsets, think of what it can do for a simple case of the blahs.

Justin: Like, I just have to give credit to like, the most *Sawbones* ad.
[laughs]

Sydnee: That is— Wow! They just say it! They just say it! “We invented a disease—”

Justin: [wheezes] “We invented a disease.”

Sydnee: “Because we wanted to sell our, our pills.”

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: “And we needed a disease for the pills.”

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: “So we made a disease.” They just say it!

Justin: “We just came right out and made one.”

Sydnee: And I love this idea of, when you’re, “When a cold’s working on yah, or maybe a headache is coming, or maybe an upset stomach—” Like, that’s all the time, though!

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like at any time, I guess I might get sick tomorrow!

Justin: Yeah, but now you’ve got a cure for that, for the blahs.

Sydnee: I can’t— We talk about this so much in medicine like “Well, it’s almost like they had to invent something because they made a pill and now they had to come up with something that the pill could work on”.

Justin: Yip.

Sydnee: But they just say it.

Justin: Yeah, they just come right out and say it. Now, Gene was in another one called “Stomach Fight” that you can, we’re not going to listen to right now ‘cause we don’t have time, honestly. But you can go track it down. Um, if you—

Sydnee: I do love Gene Wilder. I mean.

Justin: Um, yeah. Gene Wilder’s great. Um, but.

Sydnee: It’s too bad he got mixed up in all this. But, you know, there’s a whole history of that. We’ve talked about Dolly Parton, who is beloved by all, including us, has gotten mixed up in patent medicine sales before.

Justin: Yeah. Uh, continually getting ads— The Alka-Seltzer brand was continually like refreshing and updating. [whispers] Stop looking ahead. Please, Sydnee. Makes me so nervous.

Sydnee: Sorry, I'm just really excited.

Justin: I won't do this to you anymore, if this is how it makes you feel, 'cause I do read the notes too, but I'm not going to do that anymore. Uh, one of the ad companies that they worked with, the— you know, the "mad men". [chuckles] Was Jack Tinker—

Sydnee: Wait. Don Draper?

Justin: No, not the real Don Draper.

Sydnee: Oh, okay.

Justin: Jack Tinker & Partners was one of the, uh... ad companies that they worked with.

Sydnee: Jack Tinker?

Justin: Jack Tinker. It's good, right?

Sydnee: Oh, that is good. Not Hub Beardsley.

Justin: Not Hub Beardsley level! But still not bad.

Sydnee: Hub Beardsley is a name that Dwight would make up.

Justin: Yeah. [laughs]

Sydnee: I feel like if Dwight had to make up a character name, he'd say "I'm Hub Beardsley."

Justin: [chuckles] Um, the... There's lots of different campaigns that Jack Tinker was working on, they created a whole series of ads, but the most notable one was called "Alka-Seltzer on the Rocks". And it was literally just— no, it wasn't actually like, um, ice.

Sydnee: That— Well that's what I was gonna ask. Are you supposed to put it in a gla—

Justin: No.

Sydnee: I didn't think you were supposed to put it in the...

Justin: No.

Sydnee: Alka-Seltzer water.

Justin: But the idea was like, it would look like a... So they would have like a tumbler, and it was the dropping it into the, you know, clear glass of water looks refreshing. You know what I mean?

Sydnee: Sure.

Justin: It's like "Ahhh. I could dive into that. Mmmm."

Sydnee: Well, and I think it's always had this sort of connection in my mind to, like, hangovers or having too much to drink or something. I feel like you see that so many times in like movies and stuff.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: The classic image of the guy, the next day like in the office, like in the suit, looking all crumpled and feeling bad, and he's plopping his Alka-Seltzer so he can get through the day.

Justin: So, here's a story about Jack Tinker, who was at Miles Laboratories and they were, you know, trying to get ideas for this campaign. And, this is a, I'm quoting here, so "We met an attractive doctor at Miles Laboratories named Dorothy Carter". That's so like— Why did we have to mention Dorothy Carter being attractive? Like what does that have to do with anything?

Sydnee: Do you need me to explain it to you, Justin?

Justin: No, I don't.

Sydnee: Do you want me to explain it?

Justin: I don't.

Sydnee: I could explain it! [chuckles]

Justin: I don't! But as a make-good, because Dorothy will become important in this story very quickly.

Sydnee: Uh-huh.

Justin: I just wanted to take a quick detour over to check in on Dorothy Staples, who lived to the ripe old age of 104 years old!

Sydnee: Wow!

Justin: Yeah, in New York. She was born in England, got her medical degree, worked at the, uh, got her degree from the Royal Medical School in '38, was a wartime mom of three children, like during the war, while she worked full-time.

Sydnee: Wow.

Justin: As a coroner obituary, she said "We told ourselves we juggled so much, that we were contributing to the war effort". Her family moved to Argentina after the war. In '51 she moved to America. She got recertified, uh, and started working at Miles' Laboratories, where we will meet her very briefly. Eventually she becomes the company's first woman vice-president in 1963, as well as the first woman vice-president of a pharmaceutical Fortune 500 company.

Sydnee: Wow.

Justin: Period. She travelled around, uh, she loved to play tennis. She was an avid gardener, she lived to 104 years old. She works, she continues to work as a consultant for Miles for many years after this. So, anyway, thank you Dorothy Staples. Just wanted to take a quick pitstop. Hey.

Sydnee: Well, I think that's good, since the way that Jack Tinker remembered her was—

Justin: Was "attractive".

Sydnee: —an attractive doctor.

Justin: Sure. So, okay. This is the quote "We met an attractive doctor who demonstrated to us that in order for aspirin to break through the pain barrier, it often required two aspirins, not one, to do the job. As aspirin is one of the ingredients that make Alka-Seltzer effective, we asked her if two Alka-Seltzers would be better than one. Yes, two would work better than one. But the directions on the package said to take only one, and all the old Speedy commercials demonstrated only one fizzing in water."

"We did a little dance with Dorothy Carter in the laboratory. What a stroke of good fortune that was. We changed the directions on the packages and began showing two Alka-Seltzers dropping into a glass of water in every commercial. Miles created portable foil packs that held two Alka-Seltzers each, and sold them in new places: magazine stands, bars, fast food restaurants, powder rooms. They became ubiquitous and naturally Miles began selling twice as much Alka-Seltzer."

Now, that's somewhat apocryphal. The sales did not quite double, but they did increase quite a bit, as a result of this change in the directions and how it was packaged. And it was just from that chance encounter with Dorothy Carter, who is why— who is the woman who is responsible for there being two Alka-Seltzer in the package.

Sydnee: And you know what's a shame is that, like, what she did was explain the concept of a dose to them. I mean, that's what it was.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: It's just that you need to take the appropriate dose of something for it to work, and if you don't take enough of it, it doesn't do anything, and she explained that. You gotta wonder if the sales didn't also increase as much as like, well now they're using twice as much, but also it may have been more effective? I mean, 'cause aspirin is a real medicine, that does things. So...

Justin: Just like Alka-Seltzer.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Well, I'm not saying it's not a real medicine. I'm saying that it didn't work for all the things they said it would work for.

Justin: I have to keep moving. Sydnee, there's too much to cover.

Sydnee: I'm just saying it might be more effective now.

Justin: I know you love—

Sydnee: You're taking enough aspirin for it to actually help with like a headache or whatever.

Justin: I know you love to talk about marketing brands, but I have to keep moving forward. I'm gonna— Let me check my time. Hold on, I need to do the— This is why you do the little timer. Oh my gosh, I'm already— Okay. [deep breath]

1969, there's an ad called "Unfinished Lunch".

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Which is... I can't— The audio of it wouldn't do you any good, because it's in a prison lunch room. It's these guys all eating their lunch.

Sydnee: Uh-huh.

Justin: Their food. These guys they finish their lunch and they start banging their, like, mugs. On the table.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: And chanting, this one guy dies “Al-ka Selt-zer, Al-ka Selt-zer” ‘cause he wants it. And then the chant like goes throughout the whole, like, prison lunch hall. It’s an actor named George Raft, uh, who played the role. And this commercial became so popular that Raft appeared as a guest on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, who informed him that the ad took more than seven hours to tape, and it turned him into like a minor celebrity, just from the strength of this ad.

Sydnee: Did it work? Like, do they get Alka-Seltzer in the...

Justin: No, it’s sorta like, cliffhanger. Like do they get it, do they not? I mean, you have to hope they get it Alka-Seltzer.

Sydnee: It’s prison, they probably didn’t give them Alka-Seltzer.

Justin: Um, yeah. I mean that’s— okay.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: Uh, yeah. It’s probably— Well, it’s an ad, so actually they didn’t get it or not get it, ‘cause it’s pretend. But I know what you are saying. Uh, the next big, like, landmark in uh uh— [wheezes] in Alka-Seltzer marketing history is an ad campaign called “No Matter What Shape Your Stomach Is In”.

Sydnee: Uh-huh...

Justin: Which was a sort of like “Everybody can benefit from Alka-Seltzer”. Like, no matter what’s going on with your stomach. This is weird. There was a music underneath this commercial.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: And a band called The T-Bones, which was basically, kind of from what I could tell, was like a manufactured studio band?

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Uh, thought that they could have a hit with the song from the commercial.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: So they released a single, called “No Matter What Shape Your Stomach Is In”, based on the music from the commercial.

Sydnee: Di— Was it a hit?

Justin: Yeah, his name's Dave Pell. It was, uh, the group that he manufactured was called The T-Birds. Let me turn this, I'm gonna go ahead and turn this on.

[“No Matter What Shape Your Stomach Is In” by The T-Birds starts playing]

Justin: So we can start—

[music plays]

Sydnee: Did it become a hit?

Justin: Well. It did, Sydnee. The single spent 13 weeks on the Billboard Hot 100, reaching number three, while reaching number one on Canada's RPM Play Sheet. The album spent seven weeks on Billboard's Top Chart LPs.

[vocals start]

Justin: And it was just some studio musicians [wheezes] playing the music.

Sydnee: No lyrics?

Justin: Nope!

Sydnee: Well, there's some “ahhs” here, I hear.

Justin: Some “ahhs”.

[music stops]

Justin: So that is “No Matter What Shape Your Stomach Is In” [wheezes] which is wild that it became a—

Sydnee: Hey.

Justin: A big single. Big hit single.

Sydnee: It's kind of a bop.

Justin: It's kind of a bop. “No Matter What Shape Your Stomach Is In”. Let's see, does it cha— let me see if it changes much. Let me go through.

[Justin skips through the track]

Justin: Oh it— key change.

[music plays]

Sydnee: I mean, don't get me wrong, it doesn't make me wanna take Alka-Seltzer, necessarily. But...

[more vocals]

Sydnee: It's groovy.

Justin: It's groovy, right?

Sydnee: It's very groovy.

Justin: It's very groovy. Okay. So that's "No Matter What Shape Your Stomach Is In".

[music stops]

Justin: Another big hit campaign. Um, and then we get into this unbeli—I mean, this is already part of like an unbelievable run for Alka-Seltzer advertising, right?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Uh, the next big one is in the like very early 70s, and it— the Mary Wells Agency.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Uh, gets the Alka-Seltzer campaign. They have, they uh... They call a guy named Howie Cohen, who they say "Hey, we're doing Alka-Seltzer" and he's like "That's amazing". He said— They say "You're not the guy who's doing the campaign" he's like "Okay, what are we, like, the back-up?" And they said "Well, no. We're giving it to these other guys. You're the back-up for the back-up."

Sydnee: Oh...

Justin: The first two campaigns, though, Sydnee. They fail.

Sydnee: [intrigued] Oh...

Justin: And it falls to Howie Cohen, who... uh says "Okay. I got an idea for the ad. I think I know what it could be." And it is a— You will see a

gentleman sitting in a café, and we will hear the following advertisement. Drawing on a phrase that his mother used to say to him all the time, he comes up with this campaign called "Try It, You'll Like It".

Man at Café: Came to this little place, waiter says "Try this, you'll like it!" "What's this?" "Try it! You'll like it!" "But what is it?" "Try it! You'll like it!" So I tried it! Thought I was gonna die. Took two Alka-Seltzer.

Narrator: Alka-Seltzer neutralizes all the acid your stomach has churned out. For your upset stomach and headache, take Alka-Seltzer and feel better fast.

Man at Café: Alka-Seltzer works. Try it! You'll like it.

Justin: This ad is massive. It's massively successful.

Sydnee: Really?

Justin: People adore "Try It, You'll Like It". It is another like—

Sydnee: [laughs] Was everybody really bored?

Justin: People were really bored back then, Syd.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: Okay. But this isn't even the wildest thing! Howie Cohen crushes it with "Try It, You'll Like It". Then he is at a wrap party for the "Try It, You'll Like It" campaign, right?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Like, everybody's celebrating, and they have all this food there at the wrap party, right? Ice cream and lobster and cookies and cake, and all this amazing food.

Sydnee: Soup?

Justin: Soup. All the soups!

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: Vichyssoise. All the soups! Mu—

Sydnee: Chicken noodle?

Justin: Mutton— Chicken noodle, everything.

Sydnee: Potato? [chuckles]

Justin: Sydnee. I'm trying to do a podcast. So, he uh stuffs himself.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Gets completely full.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Okay. He sits back in his chair, and you know what he says?

Sydnee: What?

[advertisement audio starts]

Ralph: I can't believe I ate that whooole thing.

Speaker 1: You ate it, Ralph.

Ralph: I can't believe I ate that whooole thing.

Speaker 1: No, Ralph. I ate it.

Ralph: I can't believe I ate that whooole thing.

Speaker 1: Take two Alka-Seltzer.

Narrator: Alka-Seltzer neutralizes all the acid your stomach has churned out. For your upset stomach and headache, take Alka-Seltzer and feel better fast.

Speaker 1: Did you drink your Alka-Seltzer?

Ralph: The whooole thing.

Justin: That's right, he went directly into "I can't believe I ate that whole thing".

Sydnee: I don't think I knew that that was an Alka-Seltzer ad.

Justin: Yeah. And now I won't share it with you all, you can find it on your own, but this ad was so popular, it was remade, verbatim! By Peter Boyle and Doris Roberts, the parents from *Everybody Loves Ray*— [wheezes] *Raymond*. [claps]

Sydnee: Really?

Justin: That's how popular this, this ad was.

Sydnee: I don't— They're still saying that Alka-Seltzer neutralizes all of the acid in your stomach.

Justin: That would be bad, right?

Sydnee: Yeah, well you need some stomach acid.

Justin: Some stomach acid.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Okay, now this is where this— These histories, by the way, are hard to put together when it's so successful and like there's a lot of people who have a hand on the ball. And everybody wants to be like "Oh, I'm the guy." You know?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Justin: Or "I'm the lady. I'm the, I'm the one who came up with... this." But this story—

Sydnee: "I'm the lady." Frequent, frequent thing that ladies say.

Justin: "I'm the lady."

Sydnee: "I'm the lady!"

Justin: Um, but he— This is as close to the truth as I could get on this. In the mid-50s, Paul Margulies, who is the father of actress Juliana Margulies.

Sydnee: Oh yeah. I like her.

Justin: That's more stunning than you gave it credit for, but okay. He, in the mid-50s, he creates a jingle. Uh, "Plop Plop, Fizz Fizz".

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Everyone agrees that he created this campaign. In the, in the— This jingle, in the 50s.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: They didn't use it. For 20 years.

Sydnee: Why?

Justin: Nobody knows, but he created this in the mid-50s. The jingle. And then the full jingle was created by a guy named Tom Dawes, who was in a group called The Cyrkle.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Which was another, another uh... group, group at the time. But, it wasn't until, as old as that sounds, it wasn't until the mid-70s that this ad would actually— Like this jingle would actually be used in an ad.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: As wi— As wild as that is, we didn't see it until then. This ubiquitous jingle, that is— was created in the 50s by Julianna Margulies's dad then.

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: But, it was also before they started it in a two pack! I— So I have no explanation, folks. You tell—

Sydnee: Maybe that was why it didn't work.

Justin: Maybe.

Sydnee: Before.

[advertisement audio begins, sounds of ten-pin bowling]

Speaker 2: The beer and the burgers, the light and the noise!

Speaker 3: The three of us here with the boys.

[group singing in unison]

Group: Ahhh, ohhh! Plop plop. Fizz fizz. Oh, what a relief it is! Plop plop. Fizz fizz. Oh, what a relief it is!

Narrator: Ah, those lovely bubbles. For aches and pains with upset stomach, Alka-Seltzer works. Fast.

Group: [singing] Oh, what a relieeeef it is!

Narrator: For acid indigestion, try Alka-Seltzer Gold.

Sydnee: Man, and I can just feel the— a young Tommy Smirl watching this commercial and thinking “I’m gonna sing that to my children some day, over and over and over again.”

Justin: [laughs] How big was this— How big, how big and beloved was “Plop Plop, Fizz Fizz”?

[advertisement audio starts, theatrical big band music plays]

Sammy Davis Junior: [singing] That was some party, dancin’ all night. Ended up eatin’ pizza by dawn’s early light. I can’t help it, I love to live. Livin’ like bat means something’s got to give. I’ve got to get me some Alka-Seltzer, fast, fast! Plop plop. Fizz Fizz. Oh, what a relief it is. Plop plop.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Not enough people sing about indigestion anymore, you know?

Justin: Certainly, yeah Syd—

Sammy Davis Junior: [continues singing] Alka-Seltzeeeeer! [key change] Alka-Seltzeeeeer!

Sydnee: Wow, listen to that build.

Justin: Tell `em, Sammy.

[Sammy Davis Junior scats]

Sydnee: Alright!

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: This key change, brought to you by Alka-Seltzer.

Justin: [laughs]

[ad audio ends]

Justin: Yeah, that’s Sammy Davis Junior. [laughs] Doing, uh, “Plop Plop, Fizz Fizz”. In the UK, that jingle is “Plink Plink, Fizz Fizz”.

Sydnee: I think that’s more sonically pleasant. I was thought “plop plop” was kind of... yucky.

Justin: Uh, fair. Uh, so that’s “Plop Plop, Fizz Fizz”. Um, the uh... Sammy did it. If you, uh, you know, if you don’t happen to have one of the many

illnesses that Alka-Seltzer's good for, which is minor aches and pains and acid indigestion.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: You can use it for other purposes around your house, according to several different websites. Now I am not endorsing the efficacy of any of these because that is way outside *Sawbones'* lane. I'm already outside my lane by doing this.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: But going even further than that, I have no idea. But reportedly you can use it to clean a toilet. You can uh melt it down in a cup of water and then put it on a insect bite.

Sydnee: I guess it's got baking soda in it.

Justin: Yeah. Cleaning pots and pans. Uh, you can do an Alka-Seltzer in a glass and then leave it in your fridge and it'll deodorize your fridge. You can use it to descale your coffee pot, you can use it to clean your jewelry. You can use it to whiten your laundry.

Sydnee: I actually wouldn't put it on your skin like that.

Justin: I won't put it—

Sydnee: `Cause it does have aspirin in it.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like you could absorb that, so depending on like... what size the person, is this a kid? You know what I mean?

Justin: Oh, well. Yeah.

Sydnee: They're a bit— Like a— Just for point of reference, salicylic acid paste, like aspirin pastes, are something that are sometimes used in like folk medicine. Like I see that around here, these parts. [chuckles] In these parts. And, uh, it can be dangerous. And I have seen people with toxicity from it, so.

Justin: These days, Alka-Seltzer the brand is, uh... expanded, I would say. They still have the tablets, in lemon lime, cherry, and original. Uh, treating the, you know, treating the same stuff they've always said they treated. There's heartburn relief chews.

Sydnee: Well, a lot less than they used to say, I would say.

Justin: Yeah, probably. Uh which are the, like I said, the giant Skittles. There's, uh, Alka-Seltzer Plus, which has other active ingredients to treat, um, like flu.

Sydnee: Like cold and flu. Oh yeah.

Justin: Cold and flu symptoms. Like antihistamine.

Sydnee: Like your classic.

Justin: Decongestants and that.

Sydnee: Sort of stuff that you find in a lot of combo cold pills.

Justin: Um, there's also just like pills that say Alka-Seltzer on them, that aren't even the "plop plop, fizz fizz" stuff. PowerMax gels and day night Alka-Seltzer.

Sydnee: Gum!

Justin: And gum. There's gum!

Sydnee: Mmm!

Justin: For heartburn relief. And, you know, gummies. For the kids. [chuckles] They got everything, Alka-Seltzer. Um, so it's still an extremely powerful brand. Um, it is owned by um, Bayer at this point. It is, uh, the entire— the Miles Laboratory got bought by Bayer.

Sydnee: So it's still doing, I mean I assume it's doing fine, it's out there, we're all aware of it, so I assume it must do well. But.

Justin: Alka-Seltzer.

Sydnee: It's weird because the two things that it does, which I mean it has active ingredients in it that can do those things, so I'm not going to say obviously it is not fake in that sense. We talk about patent, old patent medicines that were sorta fake, or the idea of like a cough drop that's really just sugar.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Not all are, but some are. Anyway, my point is, there are medicines that help with acid reflux, heartburn, indigestion, those sorts of things, and there are medicines that help with minor aches and pains.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And I would even probably go so far as to say there are medicines that do either one of those things better than this combo. So it seems kind of odd to me, like just from a purely like clinical standpoint, that people would still reach for the Alka-Seltzer over any... of these other things.

Justin: Well. If I had to—

Sydnee: I think there are many things you and I take for these... ailments.

Justin: If I had to guess... and I'm not—

Sydnee: And I would not replace them with Alka-Seltzer.

Justin: These numbers are not, like, I don't have these numbers. But if I had to guess, I would guess that the effervescent, classic Alka-Seltzer is, uh, much less popular. I don't know, like I don't think I've ever seen, like, I don't think I've seen someone use it in a very long time.

Sydnee: No, and not even in— Like, my parents didn't, growing up, use a lot of Alka-Seltzer. Maybe my grandparents did? I don't know.

Justin: But I think that's why you see Alka-Seltzer applied to all these other medicines, right? Because it's more powerful as a brand than as a medicine. Which is what I was saying from before; the work of these ads was so effective that it actually gave more power to the name "Alka-Seltzer" than it did to the medicine itself. So we will see it on things that have nothing to do with the "plop plop, fizz fizz", because that's the, you know, even the, even the pills have a picture of the... the "plop plop, fizz fizz" on it. [chuckles] Like, it...

Sydnee: That's true.

Justin: You know, it's like, that is, that's the brand.

Sydnee: Power of fast fizz.

Justin: That is Alka-Seltzer, one of our icons of advertising. Thank you so much for all the great ads.

Sydnee: One of... Justin's icons of advertising. [laughs]

Justin: One of my *Sawbones'*, both of our...

Sydnee: Well. Kinda your personal... This is sorta your personal interest.

Justin: Um, so thank you so much for listening. Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. Um...

Sydnee: Thank you Justin for doing all this hard work and teaching us about Alka-Seltzer.

Justin: Uh, no problem, Syd. It's the least that I could do. Um, that is, uh... That's gonna do it for us. So 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!

[outro music plays]

[ukulele chord]

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