

## Sawbones 397: Mariko Aoki Phenomenon

Published January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
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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 co-host, Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:** And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:** Um, Syd, it's— This is our— An interesting transitional episode, our last episode this year.

**Sydnee:** We're recording it in 2021.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** But you are listening to it in the future.

**Justin:** Greetings from the past!

**Sydnee:** 2022. I hope things are... beeeterrrr?

**Justin:** Maybe turning round a little bit. I mean, one can hope.

**Sydnee:** It's just a few days away.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** So it's not.

**Justin:** I can pro— Don't— Okay, I'm knocking on all the adjacent wood.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** In our home.

**Sydnee:** I don't believe in those sorts of superstitions, Justin. I am a scientist.

**Justin:** Oh, really Sydnee?

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** Well, what kind of science...

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** ...have you prepared for us this week, on our science program, *Science Watch*.

**Sydnee:** As a scientist, it is my job to investigate all, uh... unique human phenomena.

**Justin:** Mmm. Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** No matter... how strange they may seem.

**Justin:** Mmm. Can you give me... any examples?

**Sydnee:** I also thought this would be a fun way to end this year, um.

**Justin:** And begin a n—

**Sydnee:** Something light.

**Justin:** And begin a new one.

**Sydnee:** And begin a new one. Something light. Something funny and fun and interesting, and um... not too heavy, because I'm sure there will be heavy stuff to talk about in the future.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** So, uh, I was... looking at TikTok. You know, spacing out and disassociating while looking a TikTok.

**Justin:** Ayyyyy.

**Sydnee:** Our new favorite pandemic pastime. I think we've all engaged in.

**Justin:** Yup.

**Sydnee:** And I noticed some people talking about TJ Maxx. Uh, specifically about the idea that— and I don't know this. This is not my experience.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** I just saw this on TikTok. The idea that when you are in TJ Maxx for a while, you have the urge... to go number two.

**Justin:** Okay. Now listen, you're— From what you've told me, you're going to be talking about number two a lot... in this episode, and I'm afraid that you're going to be need to be okay... with saying the "p" word.

**Sydnee:** You want me to say "defecate"?

**Justin:** Yeah, you did and it's actually...

**Sydnee:** It's almost worse.

**Justin:** The worst.

**Sydnee:** It's almost worse. Anyway.

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

**Sydnee:** Either way, people were talking about that in Tik— on TikTok, and then a bunch of people in the comments were like "Me too! Me too! Me too! I can't believe that! I thought it was just me!", and somebody said, in the comments, "Oh yeah, that's the Mariko Aoki Phenomenon".

**Justin:** Mmm.

**Sydnee:** And I was like... "What?"

**Justin:** What?

**Sydnee:** "I have got to look that up." So I did, and this— This is a whole thing that I was not familiar with, I have not personally experienced, but apparently many people have, and now I would like to share this with you.

**Justin:** Sp— Specific to TJ Maxx.

**Sydnee:** No, no. It's not specific to TJ Maxx, but it is, um, okay. So. [chuckles] The history of this— And by the way, Justin, would you— I have put the— Because you are learning Japanese.

**Justin:** Hey.

**Sydnee:** At the top of my document here, I have put the Japanese... name.

**Justin:** Uh-huh.

**Sydnee:** For this. If you would like to.

**Justin:** Aoki. Mariko. Gensho.

**Sydnee:** Okay, well I figured that was how you say that.

**Justin:** Yeah. Aoki.

**Sydnee:** Am I pronouncing that—

**Justin:** Aoki is uh—

**Sydnee:** Aoki and Mariko, or—

**Justin:** "Aoki" is—

**Sydnee:** Do I have the stress on the right syllable?

**Justin:** Yeah, that's good. "Ao" is "blue, and "ki", in this case— This is kanji for "tree", so... "blue tree".

**Sydnee:** Well this is— This is a person's name.

**Justin:** Yes, but it translates to "blue tree".

**Sydnee:** Oh, interesting.

**Justin:** But it doesn't probably actually translate to that.

**Sydnee:** And I—

**Justin:** Just that those are the two ka— I know these two kanji, and they mean "blue" and "tree".

**Sydnee:** And you're very proud of yourself. And I assume "gensho" means "phenomenon".

**Justin:** Let's— That's probably our best approximation.

**Sydnee:** Since the other two words are the name of this—

**Justin:** That's enough of an amorphous idea that I'd be shocked if it's like exactly 100% one-to-one, but I bet it's pretty darn close.

**Sydnee:** So—

**Justin:** I know that one of these kanji means "reason". That's all I know.

**Sydnee:** Okay. So back in February of 1985. This is where this phenomenon, well our awareness of it, really originates. A 29-year-old woman from Tokyo, named Mariko Aoki, had a letter published in the magazine—

**Justin:** Her last name is first in the— in the— Did you notice that, in her name?

**Sydnee:** Oh, yah.

**Justin:** "Aoki Mariko". 'Cause you would. That's how they do it.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. I'm using her entire name, because I thought that was appropriate, since I don't know her personally.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm. Yeah, you could go with uh... uh, Aoki-san.

**Sydnee:** I know usually on this podcast, we get pretty casual with our historical figures, like ancient history.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** But for recent history, try to be more respectful.

**Justin:** Here— This is an American podcast. We will drop the "san". But, Aoki-san would be. If you wanna go with that.

**Sydnee:** Okay. Anyway, she wrote a letter.

**Justin:** I guess, I don't know.

**Sydnee:** To a magazine. Which, would you like to... to give us the name of the magazine?

**Justin:** [breathes deeply] Mmm. Honosashi. That's "book magazine".  
[wheezes]

**Sydnee:** Yes, "book magazine".

**Justin:** [chuckles] The magazine of books. That's amazing.

**Sydnee:** The book magazine. Uh, and she wrote a letter to this magazine, and the reason that is given for why it was published is that the editors thought it was funny. It was kinda funny, little letter that they got, and people would be interested in this, they thought.

**Justin:** "Aw, funny— funny letter," they said.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, it was kind of funny. So they publish this letter, and in it she said, basically "Every time I'm in a bookstore for a while, I get the urge to go poop."

**Justin:** Hmm.

**Sydnee:** "Why does this happen? Why is it that when I'm in a bookstore, browsing the shelves, looking around, I am struck by the very sudden urge that I must immediately go poop?"

**Justin:** Poop.

**Sydnee:** "Why does this happen?" And apparently, a lot of— So they publish this little letter, like "Oh, this is funny." And they got a huge reaction.

**Justin:** [laughs] I bet they did.

**Sydnee:** A ton of readers were like "Oh my gosh, I do too!"

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** "Oh that's— Yeah. I have had that exact same sensation." And wanted to talk about it and wanted to share their interpretation of it. "For me, it's like this," and "For me, it also happens here", and "For me it's like—" And they got such a response, that the— the magazine, Book Magazine, did like a follow-up, feature-length article in their next issue, that came out in April of '85, that was titled "The Phenomenon Currently Shaking the Bookstore Industry".

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** Which is a little bit of sensationalism, I think. Um, I don't know that it was currently shaking the bookstore industry, as much as apparently it had been all along.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** And no-one was aware. Uh, but this, this really drew a bunch of attention to it when this article was published, and a lot of people began to sort of understand it as a thing that actually happened.

Now, as I was trying to read about, like, the history of this, it was noted that, I guess— And I liken this to, you know in the US we have a tendency to put "gate" at the end of things?

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Like if something's like a scandal.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** It's "whatever-gate". You know? Like when you made that really spicy mix last night, it was like "Spicy-gate". Because I ate it and then I was like "Oh my gosh, this is so spicy. Spice-gate."

**Justin:** [shouts] You! Said!

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** [shouts] You said! "This is delicious." You said multiple! Times!

**Sydnee:** It was, it was just really spicy.

**Justin:** No, you said multiple times.

**Sydnee:** It was like Spicy TexMex-gate.

**Justin:** And this morning, three different instances.

**Sydnee:** Well, the stuff you made this morning was so much better. 'Cause it wasn't to spi— [breaks off into quiet laughter]

**Justin:** But you said last night!

**Sydnee:** This is a— This is a "gate". That we have just— This is a "gate"!

**Justin:** Yeah. Oh, it's a gate. Now it's turning into "Marriage-gate", is what I would say.

**Sydnee:** And I don't know— I know medical history, I don't know, you know, modern Japanese history, but my understanding is that, culturally, this was a time where a lot of things would have been called "phenomena". That was a popular thing to name phenomena.



**Justin:** I invented the recipe on the fly. I will adjust it. I thought a little bit of the spice was nice.

**Sydnee:** It— Just— Yes.

**Justin:** It was hot butter Cheerios with hoisin sauce and, and uh... A little sriracha in there.

**Sydnee:** So because of this, the need to defecate after being in a bookstore for a little bit.

**Justin:** [chuckles quietly]

**Sydnee:** Urgently, I should say, became known as the “Mariko Aoki Phenomenon”. And—

**Justin:** [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** As I’m gonna talk about this—

**Justin:** [through laughter] Why? I hope. I hope, I just hope. That she was at least reached out to like, “Hey. You’re about to have your fifteen minutes, and it’s for this.”

**Sydnee:** He—

**Justin:** I mean, speaking as the berries and cream guy.

**Sydnee:** Uh-huh.

**Justin:** Like, this is her berries and cream.

**Sydnee:** Well, look at the next thing I wrote. Before you get worried.

**Justin:** Ye— Okay.

**Sydnee:** She reportedly has no problem with this.

**Justin:** With this, okay.

**Sydnee:** I worried about this too. As I was researching this I was like “Oh...”

**Justin:** Yeah, you cannot—

**Sydnee:** “What if this poor woman did not want to be known for this?” She has had multiple like follow-up interviews with Book Magazine where they talk to her about it, and where she says like “Yeah, I’m totally fine with this being named after me and this phenomenon being associated with me. Like, it does not bother me. I’m not upset about this.”

**Justin:** How are those interviews longer than two questions?

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** One. For question one—

**Sydnee:** Well—

**Justin:** “How do you feel about this pooping syndrome being named after you?” Question two. “So, do you still have to poop when you’re in bookstores?” End of interview.

**Sydnee:** Well, I, so— We’re gonna go through this. [chuckles] Medically, step by step, but I think it’s important to note... This phenomenon seems to have really captured the imagination of a lot of people. It really seems to be, for whatever reason, something that has interested a lot of people, that has resulted in a lot of research and scholarship and focus. Um, a lot of people seem to latch onto this idea.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** So, why were there multiple follow-up interviews? For that reason. Because a lot of people had questions. [chuckles] Now, as much as there has been scholarship done since then, it is worth noting, because as I was reading through this, there were several mentions— People have said like “Now, I know we attribute this to Mariko Aoki, but there were mentions of this prior to ‘85.”

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** And it seems to be mainly— And this is also probably a function of where, uh, this research has been done. So like, most of the literary references prior to this were in Japanese literature, but a lot of the research and interest was in Japan, and is— continues to be so. I don't know, there may be references to this outside of Japan, but that— that's where they've been investigating. But there are like mentions of this in different books.

**Justin:** Hmm...

**Sydnee:** As far back as the 1950s, there are mentions on some radio programs and some magazines. So like, this wasn't the first time... that this idea, that you go into a bookstore and then urgently have to poop, has been introduced.

**Justin:** [laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** It was just that this article is what broke through the public consciousness and really introduced it as its own idea.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Because by the '90s, by the 1990s, it was just sort of an accepted fact.

**Justin:** Once you put it on a platform like Honosashi, it's like who's not reading Book Magazine?

**Sydnee:** [chuckles] And then as you get into the 2000s, with like the internet, an idea like this can really take off, right?

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** 'Cause then everyone can know about it, and people can write about it. They can try to validate it, try to do surveys about it, try to, you know, replicate it and see is this something that is really real. Um, and the studies that have been done on this, they range from— So first of all, there are a lot of surveys of people who experience it.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Like, to try to understand it better. Sort of like qualitative research. Tell me about where it happens, what is it like, what does it feel like? You know, what did you do the night before, what did you eat that day? Like, all these different sort of collecting data from people who already experience it. And then demographics like age, gender, that kind of thing.

And then there's of the general population, like they've done surveys in Japan to ask people where are you most likely to need— [chuckles] To feel the urge to need to poop. Like, while you're standing on a train platform, or while you're in your office, or while you're in a bookstore, and while you're in a bookstore comes up pretty high!

**Justin:** [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** On the list of like where you might need to have to poop. Um, they've also done things like, uh, like a— like a blinded study to see, okay, is this real, or is this just people thinking it because they read about it? So they would— They did one study where they had people like wander around a bookstore, which I love the idea of like, tell them— What did you tell them? "Here's what I need you to do for this study that you've signed up for. Go in this bookstore and wander around."

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** "And—"

**Justin:** "Just see—"

**Sydnee:** "Just be there—"

**Justin:** "Just see— Just be in the bookstore."

**Sydnee:** "Just be there." And then after they were done, that sat 'em down and interviewed them and were like "So did you poop?" [chuckles]

**Justin:** [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** Which would feel— Personally, if I had, would feel like a trap to me.

**Justin:** Yeah, that would feel very targeted, Sydnee, I think. "So, uh, while we have you here..."

**Sydnee:** "Did you poop in there?"

**Justin:** "Did you poop in there?"

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** [laughs] Why don't they— That's a stupid way of doing that study. You know what you should do? Do it— well, just stand outside... the door of the bookstore and say "Well, did you have a poop while you were in there? Or what? What's the deal?"

**Sydnee:** Honey, if you stood outside the door of a bookstore and just asked people on their way out if they pooped inside—

**Justin:** I wouldn't be dressed like a scientist.

**Sydnee:** You would be arrested. [laughs]

**Justin:** No. I wouldn't dress like a scientist because I wouldn't want to put people on edge. So it would be more like [wheezes] Just like a regular guy, and I wouldn't have anything obvious to write with.

**Sydnee:** Uh-huh.

**Justin:** Or to write on. It would just be standing, and I would sort of...

**Sydnee:** No no no. Okay. You are— You're a customer in Borders. You're a customer.

**Justin:** Ah, good pull. Can I be in Waldenbooks instead?

**Sydnee:** You're a customer at Waldenbooks. You have just uh browsed the shelves for a while. You're exiting Waldenbooks, going out into Huntington Mall.

**Justin:** Walk in the Walden Book Store.

**Sydnee:** Uh-huh, and there is a guy standing there, outside. Now, which scenario is more unsettling? He's in a lab coat, with like... science goggles and a clipboard, and he's like "Excuse me, sir. Did you poop while you were in there?" And he's like writing down your information. Or! Just some guy, in like, you know...

**Justin:** They're both pretty bad, aren't they?

**Sydnee:** A Shrek t-shirt.

**Justin:** Now that you say— [wheezes, laughs]

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** Why are you making fun of my Shrek t-shirt? There's nothing— I hadn't cleaned.

**Sydnee:** Just hanging out in a Shrek t-shirt, and he's like "Hey man, hey man. Real quick, real quick."

**Justin:** [imitating Shrek] "Hey, Donkey."

**Sydnee:** [chuckles] "Hold up, hold up, hold up."

**Justin:** [still Shrek] "Donkey."

**Sydnee:** "Did you, uh..."

**Justin:** [still Shrek] "It's me, Shrek."

**Sydnee:** "Did you poop in there?" And he didn't have a clipboard, so he's not writing anything down. It's ju— It just seems like he needs to know, for his own interest. Which one is worse?

**Justin:** Okay, moving on.

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** They're both bad, I will say. To be fair.

**Sydnee:** So, uh, they got some data from this. [chuckles] From all these studies that were done over time, and different people were doing this. Different, uh, thinkers, researchers, psychologists. Just people who wanted to know more. Um, and some data that emerged from this is that while we don't really know how frequently it occurs, they— they've estimated it could be up to one in 10 people. [chuckles]

**Justin:** Wow!

**Sydnee:** Studies were like one in 10 to one in 20. Now again, who knows.

**Justin:** I need to know how many people are usually pooping in the— Well, I guess there's not— You can't do like a control, right? Because once you're in there, you're in there.

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** I guess the control would be going to a clothes store and see if you have to poop.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, well, you can compare it to other stores, or like a sham bookstore, but I don't know how you create a bookstore that isn't a bookstore, but people think is a bookstore.

**Justin:** Uh-huh. I have some—

**Sydnee:** Like you go in and it's just pictures of books on shel— Like you go touch them and it's just cardboard...

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Things with pictures of books on them.

**Justin:** Okay. Can I make a request?

**Sydnee:** Huh.

**Justin:** I need you to move— My brain is moving so quickly on theories for this. I need more—

**Sydnee:** Okay. I'm gonna get to—

**Justin:** I know. I have a lot of thoughts.

**Sydnee:** We're gonna get to theories on it.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** But before we do that, we're gonna have to hit the Billing Department.

**Justin:** Let's go! Oh no, the Billing Department always makes me have to poop.

[ad break]

**Justin:** Alright Syd, I was— I was getting anxious, but I'm gonna let you keep your own pace. I just, I'm, I'm so excited to talk about why this is happening.

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** 'Cause I have lots of theories.

**Sydnee:** Okay. Well, there are a lot of theories. Trust me.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** So, a little more info on who gets it. It seems to be mainly an adult thing. Seems 20s and 30s are like prime years for this.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Uh, certainly there were a couple kids, a couple older adults, but mainly 20s and 30s. It does seem to have like a slightly female predominance. There was one study that noted it never happens in quote "sporty males".

**Justin:** [cackles]

**Sydnee:** I don't know what that means.



**Justin:** Just regular sporty males in a bookstore.

**Sydnee:** Sporty males in bookstores don't poop. I mean, they poop, but not in the bookstore.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** It is noted that Mariko Aoki's mom thinks that it has a genetic predisposition, 'cause her uncle has it too, so.

**Justin:** Oh... Oh, interesting.

**Sydnee:** So that's an interesting, you know.

**Justin:** Twist.

**Sydnee:** Piece of information.

**Justin:** Interesting layer.

**Sydnee:** People describe it different ways. Three things are always consistent. You're in the bookstore for a while. Like it's not something that hits you when you walk in.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Like you're in there for a little bit, you get the urge to poop, and the urge itself is very sudden. Like—

**Justin:** Okay, like "Woah!"

**Sydnee:** It's not like "I think I have to go to the bathroom", it's like "Oh no".

**Justin:** [imitates panicked cartoon noises] Like that?

**Sydnee:** Well, I guess you could make that noise.

**Justin:** Awooga! Awooga!

**Sydnee:** Like cartoon noises. Some people say it is when you have found the book you want.

**Justin:** Mmm...

**Sydnee:** Some people say it's like when you're ready to make your final selection, like you're ready to narrow it down. Others say it's that when you're just sort of like you get to a part of the bookstore and you're just closed in by shelves. There's shelves all around you, that's wh— that's what triggers the urge.

Some people get other symptoms with it, like shortness of breath or dizziness. Uh, a lot of people panic, but part of that is just like... "I need to get to the bathroom". Most seem to be able to make it to the toilet, not all.

**Justin:** [wheezes] Oh man.

**Sydnee:** Most— Most can like successfully get to the bathroom before they poop, but not everybody.

**Justin:** Yeah, okay. Wait wait wait. So the scientist is like "Did you poop in there?" And you're like "Why, yes I did."

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** And then the scientist is like "Just one more question. Ah... Before I let yah go. Just one more question. Ah... Did yah poop, in yah pa—" [wheezes] "Did yah poop in your pants?"

**Sydnee:** "Why, yes I did."

**Justin:** "As you were."

**Sydnee:** Uh, there's been a lot of debate about libraries. Do libraries count? Because some people are like "Oh, it absolutely happens in libraries!" And other people are like, very distinct. "No no no, it never happens in the library, but it absolutely does happen in the bookstore."

**Justin:** What if the butt— Wait, what if they're doing the used book fair? Upstairs, on the fourth floor, in the AV area, they're selling books. Then all of a sudden.

**Sydnee:** There are, uh, they did ask, in a lot of these studies, bookstore employees. Because that seems like a good place to start, and most of them don't have— Like, they seem pretty immune to it. Like, if you work in a bookstore, you are not doing— You know, thank goodness.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** That'd be hard. Um, other types of stores are mentioned. Like people will say "This also happens to me, you know, in, in clothing stores or shoe stores". Whatever, you know, other places you might go and spend a little bit of time browsing. TJ Maxx, perhaps. Um, but not as consistently as the bookstore. The bookstore seems to come up the most.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Uh, I appreciated— They asked people to describe what the urge feels like, when you get the urge to poop.

**Justin:** They hadn't— They hadn't experienced it before?

**Sydnee:** Well, I think what they were looking for was like the intensity. And like a lot of these explanations are what most of us feel like, I think, when we have [chuckles] to poop. Which is—

**Justin:** It's the regular poop feelings.

**Sydnee:** A— Like, a heaving sensation in the rectal passage. Or a filling up sensation in the lower abdominal area. So like, you know, like you gotta poop. But other people said things like it was, quote, "hellish".

**Justin:** Hellish?!

**Sydnee:** And "Armageddon-class".

**Justin:** Wow!

**Sydnee:** So, when we talk about an intense urge to poop, I think it's important to remember—

**Justin:** Very intense!

**Sydnee:** Very intense, for some people! I mean, not everybody experienced this, but there were people that like, as a result, said before they would go to a bookstore, they would ensure they weren't wearing white pants.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Uh, there was one person who said he would never go to bookstores because of this. And there was somebody who wouldn't even live near bookstores, because just the thought or sight of a bookstore made them have to poop so badly. [chuckles]

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** That they avoided all, like mention and appearance of bookstores in their lives.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** So why?

**Justin:** Okay. Can I— I— Can I give you my theories?

**Sydnee:** Okay, there's lots of theories.

**Justin:** Okay, I'll go through mine quickly then.

**Sydnee:** Okay. Are you gonna tell us if you experience this at some point?

**Justin:** Umm...

**Sydnee:** Is that like, you're saving it towards the end? I've already said I've never experienced this.

**Justin:** Uh... You know me. If there's a public bathroom, I just gotta get in there. [wheezes] You know me.

**Sydnee:** This is true about Justin, if— he uses every public restroom we encounter. Like, at a restaurant, that's like step one. We sit down, we order the drinks, he's in the bathroom.

**Justin:** Yeah... Okay.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** I mean, I don't have any commentary there. That's just an embarrassing personal fact that you decided to unveil.

**Sydnee:** I try to avoid using public restrooms.

**Justin:** Uh, yeah. We're, uh— [sings quietly] "You say tomato, I say tomahto."

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** Okay, uh... Okay, here's number one. And I really like this, this theory. I think it's probably a constellation of things, because this is not some weird, freak occurrence. It is having to poop. I mean, we all...

**Sydnee:** Right, that is something we all have to do.

**Justin:** So I think there's probably a little bit of the hiccough phenomenon, as I call it, where it's like "What was the last thing you had to do before—"

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** Last thing you did before your hiccoughs were cured, well that didn't cure your hiccoughs. But, one. What is something that is sold in bookstores, other than books?

**Sydnee:** Coffee.

**Justin:** Yeeeeeeah.

**Sydnee:** Uh-huh. This is something people have brought up.

**Justin:** That's one. The other one is, that I was thinking about, is... you go into almo— There is almost no need, in this day and age, to go into a bookstore. Like you really—

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** Compared to a lot of stores, like, you probably don't need to go into the bookstore. You're going to the bookstore because you like to go into the bookstore, right?

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** So you're gonna be less directed, and you're just kinda like "I don't know. Just gonna go so what's at the bookstore."

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** So you're just spending maybe a little bit longer there, you're relaxing a little bit. You're a little more comfortable. Oh, what's that? Oh.

**Sydnee:** Hmm...

**Justin:** Mmm. I think I need to poop.

**Sydnee:** The relaxation theory.

**Justin:** The relaxation theory. Yeah.

**Sydnee:** That is one of the theories.

**Justin:** I like the coffee thing, though.

**Sydnee:** Some people have said— Okay.

**Justin:** Because even if you don't drink the coffee there, right? You may have an association with that. And Japan is huge into coffee, right? Like—

**Sydnee:** Oh, I didn't know that.

**Justin:** I don't know if coffee in bookstores is like a thing, right? But there— In Japan. But like, um...

**Sydnee:** Here it very much is a thing. Yeah.

**Justin:** It very much is a thing. So I wonder if like even the smell of the coffee, you have an association, and the co— the bookstore smells like coffee. That would be my theory.

**Sydnee:** That is one of the— So you're kind of hitting on— One of the major theories is just association. Um, which is— Was one of the thoughts that I have as to why I've never experienced this. They say people who read on the toilet... maybe they experience it more often, because they associate books and reading with going to the bathroom. So... You're in a bookstore, it makes you, you know.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** It's just that sort of association. I've never been much to do that.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** So perhaps that's why some people experience it. So it's— That has been thought, um, as one explanation. The coffee has been brought up. Is it just that you're walking around and drinking coffee, and walking around and drinking something—

**Justin:** Okay, yeah.

**Sydnee:** —like coffee could make you have to defecate.

**Justin:** Sure.

**Sydnee:** So maybe it's just that. There is another theory that for a while they investigated. Is it the smell of ink and paper?

**Justin:** Okay...

**Sydnee:** That somehow stimulates the olfactory nerve.

**Justin:** Sure, maybe.

**Sydnee:** And it makes you have to poop somehow...

**Justin:** My coffee theory makes more sense, but I think—

**Sydnee:** Um, well, they checked this out actually.

**Justin:** Oh, really?

**Sydnee:** On a Japanese TV show, *The Real Side of Unon*.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** And they tried to get people to poop by smelling ink. Like they gave them ink to smell and then said “Do you have to poop?” [chuckles] And it didn’t work. [chuckles]

**Justin:** No dice?

**Sydnee:** And the big thing that kind of undoes this theory is if the smell of ink and paper makes people have to poop, why are the bookstore employees or people who work in places where books are manufactured, why are they not all the first ones to, you know, have this? And they’re not.

**Justin:** Hmm.

**Sydnee:** And, actually, Mariko Aoki at one point even noted “I used to work somewhere, in like a production facility where there was ink and paper, and I never experienced it there.”

**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** So, so our first subject in this research, [chuckles] kinda debunked that theory.

**Justin:** Mm.



**Sydnee:** This led to like a conspiracy theory, actually. That perhaps it was something that the paper industry was doing, to sell more toilet paper.

**Justin:** Ohhh...

**Sydnee:** Were putting something in...

**Justin:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Sydnee:** ... the paper in the bookstore that makes you have to poop, so that we can sell you more toilet paper later.

**Justin:** We go no further. I think we've cracked it, Syd.

**Sydnee:** Which would be [chuckles] a wild move.

**Justin:** Would be a wild play, book— paper industry.

**Sydnee:** By Big Paper. Some, and I've read actually a couple gastroenterologists' opinions who've said this might actually have something. Not that they're saying it's true, but they're saying like "Eh. Some sense here." That when you are in a bookstore, if you're really looking at a lot of different things, you're bending down to pick up books, you're bending over to look at things. Maybe you're squatting to look at titles on lower shelves.

**Justin:** Oh, gets those muscles going.

**Sydnee:** And maybe it's just a positional thing.

**Justin:** It squa— It squanches it around.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** To make it come out, like a Play-Doh.

**Sydnee:** Well, it's a posture thing. If you think about, um, items like the Squatty Potty, which put you in a better pooping position.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Maybe you're just putting your body in a really ideal pooping position a lot in a bookstore, if you're in there for a while, so then it makes you have to poop.

**Justin:** Could be that.

**Sydnee:** So, you know, and it could be. There were GI doctors who were like "Hm, yeah, maybe. Maybe." Um, anxiety comes up a lot.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** And, in both ways.

**Justin:** I know.

**Sydnee:** [chuckles] Like, is it anxiety-related in the sense that you're out in public and what if you do have to poop? Is there a bathroom nearby? And that fear of not being able to get to a bathroom actually stimulates—Because we know that there are, you know, the neurotransmitters from your brain affect your gut directly.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** So we know that in conditions like, um, irritable bowel syndrome and things like that, it is not uncommon to have feelings of nervousness or anxiety lead to... cramping, diarrhea, bloating, even nausea. You know, different things like that.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** It's like the, um, more extreme extension of like a nervous tummy. Or butterflies in your stomach, right?

**Justin:** Mm-hmm. I'm really impressed by how casually you're throwing out poop. The word "poop".

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** You're getting really good at saying it without any hesitation.

**Sydnee:** Well, this whole episode, you know.

**Justin:** You've been training yourself.

**Sydnee:** Um, there's— And then there's also, exactly like you said. So, is it anxiety, uh... that causes you to poop, or is it the opposite? Is it that when you're in a bookstore, it's a relaxing... situation. You're taking your time, you're browsing books you might want to buy, you're enjoying yourself. Usually, bookstores are soothing environments, they might have some nice music playing.

**Justin:** Yeah...

**Sydnee:** People generally aren't incredibly loud, in a bookstore, and maybe you're just so relaxed— And that is— You do need, in terms of like your parasympathetic nervous system, you do need to relax to poop. And so maybe—

**Justin:** I don't know—

**Sydnee:** Maybe the hustle and bustle of society is constipating you, and the calm of a bookstore...

**Justin:** Makes perfect sense.

**Sydnee:** Is a respite for your bowels.

**Justin:** I love this.

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** It makes perfect sense to me.

**Sydnee:** There have been some more, like, philosophical kind of suggestions. That like, some is like, when confronted with the overwhelming amount of like... information. And data. And like the human... This human creation of just all that is in a bookstore.

**Justin:** [chuckles] Just gazing upon the bulk of human achievement, you're like—

**Sydnee:** [chuckles] Yes, that you're overwhelmed and you must poop.

**Justin:** "Look at all we've achieved as a society! I must add to this great work!"

**Sydnee:** Or like an academic fervor. Like, you get inside, you see all this work, and you just can't...

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** You don't know how else to express it. Your body must—

**Justin:** [cackles] I have no mouth and I must poop! [laughs] They should have sent a poo-et! Look at this!

**Sydnee:** And this— And this gets into some more like—

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** Some more, like, sort of meta-physical, kind of—

**Justin:** [snorts]

**Sydnee:** Like, "I must empty myself to allow room for the information and the experience of the books" and all this. Like, that sort of, kind of take on it. Or just something as simple as the anxiety of having to choose one book over another. You get to the point where like "I've been in here a while. I need to pick a book. Which one do I pick?"

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** "Is it bad?"

**Justin:** "This has gone far enough."

**Sydnee:** There— It's been investigated. Could certain eye movements cause the urge to poop? As in like scanning bookshelves, scanning titles.

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** Like, they've tried to get people to do like gaze studies, where they follow their eyes to do that, and does that trigger this urge. Um, and then this idea again of like, again, I thought this was interesting. I saw somebody draw this idea of connection to meditation. So— And you meditate, I don't, but they talk about how in meditation breathing is something that grounds you to like, your physical self.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** To the moment. To your presence still here on Earth.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** While your mind is going elsewhere.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Is kind of transcending your physical presence, right?

**Justin:** Yup.

**Sydnee:** Well... What if in the bookstore, all of the, the creativity and beauty and information is taking you out of yourself and into this realm of ideas and creativity and things, and pooping is a way of grounding your body in its physical self, in the moment.

**Justin:** That one's not true. That one doesn't make any sense.

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** You spent a lot of time on that, and it was nothing.

**Sydnee:** I just thought it was interesting.

**Justin:** It's not interesting.

**Sydnee:** I just thought it was interesting.

**Justin:** It's not true. No, it's coffee. I cracked it.

**Sydnee:** Um.

**Justin:** And squatting. Coffee squats.

**Sydnee:** Right, it could just be squatting and coffee, but it could also be... something about our urge to connect our insides with our outsides and ground us, as we, uh... As we allow our mind to be taken by flights of ideas. You don't know.

**Justin:** Or it could be— Or it could be nothing.

**Sydnee:** It could be— This is the other thing. A lot of people, uh, who studied it have also said, you know, maybe this is a different phenomenon. What's been called the Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** It's frequency bias.

**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** It's when you just notice— It's when you've never noticed this before, but then once it's called to your attention, you can't stop noticing it.

**Justin:** So like after you read, uh... the works of Douglas Adams, and all of a sudden 42 pops up everywhere.

**Sydnee:** Exactly. It's just— You're just noticing it.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** So, when this letter was published, from Mariko Aoki, about having to poop in bookstores, every time somebody had to poop in a bookstore after that, they noticed it. And maybe that's all this is.

**Justin:** We'll never know.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Either way, uh maybe after listening to this podcast, you're going to notice every time you have to poop in a bookstore.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Or TJ Maxx.

**Justin:** And hey, if you do have to poop in a bookstore, tweet that @sydneemcelroy. S-Y-D-N-E-E.

**Sydnee:** No. You— No.

**Justin:** Sydnee wants to know about where you're pooping, how you're pooping.

**Sydnee:** You can— That's your— That's your personal information, that you don't have to— HIPAA protects you from sharing it. [chuckles]

**Justin:** Oh, wow. HIPAA protects me from telling you my personal pooping information?

**Sydnee:** That's not true, but, maybe—

**Justin:** But what if it was!

**Sydnee:** But what if it was! [chuckles]

**Justin:** Thank you so much for listening. And thanks to the Taxpayers for the use of their song "Sawbones" as the intr— no. Their song is called "Medicines", it's not called "Sawbones."

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** I've only said this, uh... 378 times. Thanks to the Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. Uh, and thanks to you, for, for listening.

Oh, you know what? I have a quick little plug. You know a show you might like, if you like this show, if you like learning a little something, uh... Our friend Michael Beck makes a podcast called *Ask the Ascot*. A-S-C-O-T. Episodes are 10 minutes long, and it's just our smart friend, Michael Beck, who is the— If you've ever listened to *The Adventure Zone*, I stole his voice for my character, Taako.

**Sydnee:** He's very smart and very funny.

**Justin:** Very smart, very funny. *Ask the Ascot*. Check it totally out. And uh, that's gonna do it for us. Until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:** I'm Sydnee McElroy.

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

[outro music plays]

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