

Shmanners 298: Mary Kenner

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[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to *Shmanners*.

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions. Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: How are you? You got a cough.

Teresa: I got a cough. Well, it's my body. It's gettin' it out. It says, "Get out, evil phlegm. Get out."

Travis: Yeah. A lot of that post-nasal drip.

Teresa: That's right. My voice is back.

Travis: Which is great.

Teresa: Which is great. My voice is great, thank you.

Travis: Okay. But don't laugh.

Teresa: Don't laugh. It'll make me cough.

Travis: I have to be really careful, 'cause I'm so funny.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: And every time I make Teresa laugh she coughs, so I'm, like, actively now not making eye contact with her.

Teresa: Which is also funny.

Travis: [whispering] Damn it. [normal volume] I'm trying so hard. I'm going to be very dry this episode. Tell me, my love.

Teresa: [chuckles]

Travis: D-ah!

Teresa: Well, see, I think that the problem is...

Travis: Uh-huh.

Teresa: ... if I try and stifle it...

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: ... as I am wont to do...

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: ... well—

Travis: You should just do what you normally do and not laugh at anything I say. [laughs quietly]

Teresa: Just not laugh. But see, I always— I try and stifle it, and that's what makes me cough. If I laugh out loud it doesn't make me cough as much.

Travis: So, wait. Are you telling me that this whole time you've been—

Teresa: So what I'm saying is, do better comedy.

Travis: Have you been holding back laughs this whole time?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: What?!

Teresa: Constantly. Since the moment I met you have been trying not to encourage you.

Travis: This is how I find out? Here?

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: On the podcast, in front of everybody?!

Teresa: I— I think somehow, deep down, you knew.

Travis: Oh my gosh. No, I— I had no idea. I thought your laugh-maker was broken.

Teresa: But see, it's always— it is— it's partly because a lot of your jokes are real dumb. But it's also partly—

Travis: Oh, see, but now I don't take that seriously, 'cause now I know that you're just trying to keep my ego in check, so actually you think everything I say is very funny.

Teresa: And I'm waiting for the good ones, so I'm trying— I try to stifle—

Travis: Keep waitin', baby!

Teresa: —I try and stifle all of the groaners, and encourage the good jokes.

Travis: You know, one man's groaner is another man's loaner.

Teresa: What?

Travis: No, I don't know. Okay, so... uh, we're gonna do— we have this, uh, I don't know if it's tradition or habit or whatever, but I'm gonna add this to the list of when we do a biography, I don't know anything about the person, but I know enough now about this process to know that by the end of this episode, I will think this person is amazing.

Teresa: Yes, because this person is amazing.

Travis: There you go. This is another example, too, and it's a thing that comes up a lot, but we specifically try to set our sights on it during February, which is to say, "Here is a historical Black person who you probably did not learn about in school, and you should know about."

Teresa: Exactly.

Travis: Is that a good— I don't know.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: That's probably a very awkward, clunky way to put it, but you get it.

Teresa: We're using February as a time to highlight historical Black figures you may not have heard of.

Travis: Yeah. See, when you said it, it sounded so much more, like, sincere and well-put, and I said it like an alien who had just learned English.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: "[alien voice] We are studying—" okay.

Teresa: [laughs] Okay. Today... we have a female Black innovator.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And their name was Mary Kenner.

Travis: Yeah. That— oh, man. Zero bells.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Zero bells are ringing.

Teresa: Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner was born on May 17th, 1912, in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Travis: Wait, what— 1912?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: 110 years ago.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: I did it. Math!

Teresa: And, uh, she was constantly surrounded by innovation. Her father was called Sidney Nathaniel Davidson. Constantly was tinkering with things and creating incredible inventions.

Travis: Can I tell you, I'm sad I never got into tinkering. That seems like a thing—

Teresa: I think you still do it.

Travis: You think?

Teresa: Every— every time you go with, like, a wrench and a screwdriver to fix something that you don't know how it works, you're tink—

Travis: That's tinkering?

Teresa: That's tinkering!

Travis: Yeah, but I doubt that when Bebe is, like, an adult, she'll be like, "My father was always tinkering."

I think she'll say, "He was always breaking something. He was always—"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: "—just Shrekin' around. He— sometimes he would walk away with a wrench and before I knew it, something was on fire.

Teresa: Uh, I mean, that definitely counts.

Travis: I don't know. I guess that's true. You don't have to be good at tinkering to be tinkering all the—[laughs] you know what I'd call it then? Stinkering.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Aw, man.

Teresa: He invented a clothing press that could fit inside a suitcase.

Travis: What?!

Teresa: Uh, patented a window washer for trains, and a stretcher with wheels for ambulances. We don't use the same one today, but it—

Travis: But that's stuff, man!

Teresa: It set the wheels, uh, in motion?

Travis: Ahh, see, you do it too. Okay, go on.

Teresa: Um, and her father wasn't the only inventor. Her grandfather invented a tricolor light signal for trains.

Travis: What?!

Teresa: Um, and it was, again, groundbreaking for train safety and communication.

Travis: So this is, like— there is a lineage here.

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: This is, like, "My father's father was an inventor."

Teresa: Absolutely.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Her sister, Mildred Davidson Austin Smith, was also an inventor. Uh, Mildred actually had MS, and during her multiple sclerosis... hmm, I don't know if that's—

Travis: Episodes?

Teresa: Episodes. She would brainstorm creations while she was bedridden. Her specialty was board games.

Travis: What?

Teresa: Yeah! She has a very famous one called Family Treedition.

Travis: [gasps] Oh, I like it!

Teresa: Which is a—

Travis: That's a great— oh, I love it!

Teresa: Yeah! It's a genealogy game for kids. I feel like we should get this. I always have a lot of questions about the names of relatives. So, like, there were 64 cards and you could earn points by placing three cards from your hand on the board, which represented a correct relationship between your relatives.

So, example, my father's first cousin is my second cousin.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Right?

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: This would be very helpful.

Travis: It would be. 'Cause I still don't understand how that works.

Teresa: And she purposefully designed angular faces on the cards so that it would be a universal face look. It wouldn't just be one type of face.

Travis: Okay. Oh, I already like this family.

Teresa: Totally.

Travis: And I haven't even learned about Mary yet!

Teresa: It's a great family. So Mary, as she was called, went on to continue the family... business, I guess? It sounds like a family business. And she made a variety of creations—

Travis: The family treedition?

Teresa: Uh-huh. And, you know, there were some patents achieved, some patents lapsing, things of that sort. We'll get to it. We'll get to it.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And, uh, famously, she talked about how she did not like that her mother would leave very early in the morning and open and close the door, and the hinge on the door was very squeaky, and it would wake her up. So she... [laughs quietly] she wanted to create a self-oiling door hinge.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: It did not go well.

Travis: No.

Teresa: Not at all. [laughs]

Travis: Okay. I was gonna say, we don't use those now.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: And I was gonna be like, why don't we have those? That would be great. But it doesn't seem like it worked.

Teresa: Uh, and is quoted as saying, "I hurt my hands trying to make something that, in my mind, was good for the door."

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Not— didn't really work.

Travis: Didn't work. Okay. Next time. You'll get 'em next time, Mary.

Teresa: But, I mean, it was clear from very early on that, you know, she was a very curious and obviously very smart young girl. For example, she noticed that people riding in the back of automobiles were usually subject to poor weather. Uh, and this makes sense in the 1910's, right? 1920's.

Travis: Yeah, absolutely.

Teresa: Um, so she created an adjustable roof that could extend over them in the event of rain.

Travis: [gasps] Like a convertible!

Teresa: A little bit.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: She created a portable ashtray that you could secure onto a cigarette packet. In fact, her family was so inventive and curious, and obviously really good at this stuff, they moved to Washington DC to be close to the patent office.

Travis: [gasps] Okay. That's commitment, right there.

Teresa: Sure is!

Travis: Okay. I mean, would we move close to a podcast office if it existed? I guess not, 'cause Max Fun's in LA and we actively moved [laughs] away from there to come here. So probably not. I wouldn't say acti— we didn't actively move away from Max Fun. Let's be clear. It wasn't like, "We gotta get away from Max Fun."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But we did say, "We're definitely leaving Los Angeles."

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: I was not a fan. Not for me, so we left.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Anyway.

Travis: Well, the problem was you were too beautiful, and all the movie stars got really jealous—

Teresa: Ah, uh-huh, uh-huh.

Travis: —and they were so mean to you. Ugh.

Teresa: This is an example of a groaner.

Travis: That wasn't— oh, it was supposed to be like, "Oh, Travis, you're so cute."

Teresa: Hmm...

Travis: No?

Teresa: No.

Travis: Ugh.

Teresa: Try harder.

Travis: I'm trying [laughs] as hard as I can!

Teresa: [laughs wheezily]

Travis: Got her!

Teresa: [coughs]

Travis: Yes!

Teresa: According to the Vagina Museum, which is a real place in London...

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: It's a real place—

Travis: We went back and forth, 'cause Mary was born in Virginia and we were like, "Did Alex... " [laughs]

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: "Is it—" and, like, we had to go back and forth. Like, is that real?

Teresa: So then I looked in the sources for Alex, because she is an amazing researcher and writer and always lists all her sources for me, and yes, the Vagina Museum.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: According to them, that office, the patent office, was 12-year-old Kenner's favorite place in the entire world. And in DC, she would keep updating her opportunities to have her ideas patented, so she stayed there her entire life. Not the office.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: But DC. [laughs]

Travis: Per— when you said, "So she stayed there," until you said "her entire life" I was thinking, like, she just hung out.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: " Is this anything?"

"Nah, it's dumb."

"Ohh, okay. What about this one?"

Teresa: She graduated high school in 1931 and went on to attend Howard, but sadly she was not able to finish due to financial instability.

Travis: Can I just say, like, it's probably— it's Howard University, I think.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: But I think— I like just saying, like, "She attended Howard, and then attended Jason, and then attended Stephen."

Teresa: No.

Travis: No. Okay.

Teresa: I...

Travis: What? Go on, say it!

Teresa: I'm insulted that you would think that our listeners would not be able to put together—

Travis: No, I think they would.

Teresa: —University after Howard.

Travis: I just like the idea of it.

Teresa: It's like saying William and Mary.

Travis: Who are they?

Teresa: It's like saying Harvard.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: It's like saying Yale.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: University is implied!

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Sir.

Travis: Okay, fair enough. I went to Oklahoma. Okay, yeah! Okay, yeah, that actually worked.

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Damn!

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Okay. You win this round.

Teresa: Yes I do. So, because of this, Mary Kenner, having a brilliant mind and yet no formal education to pack under her belt, she was not very welcome in different work spaces, not having any mentors or guides outside of her own family. And it was a difficult time for women in science, especially Black women.

Women like Kenner had been barred from academic establishments and scientific institutions for years. But, like the women before her, Kenner did not give up. She saved and scraped together everything she would need to be her own scientist on her own terms. She believed in her inventions and was not about to let a lack of formal education stop her.

Travis: Well, already I think she's awesome and I can't wait to hear more about it. But first... how about a thank you note to our sponsors?

[theme music plays]

Travis: This week, *Shmanners* wants to say thank you to Bombas. Bombas's mission is simple: make the most comfortable clothes ever, and match every item sold with an equal item donated. So, when you buy Bombas, you are also giving to someone in need. I'm saying this directly to you, like you didn't already know this about Bombas.

Teresa: And I'm feeling very good about it, because I am currently wearing Bombas sweatpants.

Travis: Indeed. Everything they make is soft. Can you confirm?

Teresa: Yes, can confirm. Soft inside and out.

Travis: Tagless, and a luxuriously cozy feel.

Teresa: Excellent cozy feel.

Travis: Yeah. Thank you. Their t-shirts are made with thoughtful design features like invisible seams, soft fabrics, perfect weight so they hang just right— can confirm. Their underwear has a barely-there feel with a second skin support. Hmm!

Teresa: Hmm!

Travis: There— ooh, very soft. And it makes you forget they're there, in a good way, which is great. And socks, underwear, and t-shirts are the three most requested clothing items at homeless shelters. That's why Bombas donates one for every item you buy. So go to bombas.com/shmanners and get 20% off your first purchase. That's B-O-M-B-A-S.com/shmanners for 20% off. Bombas.com/shmanners.

Speaker One: Did your neighbor back into your car?

John: Bring that case to Judge Judy.

Speaker One: Think the mailman might be the real father?

John: Give that one to Judge Mathis.

Speaker One: But... does your mom want you to flush her ashes down the toilet at Disney World when she passes away?

John: Now, that's my jurisdiction. Welcome to the court of *Judge John Hodgman*, where the people are rule, the disputes are real, and the stakes are often unusual.

Speaker Three: If I got arrested for dumping your ashes in the Jungle Cruise, it would be an honor.

Speaker Four: I don't wanna be part of somebody getting a super yacht.

Speaker Five: I don't know at what point you want to go into this, but we have had a worm bin before.

Speaker One: Available free right now at Maximumfun.org.

John: *Judge John Hodgman*. The court of last resort when your wife won't stop pretending to be a cat and knocking the clean laundry over.

[meow]

[ad ends]

[music plays]

Speaker One: Hey, kid. Your dad tell you about the time he broke Stephen Dorff's nose at the Kid's Choice Awards?

[audience laughs]

Speaker Two: In *Dead Pilots Society*, scripts that were developed by studios and networks but were never produced are given the table reads they deserve.

Speaker Three: When I was a kid, I had to spend my Christmas break filming a PSA about Angel Dust! So yeah, bein' a kid sucks sometimes.

[audience laughs]

Speaker Two: Presented by Andrew Reich and Ben Blacker. *Dead Pilots Society*, twice a month on Maximumfun.org.

Speaker Four: You know, the show you like. That hobo with the scarf who lives in a magic dumpster?

[audience laughs]

Speaker Five: *Doctor Who*?

Speaker Four: Yeah!

[audience laughs and applauds]

[ad ends]

Travis: Okay. She's making her own way.

Teresa: Making her own way.

Travis: She's set up her own science... den. Science fort? Science lab.

Teresa: [laughs] Let's go with lab.

Travis: Lab. That makes a lot more sense.

Teresa: Um, after leaving Howard, Mary went from job to job, but what she finally landed was a steady full-time job in government.

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: Who knew? DC.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Uh, in World War II she took a job at the Census Bureau and later for the General Accounting Office, which is great, because this 9 to 5 really helped her save the night times for inventing.

Travis: The night times were the right times... for... bright times.

Teresa: What?

Travis: Bright, 'cause she was very smart?

Teresa: Oh.

Travis: So night times were the right times for bright times. So that something could ignite times.

Teresa: [wheezes quietly] I'm gonna cough again, 'cause you need to keep working on that one.

Travis: Well, I was trying to!

Teresa: [coughs]

Travis: I was workshopping it here in front of you and our audience.

Teresa: [laughs] A live jam session.

Travis: Yeah, exactly.

Teresa: Alright.

Travis: That's how Edgar Allen Poe did it.

Teresa: She was married a couple times. Her second husband she would call the love of her life. Um, he was a—

Travis: Was there a third husband after that? 'Cause, bummer!

Teresa: No.

Travis: Okay. I was gonna say, if there's a hu— and she keeps going like, "Yeah, but the second one? That was the love of my life."

"I know, Mary! You've told me!" [laughs]

Teresa: Anyway... um, he was a heavyweight fighter. Everybody called him Jabbo, 'cause he was a boxer.

Travis: Can everyone start calling me Jabbo?

Teresa: No, 'cause you're not a boxer.

Travis: I know. Listen, it doesn't have to be connected to—

Teresa: No, it does.

Travis: Okay. [holding back laughter] You never let me do what I want to do.

Teresa: Uh, shortly after they got married, uh, Mary quit her government job and opened a flower shop!

Travis: She opened a flower shop. She— the— can I tell you, this is another thing that we tend to find, and maybe it's just, like, the times being what they were. I don't know. But I feel like it's a recurring theme that we do these biographies of people and it's like, yeah, they had, like, you know, six different, seven different, like, careers and jobs and stuff going before they even got to the thing that made them famous.

And maybe that's about, like... they're looking for the thing that fulfills whatever desire within them to accomplish something and they haven't hit it yet, or it's just like, "I have this dream and I'm gonna do whatever it takes to, like, earn a living so I can follow the dream." I don't know. I don't know.

Teresa: I mean, or it's also, like... you know, I've heard of people thinking about, like, "What am I gonna do with my life?"

It's like, no, what are you gonna do for a while? And then you can go and do something else.

Travis: That's true.

Teresa: So, you know, you've had several career shifts.

Travis: Oh my God, so many. Maybe it's— some of those were, "Hey, you seem pretty distracted thinking about the thing you wanna do, so you're fired."

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: So maybe that was it. That might've been it, too.

Teresa: That might've been it. Um... so the couple wouldn't have children of their own, but according to some sources, they were a foster parent to five boys, and maybe have adopted, ultimately, three of them.

Travis: Wow.

Teresa: Um, but very active parents, her and her husband. They raised their children and worked at the flower shop, continued inventing. Uh, and what she didn't know at this point... what is that literary device? She didn't know this.

Travis: Dramatic irony.

Teresa: No...

Travis: That's where the audience knows something that the person doesn't know.

Teresa: Are you sure?

Travis: I think so. Foreshadowing? Is that what you're talking about?

Teresa: No, maybe I'm thinking about an omnipotent narrator.

Travis: That's— then that's—

Teresa: That's me.

Travis: Then that's dramatic irony.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: 'Cause you know something that the character doesn't know.

Teresa: I think.

Travis: Oh, man.

Teresa: She would, uh, have one of her inventions change the course of menstruation products for the rest of time.

Travis: Okay?

Teresa: We're gonna talk about that in just a second.

Travis: I assumed so! That would be a weird thing to bring up and then never bring up again.

Teresa: [laughs] I just— but on that vein, I wanna back up just a tetch. This is the 1950's, okay? That we're talking about this.

Travis: Okay, sure.

Teresa: Tampons were invented in the 1930's, but there was a ton of social stigma that went into tampons.

Travis: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Teresa: So, uh, women used sanitary belts at this point, which would hold sanitary napkins, right? Because even though tampons had been invented, they were widely shunned, except for married women.

Travis: Was it because of the idea of, uh... God, I hate that this is the word I'm gonna use... insertion?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: And that you could, quote, "sully a woman's vagina."

Travis: Oh my God.

Teresa: Right? So.

Travis: And these belts, just in case anybody didn't know, they were, uh, clunky?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Uncomfortable.

Teresa: They, uh, definitely were bulky. You could not wear a tight dress over top of it. It would definitely be seen. Um, most people at this point who were menstruating just stayed home.

Travis: Yeah, 'cause that includes the pads themselves. Wildly uncomfortable.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Uh, bulky. Not great.

Teresa: So, uh, you would stay home and you would just kind of... clean yourself, take care of yourself, sit around, not do much, because you were out of commission, 'cause you didn't have a lot of choices. Tampons were around, but frowned upon unless you were married. And these—

Travis: That was the same deal with, like, contraception at this point, right?

Teresa: Exactly, exactly.

Travis: Like, you had to prove you were married and— yeah.

Teresa: Um, and so these sanitary belts were just the pits, okay? Let me— let me—

Travis: Can I just say, "the pits" is a great phrase that we should bring back. I love it. These sanitary belts? They were the pits.

Teresa: The pits. Let me describe it to you. It's a little bit like a jock strap, okay?

Travis: Uh-huh.

Teresa: Um, but it's kind of, like, elasticity around all the way, right? And open at what would be the crotch area. So you would have to— the one that most people used was Dr. White's, which was held together with safety pins.

Travis: Oh boy!

Teresa: To be easily changeable once the pad was full.

Travis: But the idea of those coming undone and, like...

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Safety, once again, it reminds me of, like, the term "safety razor."

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Where it's just like, "No, it's a little bit safer." 'Cause it's not just, like, a razor blade, but it's still—[laughs] it's like, it's not safe! It's a razor! Right? As a safety pin is still, uh, just a sharp metal pokey thing.

Teresa: And these sanitary belts were pretty much one size for all, one size fit nobody. [laughs]

Travis: Nobody, yeah.

Teresa: Uh, they were non-adjustable. They were difficult to get on and off. They could be very uncomfortable around—

Travis: I'm pulling it out 'cause I wanna—

Teresa: —a bloated tummy. I have it right here. Here you go. Look at— look at this business.

Travis: Oh boys-ey.

Teresa: Here. And this— so, I'm showing Travis the patent submitted by Mary Kenner.

Travis: Oh, I see. So it kind of, like, latched in in the middle.

Teresa: In 1954. This is the adjustable sanitary belt that she put together. So, as you can see, Travis is looking at it.

Travis: Well, I'm looking at the Dr. White's, right? Which is—

Teresa: Okay, Dr. White's.

Travis: Which is— yeah. Looks wildly uncomfortable. Oh my God. Uh— oh, God.

Teresa: That came with a pack of safety pins. Um, and so hers was fully adjustable, um, and even featured some, um, velcro-like kind of, uh... I mean, it would be called hook and loop, right?

Travis: Right, yeah.

Teresa: Some hook and loop pads that could be kind of, like, an— what's the word I'm looking for? An adhesive to keep the sanitary napkin in place. And Travis is just making all kinds of faces looking up the sanitary belt.

Travis: Here's the thing about it, right? So, looking at hers versus, like, the Dr. White's and, like, others from that era, it's a thing that's not— unfortunately not uncommon today, too, which is having something designed for a person by a person who does not use it.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And so it's like, "Well, we've reached a point of basic functionality and we're gonna just stop there."

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Right? Where very clearly, compared to her design, where it was like, "No, this is a focus on not just functionality but comfort, discretion, like, operation." Like—

Teresa: And fit, because like I said, a lot of these sanitary belts were quite small. And they didn't fit every person who needed them. Um, in the 1970's they were rendered moot because self-adhesive— so, like, the sticky tape—

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: —um, was invented in the 70's, and so that replaced the need for a belt, you would just stick it into your underwear.

Travis: Well, and it probably also helped with the, uh, relaxation of the... oh, what's the word? Stigmatization.

Teresa: Absolutely.

Travis: Of— of a tampon.

Teresa: Um, so her patent was focused on leak-proof comfort for all sizes. Uh, she even had an in-built moisture-proof napkin pocket that you could use.

Travis: Instead of safety pins?

Teresa: [laughs] Yeah! Uh, she completed her invention in 1954, and in 1956 was officially approved for a patent. You would think...

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: ... that corporate America would be all up on this.

Travis: I actually wouldn't think that. But I understand.

Teresa: I mean, it was definitely something— there was a niche market, right? There was money to be made.

Travis: You say niche market, but that niche market is people who menstruate, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: It's not that niche.

Teresa: It really isn't.

Travis: No.

Teresa: But, I mean...

Travis: I would say, like, *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* is for a niche market. [laughs]

Teresa: There were people who would pay for this.

Travis: Correct.

Teresa: So I would think that there would be a company all up over themselves—

Travis: Ah, but see—

Teresa: —tripping over themselves, is what I mean— to get their hands on this fantastic invention.

Travis: But I'm thinking about— I'm thinking about it being 1950... 6, you said?

Teresa: Uh-huh.

Travis: Right? And at that point, business and marketing being run if not completely, at least incredibly predominantly by men...

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: ... who were probably like, "But there's already a product like that out there. What are you— how do we market this without having to talk about menstruation? No way. We're not gonna talk ladies' comfort. Ew, gross!" Right? So that's why I'm like, yeah, I can see where 1950's... like, adult men would be like, "Eww. I don't know about all this. Eww!"

Teresa: Well, I was hoping to build up some sort of, like, "This is gonna be great for Mary... "

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: But you've already burst my bubble, so.

Travis: Well, I'm just saying, I watched one episode of *Mad Men*, and then I couldn't watch any more 'cause it made me really uncomfortable. But I got from that one episode that, yeah, this wouldn't fly very well then.

Teresa: She did everything right. She kept her patent secret. She tried to, um, you know, shop it around. She was contacted by a hygiene and home goods company. But... once they found out she was Black, it was off.

Travis: It was even worse than I imagined!

Teresa: It was even worse than you imagined. She did keep her invention tight to her chest, but it didn't matter, because the company contacted her and was like, "Hey, we'd like to do this. But... never mind, you're Black."

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yeah. She said— these are her words— "I'm sorry to say, when they found out I was Black, their interest dropped. The representative went back to New York and informed the company was no longer interested. They tried to find every reason under the sun as to why I could not sign their contract."

Travis: We don't curse on this show, um, but just know that in my mind, I am cursing.

Teresa: Luckily for all of us, that company would soon go out of business, so you probably—

Travis: Take that!

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Take that, that company!

Teresa: That company. You probably haven't heard of it. Um, I hadn't. The Sonn-Nap-Pack Company.

Travis: No, because they're lost to history now, because of their bigotry and racism. Maybe they wouldn't have gone out of business if they had brought this brand new, wonderful product to market, but look at you now, bigots! Okay, go on.

Teresa: Like all things, her patent eventually lapsed, and her invention did change the lives of millions of people who menstruate. Um, and even though she didn't get the money she rightfully deserves, when the design became public domain, it caught on like nobody's business.

Travis: Yeah, but that sucks, you know? Like, I'm glad that the invention got out there and had the impact, but, like, it is— once again, don't curse. It is... horse apples—

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: —that it didn't happen until it didn't have to be credited to her, you know what I mean?

Teresa: Right. Um, between 1956 and 1987, she would go on to receive a total of five patents for her household and personal products. Uh, many of these products were inspired by wanting to help her sister, who had, remember, MS. And as it got worse, Mary began to create and design helpful objects to make her sister's life easier. A toilet tissue holder that held the roll much more stably, um, and had an attached bar that made it easier to tear off. She patented a back washer which could be mounted on a shower or bathtub wall, making bathing easier.

Travis: Okay, these are great!

Teresa: She patented an attachment for the walker so that Mildred could have more mobility, even when she was hurting. It could be attached to a walker or a wheelchair, and included a hard surface tray and a cloth carrying case. And, I mean, it— just the love that she had for her sister inspired so many things. The want to make things accessible and easy for other people, I think that's fantastic.

Travis: Yeah!

Teresa: Uh, and that seems to be a pattern throughout her inventions, right? She wanted to help—[laughs] she wanted to help herself sleep better.

Travis: Well, and help the door.

Teresa: And help the door, by oiling it.

Travis: Oil for the door.

Teresa: She wanted to be good for hygiene and sanitation products.

Travis: Help her sister, help people.

Teresa: Help her sister out. Help people who needed accessible products and things like that. That's great!

Travis: And not just accessible but, like, more independence in that accessibility as well?

Teresa: Absolutely. Uh, and they never netted her much money. But Mary continued to invent and make them anyway, and it seemed her entire life

revolved around helping people. She continued to work as a professional floral arranger, getting so popular that she expanded to four flower shops in the DC area.

Travis: Okay. So at least she saw— I mean, listen. Not the same at all, but some kind of success, you know? At least it wasn't like, "And she lived her life penniless and, you know, in desperation, but still invented." At least she had that going.

Teresa: Yeah. And she, uh, was an active foster parent, and according to the Vagina Museum, Mary Kenner still holds the record for the most patents ever obtained by a Black woman.

Travis: Okay! This is another thing, man! I wanna know more about her. Like, she's fascina— like, she seems like a really cool person.

Teresa: Yeah. And her inventions, although we haven't— I mean, she's not a household name, obviously, and her inventions aren't credited to her, especially the one that changed menstruation products, they went on to pave the way for household items and other sanitary products and things like that. So, she was a brilliant inventor and designer, and wonderful human being, it seems. And, you know, that legacy shouldn't be forgotten, so we're glad to help to tell her story.

Travis: So, thank you everybody for joining us. Thank you to Mary Kenner. Thank you to Alex, our researcher, without whom we would not be able to make this show. Thank you to Rachel, our editor, without whom we would not be able to make this show.

Thank you to Maximumfun.org, our podcast home. If you want to check out other great shows, just go to Maximumfun.org. If you want to check out other McElroy projects, you can go to mcelroy.family. If you wanna check out all the cool McElroy merch, well, it's easy. Just go to mcelroymerch.com. Um, let's see. What else, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Thank you to Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art. That's @shmannerscast. When we have topics that call for listener-submitted questions, that's where we get all of those questions, @shmannerscast.

Thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook group, *Shmanners* Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice, go ahead and join that group today.

Um, also we are always taking submissions for topics, and we love those idioms. I wanna get back on that idiom train, so send us your idioms to shmannerscast@gmail.com. You can also say hi to Alex, who reads every single email.

Travis: Uh, two important things. I mentioned the merch, but specifically this week— or this month? Yeah, this month— the McElroy pin of the month is the Sawbones Number Two Books that was based off of their episode about the impact that bookstores and that environment has on one's, uh, digestion, if you will. Uh, and that benefits the National Black Women's Justice Institute. They research, elevate, and educate the public about innovative community-led solutions to address the criminalization of Black women and girls. So, uh, check those out, and everything else at mcelroymerch.com.

Also, we're doing a *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* virtual live show. Tickets are on sale now. They're just \$10. Uh, it's gonna be February 26th at 9 PM Eastern Time, and if you're not able to make that or if you just want to watch it more than once, it will be a video on demand for two weeks after the show. You can get those tickets at bit.ly/mbmbamvirtual.

Uh, so go get those now. Don't wait. And I believe that's going to do it for us, uh, so join us again next week!

Teresa: No RSVP required!

Travis: You've been listening to *Shmanners*...

Teresa: Manners, *Shmanners*! Get it!

[theme music plays]

[chord]

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