

Shmanners 330: Escaping an Asylum

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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. What's up, my dove?

Teresa:

Okay.

Travis:

No, I just felt the energy was different. This is like the 100th podcast I've recorded this week to get ready to go to England for D&D in a Castle and the energy is over 9,000. You can't— There is no calculating where I'm at right now, any given moment.

Teresa:

Well, here's a great thing for that. I'm going to bring you down.

Travis:

Aw, yeah! Awesome. Yeah. I was feeling good about life. Yeah, dude.

Teresa:

This is the last in our spooky Halloween real ghost tales...

Travis:

Anthology.

Teresa:

Anthology.

Travis:

Is that the right...? Yeah. Series.

Teresa:

Series.

Travis:

I don't know what the difference between anthology and a series is, and at this point I'm too embarrassed to ask.

Teresa:

[laughs] I think an anthology is written.

Travis:

No, because there's horror anthologies and stuff that are, like, I think it's just like completely non-connected. It's like thematically connected, but not connected by, like character or story or anything like that.

Teresa:

Okay, well, this is connected because we talked about being committed to a Victorian asylum last week, and this week we're talking about getting out.

Travis:

Okay.

Teresa:

Or not.

Travis:

Oh, boy. Oh boy.

Teresa:

That's the thing, right? I mean, we talked about how it was especially a very sexist system. So getting out, if you were a woman who had been committed, you were probably at the mercy of the men in your life.

Travis:

Yeah.

Teresa:

So a quick recap. It's straight out of American Horror Story. Or I guess this would be English Horror Story? But American— Across the west, um, we would say that either you got committed to a horrible place, right? Which was more like a prison, or you got taken to a place that had, like, sprawling gardens and nutritious food and personally tailored...

Travis:

Now, what do you think was the difference there? Oh, wait, I believe it was money.

Teresa:

Class.

Travis:

Oh, sure. Same.

Teresa:

Same.

Travis:

Class as in—

Teresa:

Socioeconomic status.

Travis:

Yeah, not class like, that's one classy person, because there are plenty of people of high status that do not act in a classy way if you ask me.

Teresa:

Ooh. Them's are fighting words.

Travis:

Well, I've watched a lot of Marx Brothers movies.

Teresa:

Mm-hmm. So by the 1870s, nearly every state or, you know, places that were officially states at the time, had at least one publicly funded mental health institution. But that public funding was definitely not enough. It just wasn't enough, especially because...

Travis:

Just sheer scope? I mean, we're talking one per state.

Teresa:

Right, yes. They were underfunded and understaffed. And so there were a lot of places that I mean, there was just really no hope of getting out.

Travis:

You know, here's the thing that's unfortunate to it. I think in a circumstance like that, when you aren't offering adequate compensation or even, I'll go a step further to say, enticing compensation for what is a difficult job to take care of people in a facility.

The only people it's going to attract are the people who are excited— That's not true. It's going to attract people who want to do good, right? And they're like the pay, whatever, but this is my calling, and it's something I'm passionate about. That's definitely there, but it's also going to drive people who are like, oh, I don't care about the pay. I get off on being in control and the power of it.

And that's true in a lot of different systems, right? Where it's just like, oh, I'm not doing this for money. I'm doing this because I really enjoy, like, being in control and being able to tell people what to do and maybe even be violent to people without being in trouble. And that's why you should offer good compensation and then interview the heck out of everybody.

Teresa:

So, there's lots of research papers about this particular topic in Victorian life, but there's not really a straight answer about how to get out, okay? Nellie Bly, for example, that we spoke about last episode, her employer arranged to get her out of the asylum that she was committed to undercover, right?

Travis:

Can we establish, like, I think that that is another bravery aspect of what Nellie Bly did. It's not like somebody rolling up and being like, actually, that's Nellie Bly and she's fine, is enough to 100% guarantee that she's easily going to be able to get out, right? Like, there's no guarantee when she went in to do the story that the extraction process was going to be smooth and easy, right? But she still went and did it.

Teresa:

But it definitely had a lot to do with her editor.

Travis:

Right.

Teresa:

Joseph Pulitzer.

Travis:

Well, yeah, that helps.

Teresa:

Yes, that helps, right?

Travis:

Now, I only know of him from a little documentary called Newsies.

Teresa:

[laughs]

Travis:

Is that him? It's probably not— Is it? They call him Joe.

Teresa:

I mean, that is the character.

Travis:

But is his name Joseph Pulitzer in that?

Teresa:

Yeah. Yeah.

Travis:

Okay. And since— I guess they have Teddy Roosevelt in it. They might as well have— They should have just kept putting people in it. "And look over there, it's Charlie Chaplin! What, he's buying my papes!"

Teresa:

Anyway, um... So, yes, he was a man of influence, obviously, of status, and so he was able to get her out on his good word, right?

Travis:

And he was just handing out prizes like it was his job. He was like, "Let her out, you can have one, I don't care. Whatever."

Teresa:

Um, and so...

Travis:

Do you think she won a Pulitzer Prize?

Teresa:

I don't—

Travis:

But it was just like a thumbs up from him, at the time was a handshake, like Paul Hollywood. "This is the first Pulitzer Prize. A handshake. Good work, Nellie."

Teresa:

Well, so she wrote a scathing exposé, right? Under the editor of Joseph Pulitzer, which made it so that she was able to get actual, like, people in charge to come and look at the facility, right? So the facility was built for about 1000 patients, but when Nellie arrived, there were over 1600 people crammed into this facility, probably because, like, in Newsies, the boys' home gets money for every boy that's committed, right? Similar story. And there were only 16 doctors.

Travis:

For 1600 people?

Teresa:

So that's 100 people for every doctor.

Travis:

So there were just people who weren't getting seen.

Teresa:

Of course not. Of course not.

Travis:

That's assuming that every one of those 16 doctors was like, got to do my best and really put the time in.

Teresa:

Yeah.

Travis:

Woo.

Teresa:

And so Nellie wrote about several of the people that she spoke to who were not mentally ill at all. We went over this. Many of them just didn't know English. And after she was there for ten days, Pulitzer arranged to get her out. And so they hastily attempted to clean up their act right before the authorities came. But it didn't work.

Travis:

Yeah, of course not. Man, I hope, but I'm worried that that might have resulted in some danger to some of the inmates there.

Teresa:

Certainly, a lot of the people were either discharged or transferred, right?

Travis:

Okay. But not, like, done away with, which is what I was worried about.

Teresa:

Let's hope not.

Travis:

Okay.

Teresa:

But once it was exposed, New York City was extremely embarrassed and allocated an extra million dollars annually to correct these abuses, right? Which at the time, it's a lot of money.

Travis:

Yeah.

Teresa:

So this awesome investigative reporting really changed how the field of mental health treatment happens forever now.

Travis:

Man, I miss when there was good journalism being done.

Teresa:

Another person that we mentioned last episode was Elizabeth Packard. She, actually, I mean, we kind of glanced over her being committed last episode, but to go a little more into detail, she was actually committed twice. So when she was 19, she suffered from a disease referred to as brain fever, which happens a lot with these old timey diseases. Like, they basically just name it for the biggest symptom. There's no way of knowing exactly what caused it. But...

Travis:

They also, this is something I've learned from both Sawbones and just listening to books from this time and reading books from this time. They would also just come up with these kind of like, "that sounds scary" kind of names, and then just it was a huge umbrella term.

Teresa:

Exactly.

Travis:

Of just, like, what does that mean? It's like, "Oh, they've got brain fever." It's like, what? What do you mean?

Teresa:

Well, so she particularly suffered from headaches, kind of like brain fog, fatigue, and delirium. So she did actually have some symptoms that, upon further, like, observation, she was acting strange. It's true. And her father sent her to an asylum to be treated. She was there for six weeks, and the director of the institution declared her cured.

Travis:

Was she?

Teresa:

She maintains that she probably just got better. She was probably actually, like, physically ill, and it resulted in these symptoms. And so once she was physically better, her mental illness symptoms went away.

Travis:

Yes. That makes sense.

Teresa:

Totally. And then in 1839, she married a much older man who was an associate of her father's. So they thought this was it. Like, this was a good match. Right?

Travis:

On paper, you mean.

Teresa:

On paper.

Travis:

Yes.

Teresa:

After having a few children, they moved to Illinois, and this is when... So she got away from her father and their community in New England.

Travis:

Let me guess. She started getting her own ideas about things.

Teresa:

Yeah! So they were both— Her husband and her father were both Calvinist ministers, which is a very particular subset. Right?

Travis:

Okay, yeah.

Teresa:

And so once she was away from New England, she was able to question the church's teachings a little more, right?

Travis:

So not just like, time period sexism and misogyny, but also religious sexism and misogyny.

Teresa:

Right. So she broke several barriers at this time. She traveled by herself. She conducted her own missionary work. She began to express religious views that differed from her husband's.

Travis:

[gasps] What? No.

Teresa:

So he committed her to an asylum. Especially, I think what really clinches this for me is that the both of them were opposed to divorce. So he was like, well, can't divorce you, so don't want to see you anymore. Goodbye.

Travis:

I bet there was an option where you don't have to see me anymore and I don't commit you to a mental health facility. She should probably have been, like, "I like that option." That option where I can keep traveling and hang out with our kids when I want to and not have to hang out with you. That works for me, actually.

Teresa:

Yeah. Yeah. So, she was committed to the Illinois Hospital for the Insane. And at the time, a man who was committed was entitled to due process to assess his sanity. But a woman could be checked in for basically any reason.

Travis:

Okay.

Teresa:

This was not just for Illinois. The laws like this existed across the country. She was in this asylum for three years, but the entire time, she vigorously protested her confinement, and so much so that in 1863, the hospital released her, declaring that she was incurably insane and they had to make room for the curable patients.

Travis:

Okay, well, I guess that's one way to get out.

Teresa:

That's one way— I mean, it seems so counterintuitive, though, right? So, like, if you think that someone is incurably insane, you just release them because, you know, you can't, quote, help them?

Travis:

I don't know.

Teresa:

I don't know. It's very strange.

Travis:

You know what? Let's take a moment to ponder this while we hear from other Max Fun shows.

[theme music plays]

Teresa: This week, we'd like to thank our sponsor, Quip. We love Quip at our house. Bebe's got one. I've got one. Travis has got, like, three. He loves to keep the different ones for different bags and different bathrooms, and you certainly can because they're so affordable. We just got Bebe a new toothbrush head and she was so excited to get it in the mail. And she's been getting really great marks from her dentist about how great she's brushing her teeth. It has timed sonic vibration so it lets us know when it's time to switch quadrants. And it's got stylish and affordable brushes starting at just

\$25 so that you could even upgrade and it would still be affordable to a new smart motor so you could track your brushing and even earn rewards. So if you go to GetQuip.com/Shmanners right now, you'll get your first refill free. That's your first refill at GetQuip.com/Shmanners spelled G-E-T-Q-U-I-P.com/Shmanners. Quip, the good habits company.

[Max Fun ad]

Jesse: I'm Jesse Thorne. On the next Bullseye, our annual Halloween spectacular. We'll interview Ana Fabrega from Los Espookys, Monet Exchange from Drag Race, and the great R. L. Stein, creator of Goosebumps.

R. L. Stein: You know, I don't really get too deep into the real fears. It's a lot safer to do a dummy coming to life.

Jesse: That's on the next Bullseye from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[Max Fun ad]

Jesse: Hi, I'm Jesse Thorne, the founder of Maximum Fun. And I have a special announcement. I'm no longer embarrassed by My Brother, My Brother and Me. You know, for years, each new episode of this supposed advice show was a fresh insult, a depraved jumble of erection jokes, ghost humor, and frankly, this is for the best, very little actionable advice. But now, as they enter their twilight years, I'm as surprised as anyone to admit that it's gotten kind of good. Justin, Travis, and Griffin's witticisms are more refined, like a humor column in a fancy magazine. And they hardly ever say, "bazinga," anymore. So after you've completely finished listening to every single one of all of our other shows, why not join the McElroy brothers every week for My Brother, My Brother and Me.

Travis:

Okay, we're back. I didn't come to any good decisions but... So!

Teresa:

I didn't either. So she's out now, but her husband then began to imprison her in her own home.

Travis:

Okay. Not great.

Teresa:

Not great. Not great. Of all the other things we discussed, that's not another...

Travis:

None of this is great. I mean, there's no great.

Teresa:

But she was able to get a letter out to her friend and...

Travis:

Joseph Pulitzer.

Teresa:

[laughs] Wouldn't that be—

Travis:

Charlie Chaplin.

Teresa:

But they alerted the authorities.

Travis:

John Nobel and his prizes.

Teresa:

And they made an appeal to a local judge who issued a writ of habeas corpus demanding that Elizabeth's husband bring her to court to have her assessed.

Travis:

Okay.

Teresa:

And the trial was a circus. In 1864...

Travis:

Figuratively speaking, right?

Teresa:

Figuratively speaking, of course. The physicians who had met with Elizabeth claimed that her religious views and refusal to submit to her husband was what made her insane.

Travis:

Huh. And what did the judge say about that?

Teresa:

Well, there was a swarm of friends and neighbors who testified on her behalf, as well as a doctor and a theologian who argued that many intellectuals in Europe actually agreed with her religious beliefs. So, again, it wasn't on her word, but it was from the testimony of others and experts that the jury deliberated exactly seven minutes and found Elizabeth to be sane.

Travis:

Yeah. Yeah.

Teresa:

Thank goodness, right?

Travis:

It's almost so logical that it's hard to believe that it happened in the Victorian era.

Teresa:

I know, right? Not to say that this made her life easy.

Travis:

No.

Teresa:

Right? Because now her husband left her and took her children. And so she was homeless and penniless and alone.

Travis:

No!

Teresa:

Yeah. Okay. But— But! What we know of Elizabeth, we know that she's a pretty strong person. Right?

Travis:

Yeah. So far. She's great.

Teresa:

So, um, she made it her life mission to advocate for the limited rights of married women as well as the vulnerable who lived in asylums.

Travis:

Okay.

Teresa:

And so, she lobbied in Iowa and Maine and Massachusetts and so far, in Iowa, there is a law called Packard's Law which makes it illegal for asylum officials to intercept patient's mail so they are allowed to freely communicate with whoever they choose.

Travis:

Okay.

Teresa:

And she won reforms to commitment laws in four states, passed a law protecting married women's property, and later published a book. And so by 1869, she won back the custody of her three children, three younger children, and supported them and her reform efforts from the proceeds from her writing.

Travis:

Oh, awesome.

Teresa:

Yeah. When she passed away in 1897, she had done countless hours of writing and lobbying and working and advocating for these marginalized groups. So from all that, if you were interested in leaving an asylum...

Travis:

Which I would like to think I would be.

Teresa:

I would like to think I would be as well. It pretty much relied on the witnesses and the experts and just as much like, lobbying and protesting and as much as you could do. And I feel like, yes, it's great to celebrate these people who, like, worked really hard and had the help of their confidants and their— Nellie Bly's boss and all this kind of stuff. But it does

make me sad for anyone who actually needs mental health help because you might not be able to do that.

Travis:

Well. And once again not to— Well, no, I will. To compare it to today, there are so many people in prison and in facilities all over the place that need help because they are imprisoned wrongfully or being held wrongfully. And it's really hard to advocate for yourself from inside of the system. But for whatever reason, there are many— they are marginalized in such a way that there aren't people interested in helping them.

Teresa:

Right.

Travis:

And, yeah, man, it's not like, "And that's all done now and we never have to worry about it again." [groans]

Teresa:

And that's pretty spooky.

Travis:

It is pretty spooky. And the good news about this kind of spooky, unlike, say, Draculas, is there's something you can do, which is to find people who are working to help this and commit to those organizations. And we will include some of those in the show notes for this so you can copy, just click on links and go donate or see if there's something you can do to help and try to make things a little less spooky.

And we want to say thank you to our writer and researcher Alex, without whom we would not be able to make this show. Thank you to our editor Rachel, without whom we would not be able to make the show. And thank you to you. We make the show for you, so thank you for showing up. 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. Wassil for our Twitter thumbnail art. That's @shmannerscast and that is where we request questions on our different topics, so go ahead and follow us there. 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 from other fans, join that group today.

And also, I want to put out that call, always. For topic suggestions and idiom submissions, please email at shmannerscast@gmail.com and say hi to Alex because she reads every one.

Travis:

And make sure you go over to McElroyMerch.com and check out all the great merch that we've got there. It's almost the end of the month, so don't miss your chance to go check out the October merch but then also go back in just a few days and check out the November merch. Um, and you can get tickets for our upcoming tours at bit.ly/McElroyTours. And, you know, have a great day. Enjoy yourselves and that's going to do it for us. Join us again next week.

Teresa:

No RSVP required.

Travis:

You've been listening to Shmanners.

Teresa:

Manners, Shmanners. Get it?

[theme music plays]

MaximumFun.org

Comedy and culture.

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