

Sawbones Episode 100: Conjoined Twins

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Intro (Clint McElroy):

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[theme music Medicines by The Taxpayers plays]

Justin:

Hello everybody and welcome to *Sawbones: A Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine*. I am your co-host Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

We're both very sniffly.

Sydnee:

Yes, that's true. I'm sorry about that in advance everyone listening.

Justin:

It's, it's allergy season here and probably lots of other places too. Um, but-

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

... that's what's happening.

Sydnee:

Other places that it is summer transitionally, transitioning into fall.

Justin:

See, I just got back from New York. I missed you.

Sydnee:

Aww, I missed you too, honey.

Justin:

I'm glad to be ba-

Sydnee:

I hate when you leave.

Justin:

Me too. I'm glad to be back. I wish there was some way I could, um, you know, travel less. But, you know, business... Lady business calls, as they say.

Sydnee:

Wait. Lady business calls?

Justin:

Lady business. Well no, not like... No, like lady justice, but lady business.

Sydnee:

Oh, okay.

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

I thought you were saying like lady business.

Justin:

Lady business.

Sydnee:

And I was gonna say, I'm offended on multiple levels by that statement.

Justin:

No, like, you know, business.

Sydnee:

The lady that is business has called.

Justin:

The gears of industry-

Sydnee:

Okay.

Justin:

... summon me.

Sydnee:

Well, you know, if, if you wanted to travel less, like there is one way.

Justin:

What's that?

Sydnee:

I mean, we could've been born conjoined twins.

Justin:

Whoo... okay. Yes. That would-

Sydnee:

Then we'd never be apart.

Justin:

... that would solve the travel issue. Um, it would create, I guess you could say, some other light complications.

Sydnee:

But wouldn't it be nice? We'd always be together.

Justin:

Ooh.

Sydnee:

You'd always be right next to me. You could come with me to work!

Justin:

We'd be related.

Sydnee:

That would be fun.

Justin:

We'd be related.

Sydnee:

Well, that's true.

Justin:

Yeah. I mean, that's what, that's what you're, that's gonna be your hitch every time.

Sydnee:

That would be a bit of a-

Justin:

Right there.

Sydnee:

... problem. And depending on how we were connected, it could make kissing difficult.

Justin:

Uh-huh [affirmative]. Well I don't wanna, I don't wanna live that way. Uh, because we're married, um, and that would be odd if we were also conjoined twins. I don't think, I don't think that that's done, simply. But um-

Sydnee:

All right. I 'll just handcuff us together later.

Justin:

... but honestly, Syd, if I'm gonna be honest, I don't know that much about conjoined twins.

Sydnee:

You know, Justin. I think that's true for a lot of people, because we've had quite a few requests to talk about conjoined twins.

Justin:

Uh, from, from, from who?

Sydnee:

Well, from listeners. Would you like me to name a few?

Justin:

Name 'em!

Sydnee:

So thank you to Noah and Caitlin and Sarah and Nicholas and Jolene and Diane and Angel and Michelle.

Justin:

Thank you!

Sydnee:

All you guys.

Justin:

Now we're doing it, so back off!

Sydnee:

Thank you. We're gonna talk about conjoined twins. Um.

Justin:

Okay, so take me back to the beginning of conjoined twins, Syd.

Sydnee:

Well...

Justin:

Help me understand from a base level. Pretend I'm a simple, simple man with a limited understanding of science.

Sydnee:

Well that, that won't be hard. [laughs]

Justin:

Ba-dum-tchh.

Sydnee:

[laughs] You, you, I've been waiting for that set up since, how long have we been doing this show?

Justin:

So, conjoined twins, Syd. We're ready when you are.

Sydnee:

So lets-

Justin:

I think the audience is starting to get a little bored and they'd like you just to tear into it.

Sydnee:

... let's talk about twinning. The concept of twins.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Do you know why there are twins? Like why, why are two people twins? How does that happen?

Justin:

I have... There are two different ways.

Sydnee:

Okay. Go ahead.

Justin:

One is two, um, sorry for the adult language, but one way is two spermies get into the same egg and-

Sydnee:

Two spermies get into the same egg?

Justin:

Two spermies get in the same egg, okay?

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Justin:

So that's one issue. The other is when two separate eggs simultaneously get impregnated by two separate spermies at the same time, the same exact millisecond. That's how you get fraternal twins.

Sydnee:

Okay, if anyone-

Justin:

There's a third way where the egg, after being fertilized, thus making it a zygote, splits.

Sydnee:

Okay. I don't know where you came up with that first way.

Justin:

Mm, I think it was from *Look Who's Talking?*

Sydnee:

Oh, okay. [laughs] That's not a thing, but you were right with the other two.

Justin:

Nice!

Sydnee:

So, so you're right. So there are two, two types of twins. There are fraternal twins and identical twins. Fraternal twins are, yes, like you said, when there are two different eggs and two different sperm and they just all happen to, you know, form at the same time, so you get two babies.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

So they grow in the uterus together, but they aren't necess- they aren't the exact same, you know, genetic material.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

It's two different sperm, two different eggs. So then that's why fraternal twins don't look identical.

Justin:

Got it.

Sydnee:

Right. And why you can have male-female fraternal twins.

Justin:

Okay. That all makes sense.

Sydnee:

Now, if you have one egg that is fertilized by one sperm which, as you said, then divides, it can become identical twins.

Justin:

Okay. So, if I had to guess, and I'm going on a limb here, are conjoined twins when the egg doesn't separate like cleanly or all the way?

Sydnee:

It's, it's, exactly. It's when it doesn't, it doesn't completely divide, and depending on how far into the process it doesn't completely divide. Um, so I mean if it's, if it divides right away, you get identical twins. If it starts to divide later and then later and later, you get more, a more degree of conjoinedness?

Justin:

Conjoinery.

Sydnee:

Conjoinery? You know what I'm saying?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Like, they get, they're more closely conjoined.

Justin:

Right

Sydnee:

The further in the process it doesn't divide.

Justin:

Right. I gotcha.

Sydnee:

So um, and so then, so you get conjoined twins, and of course there're different types of conjoined twins depending on how they are joined together.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, so for instance, and we, and we, we kind of classify them based on the location in their body where the, where the connection is.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Does that make sense whether it's their head-

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

... or their upper body or their lower body. So there's, uh, thoracopagus, which are, they're joined at the sternum and they tend to, they tend to share a heart. So they're joined at the top part of their body. And that's about like 40 percent of conjoined twins.

There's omphalopagus, and they're joined at the, like the waist and can be all the way up to the chest, but it's usually like the center-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

... like their stomach area, and they can share a part of their GI tract, part of their GU tract. Usually not, though, the heart. Sometimes. Usually not. And that's about 33 percent.

There's pygopagus that're joined either like down at the waist, at the sacrum, or even can be like back to back. Like butt to butt.

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

Can be joined that way. There's some twins joined that way.

And the the rarest are craniopagus, which are joined at the head. And you, you may have seen twins like that before.

Justin:

Yeah, I think. But only like in, in crude, crude illustrations. That sort of thing.

Sydnee:

Right. And that, that, we have seen some twins like that, that they're joined. And they may or may not share some part of their brain.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

They may have two separate brains or they may share brain tissue. They may only have one. Uh, it just depends. And there are lots of other variations on these. These are kind of the major types of conjoined twins.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

And of course, depending on how you're joined, um, that's gonna, that's gonna be a big part of one, if you can be separated, and two, how much it's going to impact your quality of life and your health.

Um, conjoined twins are rare. They occur about once every 200,000 live births.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

And the survival rate of conjoined twins, like to birth, is really only about five to 25 percent. It's, it's, it's fairly low. Just because it creates a lot of problems-

Justin:

Sure, sure.

Sydnee:

... in utero. Um, female conjoined twins seem to fare better, for whatever reason.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

Because you are three times as likely to be born alive if you're female conjoined twins as opposed to male. So, there are a lot more female conjoined twins. 70 percent are female.

Justin:

Wow! That's wild. We have no idea why?

Sydnee:

No. I don't know why, but, but for whatever reason, most, most, uh, conjoined twins are female. And, um, we have evidence that, and this makes sense, like why would this be a new thing? Right? Why would, why would people have all of a sudden started having identical twins or having conjoined twins?

Justin:

Well, I know that we've had, we've seen some changes in the twins statistics thanks to fertilization drugs and things like that.

Sydnee:

That's true, and I guess it's fair to say that as the rate of, um, identical twins rises, you would expect the rate of conjoined twins to rise, but it's something that happens randomly anyway. So, we've had conjoined twins certainly for as long as we've been having twins-

Justin:

Can I ask a question?

Sydnee:

... Babies at all.

Justin:

What, that you'll probably have to just like hypothesize about? Why do we not have a better number than five to 25 percent survive? That's like a big-

Sydnee:

Well...

Justin:

... that's like a fairly big range with, uh, something that's pretty easy to quantify. I mean, it's fairly binary.

Sydnee:

I, I think we're just talking about, um, I mean, one, well we're talking about the rate of survival to birth. Does that make... So, so, we're, we're factoring... This is really a rate of, of miscarriage.

Justin:

Oh.

Sydnee:

Or not miscarriage.

Justin:

Okay, so that's harder.

Sydnee:

It's harder to quantify-

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

... and not, a, it's not always reported.

Justin:

Because we don't always have the insight into...

Sydnee:

Exactly.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Exactly. So that number's a little harder.

Justin:

By the way, one of the, one other... Quick question. You talked about where they're joined depends on where it was in the fertilization process. Like are we talking like minutes? Days? Weeks? Like...

Sydnee:

Yeah. Like days in.

Justin:

Days.

Sydnee:

Hours and days in.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Hours to days. Yeah. The very, very beginning of the fertilization process. Like egg and sperm meet and then the instant divisions that take place really dictate if this is going to happen or not.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, and most of the time it doesn't. But then every once in a while, it does. Uh, we have found, um, statues and sculptures that depict conjoined twins, what we think are, you know, a depiction of, of twins that were born, born conjoined, um, from 3,000 years ago. So obviously, you know, why would it have not been happening?

Um, in the 16th century, a famous French surgeon who we've spoken of before, um, Ambrose Pare?

Justin:

That sounds familiar.

Sydnee:

Ambrose Pare? Uh, he wrote a lot about conjoined twins. He actually was the reason we have all of these different names and categories for, for conjoined twins based on how they are joined. Um, and he thought a lot about it to try to figure out like why does this happen? Why are there people who are conjoined?

But the theories were pretty typical, I would say, for 16th century reasoning. Maybe it's because the parents made God angry? Maybe it's just God's way of showing like how powerful he is? Or maybe it has nothing to do with God, maybe it's the Devil? Or maybe it has nothing to do with God or the Devil, maybe it's mom's fault because she saw something that was shocking when she was pregnant and as a result this is what happened with her pregnancy?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, he had some physiological thoughts. Like maybe it has to do with a womb that's too small? You know, so they don't have room to separate. Maybe your clothes are too tight? Or maybe you sat wrong while you were pregnant?

Justin:

Nah, probably not that one.

Sydnee:

That's a terrifying thing, by the way. If that's your theory and you're telling pregnant women that. Having been a pregnant woman, and I mean, I-I-I'm fairly knowledgeable about pregnancy from a very, you know, scientific perspective because of my, because of my chosen trade. If someone had looked at me and said, "By the way, you might sit wrong while you're pregnant and cause problems for your baby." How terrifying would that be?

Justin:

That's terrible.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

You may just sit wrong.

Justin:

It's, yeah. It's brutal.

Sydnee:

I would never sit.

Justin:

Just don't sit.

Sydnee:

I would stand all the time.

Justin:

Just stand. Or sleep. Just don't sit.

Sydnee:

Now, of course none of these reasons-

Justin:

Kneeling, that's fine.

Sydnee:

... are why. [laughs]

Justin:

Crouching. Squatting.

Sydnee:

But no sitting.

Justin:

No sitting.

Sydnee:

Don't, cause you might sit wrong. I don't even know what he, he didn't write like how-

Justin:

He should have gone into detail.

Sydnee:

... like how do you sit wrong?

Justin:

If it was that possible, he should have like detailed that a little better.

Sydnee:

Yeah. In, in what way is that... How do you sit right?

Justin:

That's, I, now I'm questioning everything.

Sydnee:

Cause I, I will tell you that I'm on my-

Justin:

Maybe I've been sitting wrong this whole time.

Sydnee:

... I'm on my feet a lot, so I typically feel that any sitting is right.

Justin:

You're right. Yeah.

Sydnee:

If I'm sitting, it feels so right.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

But, um, obviously none of these, none of these-

Justin:

Sure. It's not, I mean...

Sydnee:

... none of these things are right.

Justin:

I mean, none of it's real, so...

Sydnee:

Um, now in general, if you were born as a pair of, as one of a pair of conjoined twins hundreds of years ago, it, it probably wasn't a good thing for you. Um, it was usually seen as, as the result of either mom did something bad or it was some sort of evil omen. Um, and so, unfortunately we don't have a lot of stories about what happened to conjoined twins, you know, because they were kind of abandoned.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Um, as time went on, we start to hear some more interesting stories about the lives of different, different, uh, pairs of conjoined twins, because they did survive and, uh, their lives were always notable because-

Justin:

It was such a unique experience.

Sydnee:

... it was a unique experience. And so, a lot of people talked about it and wrote about it and, and shared that. So, um, the first that we, that we have some sparse records of, are a pair of twins from the 10th century. We actually don't even know their names. Uh, we know that they were born in Armenia. Um, they traveled to Constantinople and they were like friends with the royal court there, which I think is why we have such a great record that there were, there was this pair of conjoined twins that existed at the time.

Um, the, the reason that this is mentioned is that one of the twins died and so they tried to do surgery to separate them at that point.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

No one would've attempted that before, cause-

Justin:

Well, sure. Right. Obviously.

Sydnee:

... Right. Surgery at the, any surgery at the time was a death sentence, right? We didn't have anesthesia. We didn't know how to control blood loss. We didn't have antibiotics. We didn't know anything. So, any surgery was a bad news.

If you didn't have to do it, you wouldn't do it. But, but when one twin died, they had to, and so they uh, they attempted to separate them and the other twin actually survived three days.

Justin:

Uh.

Sydnee:

Which, for the-

Justin:

But still, that, that's bru- that's a terrible three days. Like...

Sydnee:

It is, but for the 10th century, that's quite an accomplishment that the surgeon was able to do that.

Justin:

Yeah. Okay. That's fine.

Sydnee:

That's fine?

Justin:

Yeah. Okay.

Sydnee:

The oldest known conjoined twins that we actually have names for and know a little bit more about their story, um, were from 1100 in Benenden, county of Kent, England. Um, they were, they were named Mary and Eliza Chulkhurst, and uh, they were pygopagus twins. So, they were probably joined down lower at the, um, at their sacrum. Maybe even like, kind of like I described-

Justin:

What's a sacrum?

Sydnee:

... butt to butt? Like the lower part of their, like in their pelvis.

Justin:

Where your tail used to be?

Sydnee:

Yes.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Well, sort of. You're, that's your coccyx.

Justin:

Got it.

Sydnee:

But your, think about your pelvis. At some part of their pelvis.

Justin:

Got it.

Sydnee:

How about that?

Justin:

I'm into it.

Sydnee:

Um, so from, from descriptions and depictions, that's probably where they were joined. There were some other drawings that you can find of them where it looks like they're also joined at the shoulder as well as down at the hip. That's highly unlikely.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Um, that just usually isn't the way it works. So that was probably just a, kind of a fanciful-

Justin:

Fanciful.

Sydnee:

... drawing.

Justin:

That's weird that you need to look, make, make a pair of conjoined twins look like more unique. Like, more, like-

Sydnee:

Exactly.

Justin:

... like it was like, "Uh, this is boring. Everybody's seen this." Like what are you talking about?

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

It's like already so rare. You don't need to spice it up with your artistic license, dude.

Sydnee:

No, it's, it's an interesting enough story alone.

Justin:

Yeah. It's, that's wild.

Sydnee:

Um, they, they lived their lives connected because it was thought at the time that surgery, um, was impossible. Um, and they, I think that they, um, actually grew to be okay with that. Um, to enjoy each other's company, because when eventually one twin did pass away, um, as she got older, the other twin was offered surgery to attempt to save her life because they

knew it would be fatal for her and she refused and said "We came into this world together and, and that's how we will leave." And-

Justin:

Oh, that's beautiful.

Sydnee:

Um, what's beautiful about this story, because I know that's sad, but they were very wealthy, uh, and they donated their money as well as 20 acres of land to the local church. Um, and to this day, to commemorate them, every Easter Sunday the church hands out free cakes and, and biscuits and things with the images of the, what are now known as the, Benenden maids, to, to the locals.

Justin:

Aww. Well that's, that's nice.

Sydnee:

So their, their gifts and contributions and charity is, you know, is commemorated to this very day. So it's kind of a nice, nice end of that story.

Justin:

That is nice.

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Justin:

Aww.

Sydnee:

But there is an even more famous set of conjoined twins that I want to tell you about.

Justin:

Tell me, Syd. I'm ready. I'm braced.

Sydnee:

But bef- but before I do that...

Justin:

Ah, I should've seen this coming.

Sydnee:

Why don't we had to the billing department?

Justin:

Let's go!

[ad break]

Justin:

Okay, Syd. Tell me about the, the, the really super duper famous conjoined twins.

Sydnee:

Well, the most famous conjoined twins, if you've, if you've heard of conjoined twins, are probably Chang and Eng Bunker, who I asked you if you'd heard of and you said "No."

Justin:

Nope!

Sydnee:

How is that possible?

Justin:

I live a sheltered life? I don't know. I read mostly the internet? I don't know.

Sydnee:

Well, these guys are all over the internet. They uh, they were originally from-

Justin:

Really? They got like Twitter handles and everything? They got a Myspace?

Sydnee:

I don't... I mean, if you, if you Google-

Justin:

Can I follow their Spotify playlists?

Sydnee:

If you Google them, you will find lots of information?

Justin:

They got a Tumblr? I got three Tumblrs. Tell me they're all over the Internet. I'm the internet.

Sydnee:

I, I would argue that they are, they are maybe more famous than Justin McElroy.

Justin:

Okay. Possibly. In their day. Now how many followers do they have on Twitter? None! All right, tell me about Chang and Eng Bunker.

Sydnee:

So, they were originally from Siam and this is actually where we get the term that we no longer use, Siamese twins.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

From Chang and Eng Bunker. Because they were from Siam. And they, when they eventually, as I will tell you about, started touring, um, with different groups to kind of showcase themselves to make money, uh, they were billed as the Siamese twins because it sounded exotic. That was pretty much it.

Justin:

And Siamese is the, say, using the phrase Siamese twins, is that considered, like, is that offensive? Or is it just like inaccurate and therefore...

Sydnee:

I, I would say it's offensive in that it's inaccurate and it's inappropriate. It's not, I mean, first of all, we don't call, there is no Siam.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

I mean, that would be number one. And, um, so, I don't know, even if you were conjoined twins from what was formerly known as Siam, you wouldn't be Siamese twins.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

It's Thailand now.

Justin:

True.

Sydnee:

Um, and, and secondly if you, if you aren't from formerly Siam, like why would you call? You know?

Justin:

Yeah. Fair. Okay.

Sydnee:

Why, would I start calling you French Justin?

Justin:

If you would do that, I would be thrilled. Oui oui.

Sydnee:

Okay, so it's not, it wouldn't, that wouldn't necessarily be like inappropriate or offensive.

Justin:

It's just not right.

Sydnee:

But it would be like inaccurate.

Justin:

Got it.

Sydnee:

So don't use that. Say conjoined.

Justin:

Yeah. Sound smart.

Sydnee:

They were born in 1811 and initially they worked at home to support their family, and they actually started a business and were fairly successful. Um, but, in 1829 a Captain Coffin, who was visiting, saw them and convinced them that they should move with him to the U.S. and that he could be their manager and that they could make a lot more money and support their family in a lot, you know, better fashion, if he would, you know, if they would allow him to kind of tour them around and show them off.

Justin:

That lure of fame will get'cha.

Sydnee:

Uh, they began, uh, they agreed and began touring the U.S. initially as the Siamese double boys and then later as Siamese twins. Um, they toured some-

Justin:

Double boys is better.

Sydnee:

You like Siamese double boys better?

Justin:

Siamese double boys is a sweet name. Siamese twins is fine, but it's no Siamese double boys.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Do, do you, do you and your-

Justin:

Sounds like a really, really, really righteous, like, Asian rap outfit. You know what I mean? The, it's like really underground.

Sydnee:

The double boys!

Justin:

The Siamese double boys! Where we from? Siam's not a place!

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Why don't you wipe that smile off your face? Cause we're coming at you with guns galore! We're attached at the hip, you wanna see more?

Sydnee:

That was great.

Justin:

Thanks. I just, uh, this is gonna surprise you. I just free styled that.

Sydnee:

Maybe, maybe you and your brothers could start being like the McElroy triple boys.

Justin:

Triple boys! The only outfit that's harder than the double boys!

Sydnee:

The West Virginia triple boys.

Justin:

That's a pretty good name. Okay.

Sydnee:

There ya go! Okay.

Justin:

Done!

Sydnee:

I, I get credit. TM.

Justin:

I'm getting the URL right now.

Sydnee:

Um, they toured some in the U.K. as well, but they actually weren't allowed in France. They tried to do some tours in France but they weren't allowed because there was a fear that if, as we kind of alluded to earlier, if any pregnant women saw them, then they would also give birth to conjoined twins.

Justin:

What year is this? 1811? That's stupid for 1811.

Sydnee:

1830's.

Justin:

That's stupid for a lot of times. That's super stupid for 1830.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Like 1830? Wasn't Jules Verne already like up in this piece?

Sydnee:

[laughs] We've talked about this before, this as, as late as like the early 1900's, it was thought that if you read something scary or saw something upsetting while you were pregnant, then it would, it would somehow scar your child.

Justin:

But the idea that, like, okay, scar your child's one thing, but the idea that seeing conjoined twins is going to commit a mind crime on you seems like a little far-fetched.

Sydnee:

Well, sure.

Justin:

Wasn't like Sherlock alive back then in the 1830's? Sherlock was alive, walking around, solving cases.

Sydnee:

Sherlock??

Justin:

You know, Sherlock Holmes. Like-

Sydnee:

Well, I mean I know you who mean.

Justin:

... he could have set them straight.

Sydnee:

But like, he's not... Do you think Sherlock Holmes is a real person?

Justin:

What's next?

Sydnee:

So they weren't allowed in France, um, but they did tour extensively in the U.S. and the U.K. and as they moved around, they saw many different doctors throughout their lives. Um, to be examined and evaluated, for one, because a lot of doctors wanted to for their own, kind of, medical curiosity. Um, but two, to see if they could be separated. But no doctor ever though it was possible. They thought it was way too risky, and so...

Justin:

It had nothing to do with Captain Coffin standing in the doorway with like a wad of, well, twos I guess? I don't know. But that was big money back then.

Sydnee:

Handfuls of coins.

Justin:

No, no, no.

Sydnee:

Coins?

Justin:

It's permanent!

Sydnee:

Dobloons? Maybe dobloons?

Justin:

Maybe doubloons in 1830.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Um, well what's interesting about this is that they were actually only conjoined by a very narrow band of tissue at their waist. Uh, they shared a little bit of liver tissue and that was pretty much it, so by today's standards, they'd be pretty easy to separate.

Justin:

Huh.

Sydnee:

More than likely. I mean, I don't know, I don't have all the-

Justin:

I'm surprised that like...

Sydnee:

... imaging to tell you for sure, but it would probably have been a successful surgery.

Justin:

I'm surprised that nobody like, took a run at it. I mean, I guess it's like your life so maybe you, you wanna make sure the person's like 100 percent like "Oh yeah, I can defo, defo do that. Like no problem."

Sydnee:

Well, exactly. And since they were connected, uh, by so little tissue, they were able to, you know, both do all the things. They weren't, it wasn't a, a uncomfortable. I mean, some of the ways that conjoined twins are, are conjoined, it prevents them from sitting in certain ways or moving certain ways or doing certain things.

Justin:

Yeah but-

Sydnee:

They weren't prevented from a lot things.

Justin:

... that's kinda like, uh, that's kinda like an in for a penny, in for a pound situation, Syd. I mean, like, you could be pretty, I mean like, the, the distance between being very barely conjoined twins and like not conjoined twins is like a great distance, it is like infinite distance actually.

Sydnee:

Well, sure.

Justin:

Technically speaking.

Sydnee:

But it didn't, it really, as far as quality of life. Now, I mean, we don't know, I don't know, I've never, I didn't interview them, I can't tell you for sure, but I will say that after they stopped touring, they settled in North Carolina. They got their citizenship. They started farming. So, they had a successful farm. They married two sisters, Adelaide and Sarah Ann Yates, and between the two of them, they fathered 21 children.

Justin:

Nice! Whoa!

Sydnee:

So they did okay.

Justin:

Yeah, I mean, def. I'm not saying it like, I'm not saying their lives were worse. I'm just cau- I'm just taking umbridge with the fact, like, you can't be like mildly conjoined. Like, you're just, you're just like conjoined or not I think.

Sydnee:

I, I guess. You know, the-the sisters' dad, Adelaide and Sarah Ann Yates, uh, actually objected to the marriage, didn't want his daughters marrying them.

Justin:

Mm.

Sydnee:

Which you'd assume is because they were conjoined twins.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

And it actually wasn't true. You gotta remember the time period. It was just because they were from then Siam.

Justin:

I just assumed it's because-

Sydnee:

He was cool with the conjoined twins thing.

Justin:

... I figure because it's because they're entertainers. You know those Hollywood types.

Sydnee:

[laughs] The actors. Uh, they would, they did go back into show business later. They work with Barnum, famously.

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

They toured Europe that way. Um, still not allowed in France, I think. Um, but then their health began to decline and, uh, Chang died first in 1874 and Eng followed shortly thereafter.

Um, there have been a lot of other famous conjoined twins since. And a lot of, a lot of them are either coerced or voluntarily enter into the show business world, uh, to make their fortune. Uh, there were Helen and Judith, they were Hungarian sisters who were joined back to back at the sacrum. Um, they were born in 1701 and they were actually, their parents made sure they were very well educated. They spoke many language, they were trained in singing and dancing, and by all accounts enjoyed it. That's how they made their living and they enjoyed, who knows, but that's how they said they enjoyed it. And um, eventually they gave that up. They entered a convent. Uh, but, Alexander Pope wrote a, wrote a poem about them.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

Which is kind of cool.

Justin:

And you're going to recite it for me now.

Sydnee:

Nope.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

But later.

Justin:

Got it. I'll look forward to it.

Sydnee:

Yeah, hold your breath. Uh, Millie and Christine McCoy were another pair of conjoined twins who were born, uh, in North Carolina in 1851. This is a theme. We visit North Carolina a few times in this episode. I don't know why conjoined twins and North Carolina-

Justin:

It's weird. Something in the water. Who knows.

Sydnee:

... have a connection, but there ya go. But, um, they were born actually, uh, as slaves, um in 1851. Uh, and as a result of that, they were sold to various jerks who were trying to make money off of them.

Justin:

Of course.

Sydnee:

As well as stolen a couple times by, by jerks. Um, from other jerks. There's just a lot of jerks in this story. Uh, but, it doesn't end sad because they ended up back with their family after slavery ended-

Justin:

Excellent.

Sydnee:

... in this country. Um, which was good, and they, they did continue to perform, uh, singing and dancing supposedly by choice.

Justin:

Oh, okay, well that's nice.

Sydnee:

They were billed, you can see reference to that sometimes in like old timey shows from the, they were called the Two-Headed Nightingale.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

They were actually again joined, they're pygopagus, so they were joined at like the sacrum again. Um, there were the Tocci brothers, uh Giacomo and Giovanni, who were born in Italy in 1877 and they actually shared everything from the waist down was just one person.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

Or it was just one body. They were joined completely from the waist down. Um, they were given to the Royal Academy of Medicine in Turin by their parents.

Justin:

Hmm

Sydnee:

When they were a month old.

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

They were, which was, I mean, it, that's unheard of now. They were given to them. Um, they were actually each able, each twin was able to control their respective arm really well and they both had a lot of artistic talent-

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

... which I think is kind of cool.

Justin:

Must require a lot of cooperation.

Sydnee:

It, yeah.

Justin:

To work in concert.

Sydnee:

Yeah, absolutely, and it's not, it's not common. My understanding is that it's not common that each twin necessarily has that much control over the limb that, you know, that is on their side.

Justin:

Sure. Huh.

Sydnee:

Um, they also ended up marrying sisters and, uh, kind of retired from public life and lived 43 years near Venice in seclusion.

Justin:

Huh.

Sydnee:

Which sounds kind of nice.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Venice is nice.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, there are a pair of sisters you may have heard of. The Hilton sisters? They're pretty famous.

Justin:

Paris and whatever her name?

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

Rebecca?

Sydnee:

These are better.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Violet and Daisy. Um, they were, again, pygopagus twins born in Brighton, England in 1908. Uh, their mother, they actually were, were, they were sold to a midwife right after birth. Again, not because they were conjoined, but because the mother was unwed, and so they didn't want that scandal to get out.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

That this unwed mother had these children. Um, the midwife was a tyrant and she forced them to learn how to sing and dance and perform. Um, eventually they had to battle for their freedom in court and they escaped her.

Justin:

Yay!

Sydnee:

Um, however, they did continue to perform at that point, again by choice.

Justin:

See, you get a taste of the spotlight.

Sydnee:

[laughs] They starred in a couple of different movies.

Justin:

Oh.

Sydnee:

There, there was one that was unfortunately named *Freaks* but there was another that was named *Chained for Life* which was a story, it was supposed to be true life but it wasn't. But it was supposed to be about conjoined twins, where one commits a murder.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So the courts are trying to decide what to do.

Justin:

Whoa!

Sydnee:

Do you send 'em to jail and, you know, make the other twin go to jail?

Justin:

That's kind of... I don't know, that's kind of interesting.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Pretty good.

Sydnee:

Yeah. So there, that movie's out there. *Chained for Life*, if you're ever interested.

Justin:

Huh.

Sydnee:

Um, they even performed as part of Bob Hope's act, tap dancing. Uh, they both got married and divorced. One of their marriages only lasted 10 days. Um, and after a while, their career kind of wound down and they ended up, first running an unsuccessful hamburger stand in Florida, and then working as grocery store clerks in North Carolina. Again, in North Carolina!

Justin:

That's cra- what is it about North Carolina and the open arms?

Sydnee:

I know. I don't know!

Justin:

That's wild!

Sydnee:

Um, a couple other conjoined twins that I think are, are interesting to hear about because it was the first time that like a, a surgery successfully, you know, was able to separate conjoined twins. Radhika and Dudhika Nayak from India in 1888. Um, they had to be separated because, uh, Dudhika had gotten TB and was, and was very ill.

Justin:

Oh!

Sydnee:

And it was the only way to save Radhika's life. And so, um, they separated them and Radhika actually was able to live a year after that.

Justin:

Hmm!

Sydnee:

Um, because it was a very, it was a very narrow band of tissue, so it was a successful, successful surgery, which is the first time that we know that that happened to that degree of success, I should say.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Um, it's uh, it's, in general, if you look into all these different twins lives, many of them sought to marry and were refused because throughout the, throughout olden times when we didn't know much, it was always an argument over whether or not one, were they two people or one person? Which they're two people. Clearly. But the courts would argue about this. And two was it morally indecent for them to get married?

Justin:

Well, that's kinda crummy.

Sydnee:

Well, because of the sex thing.

Justin:

Ooh! Yeah. Okay. Well that makes sense.

Sydnee:

So, I think all of them-

Justin:

Well, I mean it doesn't make sense, it's still kind of whack, but...

Sydnee:

It is, it is completely whack and I mean, I think we would all argue no, um, but it, it, it led to a lot of interesting moral and ethical debates. Um, especially if, if two twins were separated, um, sometimes if they only had one, if they had shared genitalia, sometimes they would kind of give the genitalia to one of the twins and not the other.

Justin:

Mm.

Sydnee:

Which if they were both genotypically males, one would become phenotypically a male and would would become phenotypically a female.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

Which created other issues for them later down the road as to what they identified as and-

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

... you know, that kind of thing. So there were all kinds of different issues.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

Surrounding it. Um, in general, separating conjoined twins is a risky surgery. It's better now because we have all kinds of, uh, imaging that can help us. We can do MRIs and angiography to figure out exactly what nerves and blood vessels and what parts of what organ are connected so that we know before we go in and try to separate, you know, conjoined twins, what we're going to cut through.

Um, at this point it's, it's much better, um, since 1950 we have a success rate of about 75 percent for at least one twin surviving. But it's still incredibly risky, um, and especially twins that are, that are joined, you know, to a great extent-

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

... that share a lot of the same internal organs or that share brain tissue. It, it can be a very, very risky surgery to this day and so, there are many twins who opt just not to do it.

Justin:

Mm, wild. Um, we are part of the Maximum Fun podcast network. They got a ton of great shows on there for you to go and, uh, listen to and enjoy. Uh,

why not check out *Bullseye*? It's a pop culture show hosted by Jesse Thorn, the father of Maximum Fun, the pod father, if you will. Uh, they got a ton of great guests and I'm sure there's gonna be one on there that you would be very interested to hear from, uh they had one of the gentlemen on from, uh, from, uh, Key and Peele?

Sydnee:

Ah, that's great.

Justin:

That was a, a, it suddenly escapes me which of the gentlemen it was, but it was one of them. It was a really good interview and, uh, you can find that at MaximumFun.org as you can find all our shows.

Um, hey, next week, we are going to be in the Pacific Northwest. We are going to be in Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver. Portland tickets are sold out but there are still tickets available. If you want to see us in Seattle, it's MBMBAM. Uh, sorry. We are performing with *My Brother My Brother and Me*, which is an advice show I do with my brothers. Uh, but you can find the tickets at bit.ly/mbmbamseattle and bit.ly/vanmbmbam.

Thank you to the Taxpayers for letting us use their song *Medicines* as the intro and outro of our program. And I believe that's going to do it for us, Syd.

Sydnee:

That'll do it.

Justin:

That'll do it. And, uh, until next Wednesday, I'm Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays out]

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