

Sawbones Episode 97: Fainting and Corsets

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Intro (Clint McElroy):

Sawbones is a show about medical history. And nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion, it's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour, and not try to diagnose your mystery boil. We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth, you're worth it.

[theme song 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:

Syd I am so excited.

Sydnee:

About what?

Justin:

Well, I, uh, oh, I think our delivery of our furniture should be coming soon.

Sydnee:

Oh yeah! Hey-

Justin:

You know we may-

Sydnee:

... it should be coming soon.

Justin:

And uh, we, uh, we have an extra room that we didn't have before-

Sydnee:

Yeah, we, we, we-

Justin:

... sort of like an actual living room type thing.

Sydnee:

Exactly. We got a bigger place and we realized we don't have a lot of furniture.

Justin:

We don't, so we got furniture for a room, like a living room set. I got, and what I'm most excited about, I got a power armchair, I got a power armchair.

Sydnee:

It's like a sectional-

Justin:

Like a sectional.

Sydnee:

... its like a big sectional, and then Justin got to assemble all the different pieces that he wanted in his-

Justin:

For, for my Father's Day gift.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

I got to have one that has power in it. So I got a power armchair. Listen this, [weird grunting], this is like Tim Allen.

Sydnee:

Oh, that was very manly.

Justin:

You know, typical humor for you.

Sydnee:

I'm, I'm almost overcome by all the manliness.

Justin:

Yeah. So I got a power, uh, armchair on the sectional. So I'm, I'm thrilled. I can't wait.

Sydnee:

What about-

Justin:

Got uh, got corner piece-

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Justin:

... got the love seat, got the power armchair feeling very good about it.

Sydnee:

Right, with, well with the, with all that, all that manly power armchair going on over there, did you get a, did you get a fainting couch? Maybe a power fainting couch for me?

Justin:

No, I didn't get you a fainting couch or a power fainting couch. But to be honest, I didn't see that in the list of available options.

Sydnee:

I'm not sure how that would work. Like how you would power a fainting couch.

Justin:

Well-

Sydnee:

Like will it catch you.

Justin:

I guess after you faint on it, you push the power button in, it lifts you back to a seating position. So you can pretend you didn't faint. Like, oh me? No, I've been reclining this entire time.

Sydnee:

That seems helpful. Will it also like get you the remote and a glass of water or?

Justin:

No, it's, sweetheart, it's not a robot, it's just like it either goes up or down.

Sydnee:

There is-

Justin:

It's not sentient.

Sydnee:

Hold on. There is no robot coming with this couch.

Justin:

There's no robot butler. Even though our request was specifically, they said that it does not exist, and it would not be manufactured by the La-Z-Boy company in the campus.

Sydnee:

The only, the only reason that I agreed to the power chair was that I thought you were getting a, a robot of some sort.

Justin:

I am, I know the machines are coming for us. I'm, I'll be darned if I'm gonna put a robot in a home with my family, my actual human flesh and blood family.

Sydnee:

Thanks Steven Hawking for making Justin afraid of robots.

Justin:

I'm not afraid of robots, I'm just not ready for him, fainting.

Sydnee:

He's you've been listening to him. He's warning, he's warned us that they're coming, and that they're gonna take over.

Justin:

Why did you mention a fainting couch by the way? That doesn't seem, that's not, nothing I've heard your request before.

Sydnee:

Um, because I've just been thinking a lot about fainting, and I thought maybe some people would wanna hear about it and there you go. [laughing]

Justin:

That, okay. That was perhaps the greatest segue deflection in *Sawbones* history. Why did you ask about fainting couches? Is it because we're doing an episode on them? No, it's because I've been thinking about them back to you, Justin.

Sydnee:

Oh, do you think we should do an episode on it?

Justin:

Um, yeah, sweetheart, why not? Let's just go for it and see- let chips fall where they may.

Sydnee:

Okay. Well good. I was planning on it. [laughs]

Justin:

Okay, good. Thank, thank goodness. What a relief.

Sydnee:

Uh, so first of all, thank you to several people who suggested this topic. Devin, Ryan, Katie, Jason, Jillian, and Hillary that's, the masses are crying out for-

Justin:

For a fainting ep.

Sydnee:

... for fainting. Um, fainting, or perhaps you prefer to call it syncope.

Justin:

I don't.

Sydnee:

No, syncope is the, the medical word we use for fainting by the way.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So-

Justin:

Why do you guys have to come up with fancy terms for everything, confuse the rest of us?

Sydnee:

So you won't know what we're talking about?

Justin:

Ah, I always suspected as much.

Sydnee:

So we can talk about you in the hallways and you'll have no idea what we're saying. No, I don't know, just to terrorize medical students mainly.

Justin:

Okay. I can live with that.

Sydnee:

Um, fainting, syncope, swooning perhaps if you're feeling romantic.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Swooning, uh, people have been passing out and then writing about it for a really long time.

Justin:

Yeah. It seems like one of the oldest tricks you could do.

Sydnee:

Yeah. And it, and it wasn't really something that, um, was necessarily always a medical thing to write about because it, I mean it kind of fixes itself, right? Like for the most part.

Justin:

Yeah. By the time you'd get the, the village doctor over to take a look at you, you're already like, up and at `em.

Sydnee:

Exactly. And like you, you've already come out of it and unless you have a really serious condition, it's probably not gonna happen to you a lot.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

So-

Justin:

And it's probably not dangerous unless you like fainted into a bear.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Well, that would okay. Yes. Or, oh, I mean, in general, like where did you faint? Like did you hit your head? You know, I mean, it could be dangerous.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, but everybody had a name for it, everybody recognized it. The Greeks called it a cardiac passion.

Justin:

Very romantic.

Sydnee:

I really like that name, that you have a cardiac passion.

Justin:

Does it have to do much of the, the heart though?

Sydnee:

It can, it, there are a lot of different causes of fainting. There are a lot of different ones, and there, there are quite a few that have to do with the heart. So, so relating it to the heart is not a bad idea. And relating it to a passion, uh, to, to passion in general is kind of a theme that we'll see-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

... the idea that it has something to do with like a, an overwhelming emotion. Um, Galen wrote about it and he related it to fevers, which isn't, isn't totally off base.

Justin:

Really?

Sydnee:

You go, well, you can get sick, get a fever, get dehydrated, pass out.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

That happens. Um, it used to be thought that it was a type of epilepsy. A lot of people would describe it as, uh, a sort of epilepsy.

Justin:

People with epilepsy do have, uh, spells, right? Where, where they'll lose consciousness?

Sydnee:

Well, I mean, you're talking about seizures.

Justin:

Seizures, right? Yeah.

Sydnee:

Yeah, yeah. And it certainly-

Justin:

They didn't wanna get technical on you.

Sydnee:

Well, [laughs] certainly, uh, if you didn't know much about either of these things, either we're just talking about syncope or seizures. If you saw someone have a seizure, uh, you may think that it was fainting, and if you saw somebody fainting-

Justin:

Right, we are-

Sydnee:

... you may think it's a seizure. So I mean, yeah, if you, if, depending on what kind of seizure it is, it could look very similar.

Justin:

Yeah. I don't know why the term seizure didn't come to me earlier. It just spells-

Sydnee:

You're just putting yourself in the mindset of the, you know, old timey-

Justin:

There we go.

Sydnee:

Guys and girls.

Justin:

I'm basically an old timey medicine guy.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

It's about where my knowledge base is at.

Sydnee:

Um, like I said, it was previously associated with a strong emotion, which is why it wasn't always kind of like, like a medical problem, you know.

Hippocrates wrote about it, Galen wrote about it. There were lots of commentary, but there were also like poets and, and authors writing about it as well. You know, kind of like it was this interesting time where you would, like if you passed out and when you wake back up and you're, you're being brought back to life, so to speak. And so a lot of people had a lot of arty things to say about it too.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So, um, it was thought that you could be overcome by love or anger or hatred or amazement, um, and just, you know, hit the floor.

Justin:

It, can you tell me what, like what fainting is?

Sydnee:

Well, I mean, it, it depends on exactly what causes it.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

But in general, uh, what we're talking about is that for a moment, um, your brain is not getting quite enough blood flow for some reason.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Generally, generally speaking. So, and this could be because you had an irregular heart rhythm, because you're dehydrated, because your blood pressure dropped, uh, there's some, you know, uh, neurological issues that can cause this, but for some reason, for a second, the pressure that keeps blood pumping upwards against gravity to your brain was not enough, or, or your brain thought it wasn't gonna get blood flow. And so it's actually kind of a way to save your life. As a result, you hit the ground makes you go horizontal.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So then you'll get blood flow to your brain. That's a, that's kind of a general way to think about it. And, and when, and of course when you pass out, you lose consciousness.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So syncope, fainting, swooning, you're losing consciousness, that's part of the definition, you know, that you, that you lost consciousness. Uh, you can be out for a few seconds up to a few minutes, generally, it's just a few seconds. Um, and usually when you wake up, you feel okay, like you're not confused, you're not disoriented unless you smacked your head or something as well. Or if you did have a seizure, uh, usually you wake up and, and you, you know, you're kind of back to your old self again.

Justin:

Have, uh, have you ever fainted?

Sydnee:

Yes, I have.

Justin:

When?

Sydnee:

Well in, how do you not know this about me?

Justin:

I don't know, remind me.

Sydnee:

When, when I was in middle school, I had, uh, a kind of syncope called vasovagal syncope. And I used to pass out, not all the time, but not infrequently, either.

Justin:

Weird.

Sydnee:

I, and, uh, it's, it's something that some adolescents get and, and you usually grow out of, especially, uh, young women tend to get it, and I did. And so I just had to be really careful when I would stand up, 'cause if I would stand up too quickly and start walking, I would pass out. So I had to like stand up for a second, and chill and take my time, and-

Justin:

I only fainted once when I was at a sleepover at a church somewhere. Uh, these kids would doing this thing where you like breathe real deep 10 times, and then someone grabs you from behind and lifts you up-

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Justin:

... and it makes you faint.

Sydnee:

Yes!

Justin:

And they did, that was not pleasant, it was scary. So now, and a couple times I've laughed so hard that I've almost faint- like I've, you know what I mean?

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Justin:

Like you kinda lose control and you black out for just a split second.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

I, I've done that a few times.

Sydnee:

Those, those sound like really good times that you were laughing so hard you blacked out.

Justin:

Yeah. It's usually about something I said though.

Sydnee:

Um-

Justin:

Something really funny.

Sydnee:

... you're kind of talking about vague reactions there and then the, the fainting game or the choking game, I think I saw it called that's something that a lot of people do. Um, I did that when I was younger, too.

Justin:

Did it work?

Sydnee:

That passed out from that before. Yeah, it was really-

Justin:

It's a good time.

Sydnee:

... it's scary.

Justin:

It's a good way to feel all the time.

Sydnee:

It's not a good idea, don't do it.

Justin:

Don't do it.

Sydnee:

Don't do it. You're hyperventilating, which is throwing off your acid base balance in your body. And then you're obviously you're attempting to kind of deprive yourself of blood flow to your brain briefly. Don't do that.

Justin:

No, no, no. Your brain loves blood. [laughs] Just let it get all the blood it wants.

Sydnee:

If you're that desperate to pass out, may I suggest, uh, what we call Stendhal syndrome.

Justin:

Now what is that?

Sydnee:

Stendhal syndrome is, it's actually kind of a, a psychogenic, um, fainting meaning that it, you're not really passing out in the way that we kind of think about it from a medical standpoint, but it was named for a French writer who, uh, described the first time that he saw Florence, the first time that he experienced the city Florence.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Um, basically he almost passed out. He was overcome by the beauty and the art, and just the romance and, and all that is Florence. And-

Justin:

So, so like the first time I watched the second *Ace Ventura* movie, same basic principle.

Sydnee:

Exactly. You had Stendhal syndrome. You almost, you almost passed out.

Justin:

Good to know.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Grab there's a name for it.

Sydnee:

There, there is. And then, and because of these associations, it was actually okay for a long time for both men and women to pass out.

Justin:

Hmm. Okay.

Sydnee:

You know, like if, like it was something that could like a great passion or a great beauty could overcome you regardless of your, of your sex and, and you might, you know, pass out.

Justin:

You're just plugged in, you're living life to the fullest.

Sydnee:

Exactly. And the, the reason I mentioned this is that when we, the, a lot of what we talk about when we talk about fainting is really related to the Victorian era.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

And that's when, uh, fainting is, it probably becomes swooning because then it becomes a very feminine, delicate, romantic, like, you know, what we typically associate with like fainting couches, like-

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

"Oh my, oh, it's too much for me." And, and it really was in the Victorian era, it was thought that if a woman was rich and, and well to do, and, and, you know, high class and the, the kind of woman that was socially acceptable, um, would just be overcome by anything that was shocking or scary or vulgar, or, or too sad, anything like that.

And the socially acceptable way to respond to any of that stimuli was just to... pass out. Um, and it probably had something to do with the fact that at the time, women weren't allowed to have a lot of emotional responses in public. It would've been considered vulgar. If you were of a high class to have any kind of outburst, other than this codified way to express your emotions, you can pass out.

Justin:

So codified, they had like couches for it.

Sydnee:

Exactly. So there, there were in, in, you know, and we're talking about richer households-

Justin:

Sure, right.

Sydnee:

... you know, upper class households, you may have a fainting couch, which is just a really nice couch with like one side you've, everybody's probably seen them-

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

... with one side and the back. And so that you can kind of just like access it by, I, I mean, I guess you have to be standing right next to it at all times really.

Justin:

Well, I, I think you, you feel it coming, you feel a spell coming on. You say, I got that faint. Somebody get me the fainting room so I can get this done.

Sydnee:

Well, and you, you can you, I mean, I, and I think that they, they would've experienced it like that. Someone would've- exactly like you imagine, like throw the back of their hand to their head and gasp suddenly and begin to get the vapors fanning themselves-

Justin:

Joseph Merrick pulls .

Sydnee:

... dragged over to the couch. And-

Justin:

Joseph Merrick pulls the sack from over it from, from over his head and the gaze upon the Elephant Man in this, all his splendor. And they're just overtaken and they have to head over to the fainting room.

Sydnee:

And they just hit the couch. And you mentioned fainting rooms a couple times. And that was something that I hadn't realized existed. There were fainting rooms as well.

Justin:

Well I thought I made that up. Sorry.

Sydnee:

No, no. There were actual, and that would be in your, in your really-

Justin:

Really nice.

Sydnee:

... really nice houses. You would have a whole room devoted to fainting and part of this too though, there's a little bit of overlap. Remember, in the hysteria episode, we talked a little bit about the secret pelvic massage-

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... that women could get-

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... to relieve their hysteria.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Well, the fake disease hysteria was also correlated with fainting. And so in order to fix this problem, you may invite your doctor to your fainting room-

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... where you would lay on your fainting couch-

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... and get a little bit of massage to relieve your issues.

Justin:

Yeah. Cooooool doctors back then, cool docs.

Sydnee:

Uh, so similarly to this, by the way, there is something called falling out, which is still, still a, this sounds kinda like the Victorian fainting.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

It's like a, it's a culture bound syndrome, meaning that you only see this kinda like nerves are around here. You only see this in certain parts of the world, like the American south or in the Caribbean where something is very emotional. And so you would pass out except that you're, you're really awake the whole time. Like you can see and hear what's going on around you, but you passed out. So-

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

... it's a whole other thing.

Justin:

It's like the most extreme, like response you can come up with at the time-

Sydnee:

Exactly.

Justin:

... overcomes you.

Sydnee:

And, and it's acceptable because that's what that we, we understand that's how you react. It would be like, you know, in some cultures it would be okay to scream or to laugh really loudly-

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

... or whatever.

Justin:

Um, were, were there, you know, uh, you, I know there's the obvious treatment for this, which is weight.

Sydnee:

Exactly.

Justin:

Uh, were the, were there other things that cooked up?

Sydnee:

There were, so, um, as far as treatments, the most common that we have had for a really long time, this goes all the way back to our buddy Pliny.

Justin:

Uh, Pliny.

Sydnee:

We haven't talked about Pliny in a while. So Pliny of the elder recommended this, uh, smelling salts, um, which were originally made from the, um, it was called hartshorn. And that was because, and I didn't know this, so hart is an old word for stag or a deer.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

And shorn, because of it's like you would get shavings off the horns of the, of the deer. So hartshorn is like the shavings from the-

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Yeah. And you can, there were ammonium salts in these shavings and you could use that as-

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

... as smelling salts, which is, yeah.

Justin:

Gross.

Sydnee:

I don't know who figured that out, that's real weird.

Justin:

Sounds good.

Sydnee:

Um, it's basically ammonium carbonate. And like I said, it's been around since aged times. The way that it works because smelling salts, I think most of us are familiar with those.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Is that, um-

Justin:

I've always wondered about that. 'Cause I've never like actually seen them and they're in every movie and TV show ever made.

Sydnee:

I've never actually seen them either.

Justin:

It's weird.

Sydnee:

Uh, I, I'm sure that they exist.

Justin:

But i haven't seen it, right, or whatever, like, do you get them there?

Sydnee:

I don't know that. I don't know that you can just buy them.

Justin:

Weird.

Sydnee:

Um, but it, ammonium gas is made, um, by the, by the salts and it irritates the mucus membrane.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

So the lining of your nose, so you hold 'em under somebody's nose. It irritates the lining and makes you inhale and breathe quickly. Um, and it also starts to stimulate your sympathetic nervous system, which is what's in charge of like your fight or flight risk spots. So it kind emulates, I mean, that's how it wakes you up. It stimulates everything.

Justin:

Huh.

Sydnee:

Most, um, fainting is, is mediated by the other kind of nervous system, the para [inaudible 00:18:38].

Justin:

You know, this is like that moth balls, speaking of things with ammonia, ammonia based sense, like-

Sydnee:

And they do.

Justin:

Yeah, moth balls. Like I know that's a thing. Where are people getting moth balls? I've never seen them.

Sydnee:

Like Walmart?

Justin:

Like, are they in Walmart? Have you, like really tried to picture ever seeing moth balls? Like-

Sydnee:

Walmart's really big.

Justin:

It's really big.

Sydnee:

I think you'd have to look for 'em to know.

Justin:

You think there's a moth ball and sme- sme- smelling salts, like section that we've just been missing the whole time.

Sydnee:

Well, I know what we're doing tomorrow.

Justin:

Yep.

Sydnee:

Now, um, in, in Victorian times, uh, police officers constables or other just generally helpful men, I guess, would carry something, um, in order to be helpful to all of these poor fainting upper class women who were, you know, unable to express their emotions in any other way.

Justin:

Oh, men, you never let me down.

Sydnee:

The, it was called a vinaigrette.

Justin:

Hmm, delicious.

Sydnee:

And not, yes. Not that kind.

Justin:

Oh.

Sydnee:

A vinaigrette is, it's a small container that has, uh, like a sponge soaked in smelling salts. And then usually it would be dissolved in like vinegar or alcohol and you'd also have perfume in it. So when, so it would also smell kind of nice, like bad and nice.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Um, and you would have it closed at all times, but you would have these little, like silver, fancy, they were all like, you know, inlaid engraved and-

Justin:

It's of course.

Sydnee:

... intricate. And you could open them and, and helpfully hold them to the nose of the woman who was just passed out.

Justin:

I'm just gonna start doing that. Like just a women mid conversation, just like madam, madam, excuse me, are you seem to be on the, the verge of a fainting spell. Allow me-

Sydnee:

[laughs] "I have some vinaigrette here."

Justin:

"I, I allow me to sample my vinaigrette, madam."

Sydnee:

"It's red wine."

Justin:

"It's um, delicious. But for, for you, you seem to be about to faint."

Sydnee:

Uh-

Justin:

"I'm about to tell story. So scandalous about my color years in college--"

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"... that I'm afraid you shall faint. Uh, so I have a vinaigrette prepared."

Sydnee:

And that's the opening to *Animal House*.

Justin:

That is the beginning of *Animal House*.

Sydnee:

Uh, in addition-

Justin:

"Gentlemen, guard your ladies for the tale of collegiate scandal, your eyes shall be hold, would wash the white paint from a picket fence."

Sydnee:

Are you done?

Justin:

"Bluto--"

Sydnee:

Okay. Okay.

Justin:

"... is the first of the characters."

Sydnee:

Okay. Now, now, We're gonna move on. If you don't have-

Justin:

"Organist, begin the soundtrack!"

Sydnee:

If you don't have smelling salts, you could try just lavender water, I guess, 'cause it smells better.

Justin:

[crosstalk 00:21:22].

Sydnee:

Uh, there was something called Hungary water-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [laughs]

Sydnee:

... which was the same idea. It was like-

Justin:

All from creators from hungry man. [laughs]

Sydnee:

There's Hungary water. [laughs] It had, it was just water with like some nice smelling herbs and floral things so that it would smell good.

Justin:

To be clear, that's Hungary like the country. Hungary-

Sydnee:

Hungary. Yes. Hungary.

Justin:

... water.

Sydnee:

Uh, laudanum was a popular treatment. Uh, which I think if I were a Victorian woman and I was forced to, the only way I could, you know, socially acceptably express my emotion-

Justin:

Yeah, be fainting left and right, huh?

Sydnee:

... faint and pass out.

Justin:

Right, huh.

Sydnee:

I'd be like, yeah, I need some laudanum for that.

Justin:

Oh, golly.

Sydnee:

Give just, yeah. That helps with the fainting all the time. And then, um, bloodletting throughout history was a popular treatment, uh, especially if you fainted from blood loss, bloodletting was a good idea.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I wonder if you had a lot of fainting, uh, at the red cross around donation time, you think?

Sydnee:

Yeah. Oh the that's a very common cause of fainting is, uh, blood, like the sight of blood. There, there are a lot of people who have a-

Justin:

I just mean after you give blood and like you-

Sydnee:

Oh, well you can do that too.

Justin:

Right, and faint-

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Justin:

... kind of thing.

Sydnee:

Some people do. I mean, you, you really generally don't give enough that it should, but it's possible. Um, but uh, fainting, like I said, it's very much a, when we think about it in a medical and, and social context, it's very much a Victorian thing. And a lot of people like to blame corsets for fainting.

Justin:

Oh yeah? Uh, like how did they, how did that work?

Sydnee:

Well, I wanna tell you all about corsets and fainting, but before I do that, why don't you come with me to the billing depart?

Justin:

Let's go!

[ad break]

Justin:

Syd, uh, tell me about corsets.

Sydnee:

So let's talk about corsets.

Justin:

Yes.

Sydnee:

Um, because I don't think you can mention Victorian times and fainting without it. So when we talk about, I think most people kind of picture corsets is like the thing that they're all wearing in like the Lady Marmalade video.

Justin:

Yes.

Sydnee:

Okay. Originally corsets were a pair of, of what we would've called stays or bodies or like bodices. And they were these two, um, like it, it would, the, these two pieces of something stiff, like stiff brocade kind of stuff.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

That you would put on either side of your trunk and then lace together. And it would create like an inverted cone-

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

... you know, out of your upper body.

Justin:

Very attractive.

Sydnee:

And it would also have these little flared out pieces on the bottom that would kind of go underneath your skirt to kind of keep your skirt out and to keep the, uh, the bottom of the bodice from like cutting into your skin and all that kind of stuff. Um, they were initially an Italian creation, but they became very popular when, uh, Catherine de' Medici introduced them to the French court and all the French ladies loved them.

Um, you'll see, like these old, like iron cages and things from, from this era, we're talking about like the 1500s, that was probably like some really bad attempt at like an orthopedic brace and not what an actual corset was made of at the time.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So if you see that and you're like, oh my gosh, women suffered in these corsets, that probably wasn't a corset.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, so, so you would lace stays together and then you would put all your clothes on over top. Um, but a lot of women didn't use 'em at first because the, or the bodices of their dresses were kind of stiff, so you wouldn't necessarily need these. Um, it wasn't until we started, like women started wearing kind of looser things on, over top of that.

Justin:

Hmm.

Sydnee:

That these became like undergarments now.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So you wouldn't wear a stiff bodice dress, you would wear something stiff underneath something looser on top. Um, and so as we move forward, we kind of see, uh, that kind of trend. And instead of just, uh, lifting the bust and smoothing the waist, we really start to attempt to shape the female form into something that, um, let's be honest, that men liked. Right?

Justin:

Got it. Yes. Yes.

Sydnee:

Um, now when we, when we talk about corsets in like a medical context, and especially in like a, like, kind of from a feminist perspective-

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

... what we're really upset about, I think what most people get upset about is the tight lacing.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So you get this image and I think most of us, you remember, you saw *Gone with the Wind*.

Justin:

Oh yeah.

Sydnee:

So you see, you remember Scarlet O'Hare up against the bed post.

Justin:

Yeah. I got that. She, I remember in the book, it said she had a 17 inch waist. That seemed insane to me.

Sydnee:

Right. Um, and that's when people start talking about, oh my gosh, that was so unhealthy. And so many women were in these tight fitting corsets. Um-

Justin:

But they looked great. I mean, we can all agree on that.

Sydnee:

Did they?

Justin:

Am I right guys?

Sydnee:

Did they?

Justin:

Guys, let me hear you dog pound, where you at?

Sydnee:

For corsets.

Justin:

Where's my corset dog pound? I see one guy.

Sydnee:

Corsets?

Justin:

You know, we're hound dogs.

Sydnee:

Anyway. So most women did not-

Justin:

I-

Sydnee:

... did not.

Justin:

... I like, I like a woman who just is like, seems to be on the verge of blacking out constantly-

Sydnee:

[laughs] Most wo-

Justin:

... they laugh at your jokes more, which I appreciate.

Sydnee:

Hey. [laughs]

Justin:

Hey. It's true.

Sydnee:

Most women didn't, um, lace themselves that tightly. It was rare to find a woman who would've tightened herself below 20 inches. So that whole 17 inch thing, I mean, yes, certainly there, there were women who did that, but that was not the majority of women.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Um, the, and that was really the Victorian era, when we see the, that kind of association that you're not just using it to kind of shape the body, that's

underneath your clothes, but you're actually shaping your body. You're actually trying to force your body into a different shape.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Um, and from the beginning of corsets, you hear like, there, there are accounts of doctors upset about them. Even when corsets really weren't that restrictive when they first came out, they really weren't. Um, and, but you've got doctors talking about how, like, ah, it's gonna smooch their internal organs and they're not gonna be able to breathe. Um-

Justin:

Does it, does it smooch 'em?

Sydnee:

Well, I'm gonna tell you about that.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Let me tell you a little bit more about-

Justin:

I didn't mean to get ahead of you.

Sydnee:

... no, don't get ahead of me. I'm gonna tell you about that. Um, it was interesting in response to this, in the Edwardian era, we saw like a different corset introduced that they called the S-shape corset. 'Cause it would kind of form your body into an S like your upper body and your breasts would be kind of thrust forward. And then your, your butt would be kind of pushed backwards and you'd get like an S-shape.

Justin:

Ah, nice.

Sydnee:

And that was supposed to be better for you. It was called like the health corset. Like they had ads where they had like five year olds in these.

Justin:

If they had a TV ad, you know, it would be set to like, *I Will Survive* this women dancing around in their S-shape corsets, it's like, come on, girl, get it.

Sydnee:

[laughs] But this one unfortunately is probably worse for your back than the original course.

Justin:

Oh girl, don't get it. [laughs] Sorry, sorry girl.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Uh, as, as we move forward through the, into the 1900s, women wanna move more.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Um, now they were able to do a lot of stuff in those corsets, contrary to popular belief. Women were like riding horses and, you know, doing all kinds of things in the corsets. Um, but they wanted to move a little freer. Dance trends affected this. It was hard to tango in a lot of corsets. Um, and then finally, I think kind of the death now for, for like the, the widespread use of corsets was World War I, uh, when they needed to free up all of the steel-

Justin:

Steel, yeah, that's makes cense.

Sydnee:

... that they were using in the corsets. And so the war department asked everybody like, hey, would you please stop wearing corsets? And do you know that they-

Justin:

Did that really make an, an impact though?

Sydnee:

Made a huge impact, women stopped wearing, I mean, maybe they were just looking for an excuse, but women stopped wearing corsets. There actually one, one site said that there was enough steel saved from not

selling corsets to make two battleships. Two battleships were entirely made out of, you can think about corset materials. Um, and they almost came back right before World War II, but then World War II had the same problem, so.

Justin:

Right, is that steel back, sorry ladies.

Sydnee:

I mean, not that corsets have ceased to exist, I certainly we see them-

Justin:

I hate to disappoint you, but unfortunately we need those to make battleships.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Certainly there's still more people wearing corsets and there are, you know, fashion trends with corsets, but the health effects.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So this is incredibly controversial.

Justin:

Naturally.

Sydnee:

That- you could read about this for decades if you wanted to. Um, but if we're talking about what was detrimental, the most detrimental were people who did the tight lacing. So when you talk about people with like 17 inch waists. There is some documentation that it, it can decrease your lung capacity. So you get a little more short of breath, which is probably where the association with fainting was.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

Although not everybody was passing out because of corsets.

Justin:

Of course. Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, it can misshape your ribs. Like if you look at, they have x-rays of people wearing corsets and it actually can kind of push them into different positions, although that whole story about how women would remove their ribs to fit into corsets, as far as we know that never happened. I mean, if you imagine surgery in the 1800s, who's gonna go through that proce- I mean, they-

Justin:

Right, yeah.

Sydnee:

They would've died.

Justin:

You would've died.

Sydnee:

Um-

Justin:

Guaranteed.

Sydnee:

It can cause because of the way it's kind of squeezing your, uh, your gastrointestinal tract, it can cause indigestion, tight corseting can cause constipation. Um, it does shift your organs a little bit. Um, and so there was some thought that maybe it could have led to uterine pro- prolapse where like your uterus kind of pokes down into the vaginal canal a little bit.

Justin:

Ugh, oh man.

Sydnee:

And so it may have, may have contributed to that possibly in some of these tight corseters. Um, it can absolutely cause back and hip pain and gain abnormalities in, in some of the corsets in some women. And then there's this whole concern about like pregnancy, 'cause women corseted while they were pregnant.

Justin:

Yes.

Sydnee:

And did it cause miscarriages, I don't really know. There was one study where they studied skeletons and like tight corseters also had slightly smaller pelvis. And so there was this whole theory could it have led to me- we don't really know. I, I don't really know. I, I can't answer that question. Um, it can cause muscle atrophy because you're not using your muscles to hold you upright-

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

... the corset it is. And it can cause skin irritation, depending on the design of the corset that you know, where it rubs you.

Justin:

Of course, yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, a lot of the things that doctors freaked out about and said that it caused are not true. It didn't cause tuberculosis, obviously it didn't cause hysteria because that's a fake thing. So that wasn't real. Um, it didn't cause cancer. It didn't cause liver failure.

Justin:

Cause those are fake.

Sydnee:

No, no-

Justin:

Those are real.

Sydnee:

... they are real.

Justin:

Got it. All right.

Sydnee:

Um, but it, all in all, they probably weren't quite as bad as we've all been led to believe. Um, if you use them appropriately and certainly women who, who, and men who like to corset now I think take the proper precautions. And so you don't have to worry about all of this stuff quite so much. There were, there were the extremists who did. Um, but they probably weren't the horrible thing for your bodies that we always thought they were. Um-

Justin:

So hooray for corsets.

Sydnee:

No, I'm not, I'm not saying that-

Justin:

They're back!

Sydnee:

... because it, because this gets into like the idea of like who wanted corsets, 'cause I, you know, I mean my, my opinion ever was always like, it was, uh, you know, men found it beautiful, and so women conform to the male ideal-

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

... of beauty and that kind of thing. Um, but there's been arguments that like, well, no women wanted, all women wanted to corset. And so it was just women choosing to wear what was fashionable at the time. But I think, I don't know that that makes much sense because saying that like at the time that it was socially acceptable to be corseted, all women also happened to want to wear corsets is like saying that like before Elizabeth Blackwell, no women really wanted to be doctors anyway.

Justin:

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Sydnee:

And then afterwards we all decided that it might be fun to be a doctor. So I don't know that I buy that argument. Um, but, but people have said that they think that the reason doctors were always so against them is not because of health concerns, but because they thought male doctors, uh,

didn't like the increased sexuality of women who were able to maintain these womanly figures even after they were mothers.

Justin:

Oh, huh.

Sydnee:

Which I, I don't know.

Justin:

So the corset as a female empowerment-

Sydnee:

Exactly.

Justin:

... symbol.

Sydnee:

So it depends on how you look at it. Yeah. Either way, um, if you didn't do it right and you laced too tightly, you could probably hurt yourself in some, in some minor ways. Um, but I don't know that it caused all of the, all of the fainting that we saw in the Victorian era.

Justin:

Is fainting ever like an actual concern like, should I do anything about it if I start fainting?

Sydnee:

Yeah. If you start passing out, go, go see your doctor. Absolutely. Um, like I said, there are lots of different con- conditions that can lead to fainting and we kind of talked about some of them and why it could happen. Um, I have a, a brilliant ER doctor though, who always told me that if I had a patient who came to the ER fainting, the money's in the heart.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

It could, it could be, so that's why it may be nothing. You may be dehydrated, you may just, you know, some people pass out every time they poop, some people pass out when they pee, some people pass out if they

cough too hard, those are all vagal reasons. Totally benign, no big deal, but inconvenient. But there are some serious causes of, of syncope or fainting. So if you're, if you pass out, I'd go get checked out.

Justin:

What's that mean the money's in the heart. What does that-

Sydnee:

That's where you should look.

Justin:

That's where you should look.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Not like that's where you should look to raise money to get more money. Is that what you mean?

Sydnee:

No, [laughs] no! That's where the answer would be!

Justin:

Got it.

Sydnee:

That's where, yeah. Look at the heart and, and if nothing else, that's the thing you wanna rule out, 'cause that's really the scary stuff. Right?

Justin:

Sure. I wanna tell you Syd, we have two new podcasts on the Maximum Fun Network of which we are proud members.

Sydnee:

Well, tell me about 'em.

Justin:

Well, uh, the first is called, *We Got This With Mark and Hal*, which, uh, features, uh, Mark Gagliardi and Hal Lublin from the, uh, very funny, uh,

Thrilling Adventure Hour. You may know from there. Uh, and also the other's called, *Can I Pet Your Dog*, which is produced by my brother, Travis McElroy.

Sydnee:

Not that guy again.

Justin:

Not that guy again. Uh, but, uh, the, the episode that has just premiered the very first episode, uh, features, uh, our, our buddy Lin-Manuel Miranda, uh, talking about his dog, Toby and, uh, and, uh, I think you should listen to both of those.

Sydnee:

So go check them out.

Justin:

That's what I think Syd.

Sydnee:

But listen to our show first.

Justin:

Uh, listen to our show first, always twice in case you missed anything. And then, uh, thank listen to their, their shows. Uh, Maximum Fun is your home for comedy podcast hits. That's a new slogan that I'm working on for them.

Sydnee:

[laughs] I'm sure they'll appreciate it.

Justin:

Um, should catch on like wildfire. Uh, you can find both those show that I mentioned at maximumfun.org, as well as on iTunes or wherever fine podcasts are sold. Uh, and, uh, thank you to the Taxpayers for letting us use their song as the intro and outro of our program. If you search for Taxpayers, *The Medicines*, you'll find that track and you can buy it and, or, or just tweet at 'em and say, hey, thanks.

Uh, I wanna remind you that we're gonna be coming to the Pacific Northwest in the last weekend of Au- August. Uh, we'll be in Seattle, and get tickets to that Bit.ly/MBMBaM Seattle. And we're also gonna be in Vancouver, Bit.ly/VanMBMBaM. We're gonna be performing with *My Brother, My Brother and Me*, which, uh, is a, uh, an advice podcast to do with my brothers. Uh,

we'd really like it, if you come out and see us. Charlie will be there, and, uh, Sydnee's sister, Rileigh's gonna be turning 15 when we're in Vancouver.

Sydnee:

So if you wanna bring her birthday presents.

Justin:

Go nuts.

Sydnee:

She'd love them.

Justin:

She'd love that. Uh, anyway, that's gonna do for us until the next time we have a topic to, uh, to discuss with you, I'm Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

As always don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays out]

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