

[00:00:00] **Sound Effect:** Three gavel bangs.

[00:00:01] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome to the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast. I'm Bailiff Jesse Thorn. This week, "Special Prosciutto-cutor"!

*(They chuckle.)*

Craig brings the case against his mother, Bettie. Bettie has had a dry-cured ham hanging in her basement since the 1960s. She now wants to throw it away. Craig thinks they should cook it and eat it. Or if it's unsafe for consumption, he'd like at the very least to give it a proper burial. Who's right? Who's wrong? Only one can decide. Please rise as Judge John Hodgman enters the courtroom and presents an obscure cultural reference.

*(Chairs squeak, followed by heavy footsteps and a door closing.)*

[00:00:43] **John Hodgman:** First you stole my sweetie. Then, you usurped my place as Castor's best friend. Things were great before you showed up, but you made everyone forget me. Well, I've been getting stronger. Stronger than you. I'll give you 'til sundown to leave Sweethaven.

Bailiff Jesse Thorn, swear the litigants in.

[00:01:04] **Jesse Thorn:** Craig and Bettie, please rise and raise your right hands.

*(Chair squeak.)*

Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God or whatever?

*(They swear.)*

Do you swear to abide by Judge John Hodgman's ruling despite the fact that he himself is a bit of an aged ham?

*(They laugh and swear.)*

I'm sorry, John. That's all I can think of. Judge Hodgman, you may proceed.

[00:01:28] **John Hodgman:** I mean, what could you do, Jesse? What could you do? You know what? You shanked me. Since we're talking about cuts of meat, you lamb-shanked me right in the—right in the kidneys with that joke. You really made Joel Mann laugh too. Right, Joel?

[00:01:45] **Joel Mann:** *(Flatly.)* It's spiraling out of control.

[00:01:46] **John Hodgman:** Oh, stop!

*(They laugh.)*

Wow. Turn off your microphone.

[00:01:51] **Jesse Thorn:** Joel, with some of his famous dry humor!

[00:01:53] **John Hodgman:** Everyone turn off their microphones.

*(They laugh.)*

You too. You too, Craig. Craig and Bettie. *(Quietly.)* Don't turn off their microphones, anybody.

Craig and Bettie, you may be seated for an immediate summary judgment in one of your favors.

*(Chairs squeak.)*

Can either of you name the piece of culture that I referenced as I entered this virtual court of fake internet law? Ooh, Craig, why don't you start?

[00:02:15] **Craig:** I am going to let down my child. I have a—I feel—relatively good hit right in general, but of course, on the episode where I am a participant, I have no idea. So, I will guess it is from an episode of *Blue's Clues*. Or—

[00:02:33] **John Hodgman:** An episode of *Blue's Clues*. Definitely a show where a lot of violence was threatened.

[00:02:44] **Craig:** That is my recollection. I may be misremembering it with *True Detective*, which I was watching at the same time my child was watching *Blue's Clues*.

[00:02:50] **John Hodgman:** Sure. And by the way, you are gonna let down your kid. That's part of being a dad.

[00:02:55] **Craig:** Oh, yes. Well, they are turning 14 tomorrow.

[00:02:56] **John Hodgman:** Now, let's turn to your mom.

[00:02:58] **Craig:** So, that's—I am in full-time disappointment mode.

[00:03:02] **John Hodgman:** Well, belated happy birthday to Craig's kid. I'm glad I remembered. I didn't let you down, kid. Now, let's turn to Mom/Grandmom. This is your mom, Craig. Bettie.

*(Bettie confirms.)*

Bettie, do you wanna hear the quote again? Do you think that will make a difference?

[00:03:20] **Bettie:** No, I don't.

*(They laugh.)*

I was listening carefully, and it meant absolutely nothing to me. So, I—

[00:03:29] **John Hodgman:** Usually, our cultural references—I'll give you a little bit of a hint, 'cause you're a—'cause you're a nice mom and grandmom. Usually, our cultural references have something to do with the topic of the day. The topic of the day being ham. Yeah, ham.

[00:03:48] **Bettie:** Ham. Well, what crossed my mind was ham, pig. *(Suppressing a laugh.)* I'm gonna say *Charlotte's Web*.

[00:03:57] **John Hodgman:** Hey, I don't mind that at all! *Charlotte's Web*, that's a top-notch Maine reference. And of course, I am here in the solar-powered studios of WERU in Orland, Maine—89.9 on your FM dial. Also, [WERU.org](http://WERU.org). Joel Mann, the Maine Mann, Joel—what is—what do you think? Would you have a guess?

[00:04:18] **Joel Mann:** Uh, the movie *Babe*.

[00:04:19] **John Hodgman:** The movie *Babe*.

*(They laugh.)*

You know, I have to—I love the title of this episode, which is “The Special Prosciutto-cutor”. But Jesse Thorn, did you know that there was a suggestion in the Reddit which was—for a title for this episode called “Babe 3: Pig in the Cellar”?

*(Everyone cackles.)*

It's pretty good. But too grim of when we're talking about a salt-cured, old country ham. All guesses are wrong. So, hey, uh, Bettie or Craig, you ever read the funny pages? The comic strips?

[00:05:01] **Craig:** Yes.

[00:05:02] **Bettie:** Not anymore.

[00:05:03] **John Hodgman:** Would it mean anything—? Not anymore? Would it mean anything that, when this character says, “you usurped my role as Castor's best friend,” he's

referring to a character named Castor Oyl, who is the little-known sibling of a famous character named Olive Oyl?

*(They both “ooh” knowingly.)*

[00:05:21] **Bettie:** Popeye? Oh.

[00:05:24] **John Hodgman:** Yeah. I was quoting from Popeye, but specifically not Popeye—a character named Ham Gravy.

*(Craig laughs.)*

Who was—and I couldn't, for the life of me, I couldn't think of anything truly hammy. But the first thing that came to mind was Ham Gravy who—this is just my kind of character. He was the original star of *Thimble Theatre*, which was E. C. Segar's comic strip that introduced Popeye. And he was Olive Oyl's neglectful boyfriend. And he and Castor Oyl were kind of the co-stars of this comic strip with Olive Oyl. There was no Popeye. And then, years into the run of *Thimble Theatre*, uh, Castor Oyl and Ham Gravy get a magical bird, called the Whiffle Hen. And if they rub its head three times, good luck comes to them. So, they go to Gambling Island. And to get them there, they hire a sailor named Popeye. And Popeye is so much of a better character than these two dopes, Castor Oyl and Ham Gravy, that he immediately stole the show and became pretty quickly the star of the comic strip. And also, Olive Oyl's love interest.

And Olive Oyl threw over Ham Gravy for Popeye. Now, this particular strip—you know, Ham Gravy was completely forgotten except for one very brief sort of—I think he had one line in the movie. In the movie *Popeye*, the great comic actor and new Vaudevillian, Bill Irwin, played Ham Gravy in the movie version of *Popeye*, which is one of my favorite things too. And he—and I think he had one line. No one knew who he was or what he was doing, except chasing his hat down the street. And then, Ham Gravy was otherwise forgotten. But he's been brought back by Randy Milholland, AKA R. K. Milholland, who was the cartoonist who started doing *Popeye* cartoons for something called the Popeye Cartoon Club, which was online, until he got hired by the King Features Syndicate to do the Sunday strips of *Popeye*, at the beginning of 2022. And he's—I love his take on Popeye, 'cause he's bringing back all these old characters that were completely forgotten.

It was really an—*Thimble Theatre* was this big ensemble comic strip with Popeye at the center of it. And he's bringing back Ham Gravy as a heel who's constantly just a real jerk to everyone around him and an unlikeable person. In this case, this is actually one of his Popeye Comic Club strips that he tweeted back in 2019, where he had Ham Gravy coming back to get his revenge on Popeye for stealing Olive Oyl from him. And he turns out to be a real cad and a jerk. Anyway, that's a little *Popeye* history lesson there. I love old *Popeye* strips, and I could only think of Ham Gravy.

*(They laugh.)*

And that's what got me to subscribe to King Features Syndicate. For 30 bucks a year, I get to read all the *Popeyes* in the world, plus—I mean, I think they're still doing *Sally Forth* and whatnot.

But now we're gonna hear this case. It is the case of an aged ham in the basement of Bettie, a mom, and the dispute is between her and her son, Craig. Craig, you bring this dispute. What is the justice that you seek?

[00:08:47] **Craig:** Uh, I do, your honor. I would request that the ham—that your honor orders that we eat the ham—prepare it in a manner in which it may be rendered edible and then eaten. Or if all of medical science flies in the face of the advisability of that course of action, I would request that it be given a respectable and honorable burial. It has been of the family longer than I have at this point, and to throw it out seems an ignoble end.

[00:09:20] **John Hodgman:** So, you're both—you're both in Maryland. You're from the deep south of Maryland, Craig. Ooh. And uh, Bettie, you're from the north of Maryland. You're meeting together today in Baltimore, Charm City itself, to speak to us. Thank you for being here. But this ham lives currently in your home in—north of Baltimore. Tell me the story. Has it really been there since the 1960s, Bettie?

[00:09:46] **Bettie:** Well, it's been with us since the 1960s—my husband and I.

[00:09:52] **John Hodgman:** You're saying you inherited this ham?

[00:09:54] **Craig:** No, no, no. We bought it. But then, you say—has it been in that spot? We didn't build the house until '71. When we built the house in 1971, the ham moved with us and moved into the new house as a new occupant with everybody else. So, it's been part of the family, yeah. And hanging there in the basement. It's been moved around a little bit in the basement, because the drippings of the grease get a little too much and they drip through all the cardboard and everything that I put down. So, I have to move it. But it's still there!

[00:10:28] **John Hodgman:** (*Laughing.*) Wait a minute. You're saying this ham drips?!

[00:10:32] **Bettie:** Well, it used to. (*Laughs.*) It's—right now, it's sort of like some kind of a weapon that you could take anybody down with it—just slinging it around. It's so hard.

[00:10:47] **John Hodgman:** (*Laughs.*) Well, I do want to ask what the texture of the ham is, but let me just put a pin in that just for a second and we'll go straight to the evidence, because I'm sure everyone is pulling over their cars to immediately go to the show page at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or to our Instagram, [@JudgeJohnHodgman](https://www.instagram.com/JudgeJohnHodgman) at Instagram, to see the photo first of all of this ham, and then also a photo of Bettie—you wielding the ham, as though you're about to bonk someone in the nose with it, *Popeye*-style. But I've reviewed this.

This is a—it is a country ham, from Virginia. A country Ham, of course, is a ham that has been dry cured with salt to draw the moisture out of it, to prevent microbial growth and to preserve it. City ham is a very—is a fancy ham that wears a little hat and walks around with a little— isn't that right, Jesse?

[00:11:46] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, that's correct. A little monocle.

[00:11:48] **John Hodgman:** Walks around with a little cane and spats and stuff and is like, “Ooh, I would never go in there.”

[00:11:51] **Jesse Thorn:** White kid gloves.

[00:11:52] **John Hodgman:** Yeah, white kid gloves.

[00:11:54] **Craig:** That was the plot of *Babe 2*, correct?

[00:11:56] **John Hodgman:** Yeah, that's right. Exactly.

[00:11:58] **Jesse Thorn:** *Babe 2: Ham in the City?*

[00:11:58] **John Hodgman:** And the city ham is wet brined. It is wet brined, and it does not last as long as a good old country ham, which—you know, they do not need to be refrigerated. You've done nothing wrong, at least for the first year of this ham's life. You were storing it perfectly in a cold basement where it belongs, much like a prosciutto, you know, or any kind of European ham. It doesn't—you can just—you see it hanging around in a specialty shop. And that's where it belongs! Hanging. And this is specifically according to the evidence you sent in, Bettie, a Smoots brand Virginia Ham, cured and aged in Virginia. And it is wrapped in butcher paper and then wrapped—and then wrapped in—it looks like a burlap sack, and it's about 10 pounds of ham. Although, the wrapper itself, it says conveniently on the exterior, weighs four ounces. So, take back four ounces. Plus, there's the weight of the bone, but that's a good amount of meat there.

[00:13:02] **Craig:** In preparation for today, we did weigh the ham. It had actually never been opened until Monday night of this week, when we were speaking with Jennifer Marmor in preparation. I think both of us had always been a little afraid we would have a Ark of the Covenant situation were we to open it.

*(John laughs.)*

But we did open it having it out to weigh it, and we found it weighed—

[00:13:28] **Bettie:** About six.

[00:13:29] **Craig:** Just about six pounds. So, it has lost—over the decades, it has lost about four pounds worth of weight, probably in grease.

[00:13:37] **Bettie:** Grease, yeah.

[00:13:38] **John Hodgman:** Yeah, I didn't know that they would continue to drip grease. I mean—and this is through the paper and a burlap sack. Now, I want to share the photo so—I

mean, could try to describe what I'm seeing here, but I think it would work better if we just got Joel Mann's reaction. He's not seen this, right?

[00:13:58] **Joel Mann:** No, I have not seen it.

[00:13:59] **John Hodgman:** Alright, so first and foremost.

[00:14:04] **Joel Mann:** Does it have a name?

[00:14:06] **Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughing.*) Oh god!

[00:14:06] **John Hodgman:** That's a great question. Bettie, does the ham have a name?

[00:14:09] **Bettie:** It does not. It does not, no.

[00:14:11] **John Hodgman:** It does not have a name. The surrogate child that you've kept in the basement all these years.

[00:14:15] **Joel Mann:** I think you should give it a name.

[00:14:16] **Bettie:** Well, it's kind of like Craig's brother. You know.

[00:14:20] **Craig:** Yes. Otherwise, your honor, I am—like you, I'm a member of the Super Smart Afraid of Conflicts Narcissist Club, save for my ham brother.

[00:14:29] **John Hodgman:** An only child. A ham brother.

[00:14:31] **Craig:** Yes. Save for my ham brother, which I'm asking you to order us to eat, so maybe there's something I need to unpack there.

[00:14:37] **John Hodgman:** I'm—look, I thought this—this sounds more and more like a Stephen King novel, so I wish we were in Maine together right now. So, here's Bettie in a delightful Minnie Mouse t-shirt, holding up this ham. Which, you know, honestly, that's six pounds of ham that you're holding up there, and you're hoisting it high and proudly, Bettie. Now, here we go. We're gonna start—this is the unboxing video, Joel, and you're welcome to give your honest reactions to what you're seeing.

[00:15:08] **Joel Mann:** (*Mutedly.*) Whoa.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:15:09] **John Hodgman:** Okay, so this is the ham wrapped up, dry cured in Virginia. Box 124, Mount Jackson, Virginia is the address of Smoots. Now, here it is lying on a really terrifying looking—it looks like a freezer locker in your basement, next to a bunch of odd

electrical wires. This truly looks like some found-horror footage right here. What do you think of that, Joel?

[00:15:38] **Joel Mann:** It's pretty scary looking.

[00:15:39] **John Hodgman:** Yeah. And here—this is the—this is the wax paper inside.

[00:15:44] **Joel Mann:** Yeah. I don't know. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:15:46] **John Hodgman:** And here's what it looks like.

[00:15:48] **Joel Mann:** I'd give it a name and then bury it.

[00:15:51] **John Hodgman:** This is the ham itself. Did you take a look at this? This Lovecraftian horror?

(*Joel confirms.*)

It's got a little eye.

[00:15:57] **Joel Mann:** Yeah, no, no. Name it and bury it.

[00:16:00] **John Hodgman:** But there's this nice dog, named Gibbs. That's a good palate cleanser for that photo.

[00:16:06] **Bettie:** He'd probably eat it. (*Laughs.*)

[00:16:08] **John Hodgman:** That's a good pal. Well, the question—the question to us is, should he? Should anyone?

[00:16:13] **Bettie:** No! No, no, no.

[00:16:15] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's take a quick recess and hear about this week's *Judge John Hodgman* sponsor. We'll be back in just a moment on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

[00:16:22] **Sound Effect:** Three gavel bangs.

[00:16:26] **Sound Effect:** Three gavel bangs.

[00:16:28] **John Hodgman:** Bettie, you didn't—you've never named this ham, which I think marks you as a fairly stable individual. And yet, you've had it—you've had it in your basement for as long as I've been alive. More than 50 years. So, I need to know the story of the ham. When did you get it and how?



[00:16:44] **Bettie:** Okay. My husband and I were—had gone maybe the Greenbriar or somewhere like that down south, and we were driving back. And I remember going in this little country store. And he said, “Oh, look at those hams!” And so, he was mesmerized with these hams. He liked anything that had sort of a local feel to it. And so, he said, “I think we should take one of those.”

And I said okay, figuring—you know—we'll take it home, maybe have it for Thanksgiving or something. So, we took it home and I guess maybe a couple Thanksgivings went by when we were living in an apartment. Then, when we moved to a house, I said to him one time, “What do you think about that ham? Maybe we could have that ham?”

“No. No,” he said. “I don't think it's ready. I think it—I think it needs to have a little more time.” Okay. So, this went on back and forth a few times. In the meantime, Craig was born, and he accepted this ham as part of the family. And—

[00:17:52] **Craig:** I did not have a choice.

[00:17:56] **Bettie:** Right. You had to go down and visit it.

[00:17:57] **John Hodgman:** It's okay. I understand.

[00:17:58] **Craig:** I was terrified of it as a small child.

[00:17:59] **Bettie:** He'd take his little friends—

[00:18:00] **John Hodgman:** We're gonna get your story in a minute, Craig. This is Bettie's time.

[00:18:05] **Bettie:** And so, it just went on like this. And I kept saying, “What about this ham?”

“No, no.”

Now, keep in mind that Clark, my husband, who just recently passed away—

[00:18:19] **John Hodgman:** I am very sorry to hear that.

[00:18:20] **Bettie:** Did not even like ham. He would not eat ham, and yet the more he said it, the more I thought, “Well, I guess I'll just—I don't know why we're saving it, but—” Still, almost up to the last year of his life, I think—didn't we say to him, “What about that ham?”

Well, then he said, “Why don't I try to track down the company, and I'll write to them.” (*Struggling not to laugh.*) “Maybe they would like this ham for their museum or something.”

So, I said okay. Well, he started writing a letter, but unfortunately he became rather ill and never was able to finish it. So, the company who we've since discovered doesn't even still exist never got the ham for their museum. So, unfortunately, its original string that was hanging it—it was a piece of binder's twine, I think—finally broke, as you can see on some of the pictures. So, it's now lying in a state on a greasy piece of cardboard.

[00:19:27] **Jesse Thorn:** I don't even want to think about the sick thud when that string broke.

*(They laugh.)*

The thwap of that dry ham as it hit the basement floor.

[00:19:39] **John Hodgman:** What do you think was behind Clark's fascination with a food that he does not like and yet will refuse to get rid of it?

[00:19:47] **Bettie:** I don't—you know, I can't—

[00:19:50] **John Hodgman:** Either by ingesting or throwing it away.

[00:19:52] **Craig:** I can't even fathom what that was. Because first of all, he was not a hoarder. He was not one to keep things around. Oh, well, papers and stuff maybe, but I just don't know. But once he passed away, I thought, you know, we need to do something with this ham. I wanna be nice to it. I'm not gonna be mean to it and throw it to the rats or anything. I won't do that. But I said to Craig—

[00:20:23] **John Hodgman:** You have a family of rats in your basement too?

[00:20:25] **Craig:** No, no, no!

[00:20:26] **John Hodgman:** Who have been salivating for this ham?

[00:20:28] **Bettie:** No! *(Laughs.)* At least I hope not. No, but we have a dump about five miles away. We could—I just thought we could wrap him up. Him. Oh, there! See? There I am.

Wrap it up in a nice, big, thick garbage bag.

[00:20:43] **Craig:** My poor ham brother.

[00:20:45] **Bettie:** And take it to the dump and throw it away.

[00:20:47] **John Hodgman:** Not the cheap stuff. A nice, thick garbage bag, for respect.

[00:20:50] **Bettie:** Oh, yeah. The thick kind. Oh, yeah. What are they called? Those great big bags we use?

[00:20:55] **John Hodgman:** Contractor's bag or a Liner's liner.

[00:20:58] **Bettie:** Yeah! Something like that. Yeah.

[00:20:59] **Jesse Thorn:** If you go down to the Smart and Final, they're labeled contractor/ham bag.

*(They laugh.)*

[00:21:04] **Craig:** If I may briefly interject, I will point out—

[00:21:06] **John Hodgman:** I'll allow it.

[00:21:07] **Craig:** She doesn't even want the rats to eat it. She doesn't want anyone to eat it, including rats at a dump!

[00:21:12] **John Hodgman:** Out of kindness to the rats. Jesse Thorn, please make a note in our IP log, in our super incredible, soon-to-be-millionaires IP log: idea for animated movie—generations of rats living in a basement, worshipping a ham that's hanging from the ceiling, trying to come up with—trying to come up with increasingly Rube Goldbergian schemes to cut that butcher's twine and get that ham down from the ceiling finally.

[00:21:48] **Jesse Thorn:** So noted.

[00:21:49] **John Hodgman:** Thank you very much.

[00:21:50] **Bettie:** So, that's the story.

[00:21:52] **John Hodgman:** And let me just make sure I understand so that I—so, did you buy the ham from the company, from Smoots itself?

[00:21:58] **Bettie:** No, it was from just a little—if I'm remembering correctly. of course.

[00:22:03] **John Hodgman:** I'm sure you are.

[00:22:04] **Bettie:** Who knows about that. But just one of those little roadside country stores where you stop, and they sell ham and—

[00:22:10] **John Hodgman:** Just a classic country ham from a country store.

[00:22:14] **Bettie:** Right, right.

[00:22:16] **John Hodgman:** And just to remind me, were you in Maryland or were you in Virginia?

[00:22:20] **Bettie:** I think we had gone to West Virginia, maybe to the Greenbrier. And then, we were just traveling along the roads, which—again—Clark didn't like country roads, because he said they were too windy. And he said, “Don't ask me to go down there again.” *(Softly.)* But you got your ham.

So, I would guess we were traveling from West Virginia—probably up through Virginia and back to Maryland.

[00:22:46] **John Hodgman:** Right. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:22:48] **Jesse Thorn:** I did a web search for “Smoots, Mt. Jackson, Virginia”, and there are a number of even roads named after the Smoot family. And I'm looking at a real estate listing for what appears to be a gas station and country store at 101 Smoot Trailer Park Road in Mt. Jackson.

[00:23:10] **Bettie:** Whoa!

[00:23:10] **Jesse Thorn:** So, I say we start an online fundraising campaign to get \$166,300 and get this ham store up and running again.

[00:23:19] **Craig:** Would that be the sight of the ham museum?

[00:23:21] **Jesse Thorn:** That's a great idea.

[00:23:23] **John Hodgman:** By the way, it sounds like we got some more for our unbeatable IP log. “We bought a ham store.”

*(They laugh.)*

You know, about two podcasters.

[00:23:31] **Jesse Thorn:** So noted.

[00:23:33] **John Hodgman:** Craig, when was your first encounter with this ham? When do you first remember being aware of the basement ham?

[00:23:40] **Craig:** Uh, I was very small. I don't remember the exact age, but I—as a child—was terrified of our basement, in no small part because of this leathery object looming above me. If I was ever told to go into the furnace room and get something out of the freezer, it was always very scary to me. I also watched the film *Night of the Living Dead* far too young, so that definitely had something to do with the process. But it was probably about 50/50 George Romero and the ham.

[00:24:11] **Jesse Thorn:** I can understand the fear, because I'm looking at this picture of Bettie holding the ham in the basement wearing her Minnie Mouse t-shirt, and it looks like the most genial chapter in the *Saw* films.

[00:24:25] **John Hodgman:** (*Laughs.*) Yeah, it's pretty grim. Proceed with caution to the Instagram account and the show page for sure. Not for the faint of heart.

[00:24:35] **Craig:** It did not help that the furnace room in which the deep freeze is and in which the ham spent the majority of its life, and the entirety of my life is behind a—essentially, a hidden panel wall.

[00:24:47] **John Hodgman:** No.

[00:24:48] **Craig:** So, it looks like—yes.

[00:24:50] **John Hodgman:** No. No.

[00:24:50] **Jesse Thorn:** So, this is a ham of Amontillado?

[00:24:52] **Craig:** Very much so.

[00:24:52] **Jesse Thorn:** Drip, drip, drip, drip.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:24:55] **John Hodgman:** Your home had a secret ham room?!

[00:24:58] **Craig:** You have to literally put your fingers into a knot—this is the kind of thing that my father loved. You have to literally put your fingers into a knot in the wall—you know, in one of the wood boards on the wall and pull it out to get this part, and then just part of the wall swings open. There's not a theatrical creak, but there certainly should be.

(*Bettie chuckles.*)

[00:25:18] **John Hodgman:** And the ham hung in there until it fell?

[00:25:22] **Craig:** Yes. And it's still in there!

[00:25:23] **John Hodgman:** Why?

[00:25:24] **Craig:** It's just lying in state, like Lenin's tomb now.

[00:25:29] **John Hodgman:** Right. So, you say you were terrified of this ham. Rightly so. What was your reaction when your mom suggested throwing it away? How did you feel about that?

[00:25:39] **Craig:** Well, I had many decades in my own life between my initial fear. And as my mom mentioned, I did go through a period where I was slightly older where I would—I don't think I ever actively charged admission, but I would certainly take friends to see it in the hidden room.

*(John laughs.)*

Like a—you know, a room of wonders at a sideshow or something. But it just—it had always been around, and it—I had been I think saying for years, “When are we gonna do something with that?” 'Cause it just seemed silly to have it down there. And my father would always say, “Oh, yeah, we'll get around to that at some point.”

As my mother mentioned, he did not like ham. I don't recall ever seeing my father, other than out of extreme politeness and occasionally not even then, eat a piece of ham of any sort.

[00:26:35] **John Hodgman:** What do you think his relationship to this ham was? Why was he putting off eating it? Why wouldn't he let anyone get rid of it? Why was it being moved around? What—was it a funny thing for him? Did he have a sense of humor? What's your guess?

[00:26:48] **Craig:** He very much had a sense of humor. It was not sort of a practical prop humor type of thing. He had I would say sort of old-fashioned dad humor, which I have inherited it. He and I both had a love of shaggy dog stories. We would often see how long we could lead each other on in a story leading up to a truly terrible pun at the end, before the other could cotton on to that's what we were doing. I don't think the ham itself—

[00:27:10] **John Hodgman:** Sure. Yeah. With frons like these, who needs enemas?

[00:27:15] **Craig:** *(Laughs.)* I don't think the ham itself was related to that. My best theory is that he—having been born in 1924, he grew up and spent a lot of his childhood and young adulthood in the Depression. And I think as a result of that, he was always—as my mother said, he didn't tend to keep things. The papers that she mentioned were—are generally receipts or other things like that. I think food specifically, having grown up in the Depression—especially nice food—was something that he valued and hated to see wasted. And so, I think his distaste for ham warred throughout his life with—you know, “We paid good money for this ham; it's wasteful to throw it away.”

[00:28:05] **John Hodgman:** I got you. And it's been preserved. And it's there in the basement as a bulwark against starvation. So, should the Depression come again, you can always bring up the ham. I can kind of understand that.

[00:28:18] **Craig:** I genuinely do think that was part of it. I genuinely do think that was part of his thinking was, “Well, if we lose everything else, at least we have this ham.”

[00:28:26] **John Hodgman:** Bettie, does that track with you? Does that seem to make sense?

[00:28:30] **Bettie:** It could be. It does make sense, knowing how he was. Yeah, it does.

[00:28:35] **John Hodgman:** Craig, you suggested two possibilities for the ham: either eating it or giving it a proper burial. First off, do you really want to eat this thing? Is that a joke?

[00:28:55] **Craig:** I do. No, I do. My wife of 23 years—whose name is Anya and who is a whole human being in her own right—is a veterinarian, professionally.

[00:29:02] **John Hodgman:** This guy's a real listener to podcasts! Yeah, good! Noble work.

[00:29:10] **Craig:** And is—oh, absolutely! She works actually emergency veterinary medicine, so she does the hard stuff at all hours of the night, and I have nothing but tremendous respect for her and the hard work she puts in.

[00:29:23] **Jesse Thorn:** Like, for example, if a rat were to eat a 50-year-old ham?

*(They laugh.)*

[00:29:27] **Craig:** And it needed to be rushed to an emergency room. Yes. That's exactly the sort of thing that she would do. But she is also a really wonderful and avid cook and baker, and so I'm fond of saying she's an expert in all forms of curing animals.

*(They laugh.)*

She makes her own sausage and jerky, things like that.

[00:29:47] **John Hodgman:** Alright. Turn off the microphones now. That's it. You tricked me into a shaggy dog story. You Clarked me! You started out making me believe you were giving a lovely and rather long for a podcast tribute to your wonderful wife, and it ended up just being a joke about her curing animals. Shame on you, Craig. I hold you—I hold you in light contempt of court.

[00:30:09] **Craig:** Can't it be both, your honor? But back to the original subject of—my reason for bringing up my wife.

[00:30:13] **John Hodgman:** Oh, right. Right. What does your wife have to do with this ham? That's what the world wants to know.

[00:30:18] **Craig:** She is very much of my opinion that we should cook and eat it. In fact, I think it was originally her idea that—'cause I was simply looking at it and thinking, “We gotta do something with this ham.”

*(Jesse laughs.)*

And she got more and more excited thinking about it, and she said, “We could—we could cook it. Why don't we—why don't we have it? Why don't we cook it for some big family event?”

[00:30:38] **Bettie:** (*Laughing.*) Nobody would come.

[00:30:39] **Craig:** My aunt has already said she's busy that day, whenever that day might be.

[00:30:45] **John Hodgman:** Was she there when you finally unwrapped it?

[00:30:49] **Craig:** She unfortunately was not. She was working that night. My child was, and they were firmly in our camp. This is the child who's about to turn 14. They were formally in our camp about eating it, and then having seen it unwrapped, they have now swapped to my mother's side of the equation and do not want to eat that ham.

[00:31:11] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, you're gonna prepare the ham. I mean, it's got a soak or whatever. Right? Country ham?

[00:31:15] **Craig:** Oh yes. Yes, it is I think salt and sugar cured, according to the semi-legible, grease-stained instructions on the ham. There are also instructions, but they were so grease-soaked that I couldn't open them without destroying them.

[00:31:34] **Bettie:** Did you get a picture of that?

[00:31:37] **Craig:** Yeah, they are—I think they are not part of the evidence to this, 'cause they are, they are so illegible. But they were inside the little mail-order ham card, which says (*chuckles*) you can order by mail. And it says, “Mail me \_\_\_\_ hams.” And “I prefer hams about \_\_\_\_ pounds in weight.” So, presumably back in the wonderful days of the past, one could have ordered a dozen 10-pound hams by mail.

[00:32:03] **John Hodgman:** This is in evidence as well, and I just wanna say you undersell this card. It is so charming. It says, “Dear Mr. Smoot, please mail me \_\_\_\_ hams like the one I have just enjoyed.”

(*They laugh.*)

That's so—that's so lovely.

[00:32:18] **Jesse Thorn:** No postage necessary. Hams shipped via parcel post COD.

[00:32:22] **John Hodgman:** Tell me about what it felt like when you were opening that ham—all the sensory experience that you took in, in that moment. Because it's the first time it was unwrapped. Right, Bettie?

(*Bettie confirms.*)

[00:32:33] **Craig:** The burlap on the exterior is very brittle at this point. I had always, having been familiar with a ham, I had always thought it had a sort of a sort of a waxy scent to it, and I assumed that was just because of the area in which it's stored. My parents have—actually,



pictured in the image of my mother holding the ham, you can see an old wrought-iron chandelier/candelabra hanging on the wall.

There were multiple candles stored down there. I always assumed it was just sort of the fact that the basement always smelled a little bit like wax. Also, my father kept bees, so there was also always a omnipresent bee wax smell.

[00:33:11] **John Hodgman:** Mm-hm. You took a long time to reveal that your father was a apiarist.

[00:33:18] **Craig:** (*Chuckling.*) He was a—he was a man with many layers.

[00:33:20] **John Hodgman:** So, any smells? Did you touch the ham?

[00:33:23] **Craig:** Yes, I did. I did. So, the wax smell intensified upon opening the outer burlap bag, and that's when we realized there was this butcher paper—heavily waxed paper inside. And that seems to be where all the wax was coming from. Now, obviously heavily soaked with grease that has spent years soaking through and dripping. The ham itself, texture-wise, is fairly waxy as well, but smooth to the touch.

[00:33:52] **John Hodgman:** Waxy. Okay. Did you poke it?

[00:33:55] **Craig:** I would assume the wax has rubbed off from the bag.

[00:33:57] **John Hodgman:** Was it hard or was it—was it soft and—?

[00:33:59] **Craig:** It was rock solid. Yes, your honor.

[00:34:01] **John Hodgman:** It was rock solid. Yeah.

[00:34:02] **Craig:** No give whatsoever.

[00:34:03] **John Hodgman:** Was there any mold on it?

[00:34:05] **Craig:** No, at all. And no smell of decay or rot or fungal growth or anything of that sort.

[00:34:13] **Jesse Thorn:** I think the smell has long since dripped out of it.

(*They chuckle.*)

[00:34:16] **John Hodgman:** Yeah, that's right. Have you consulted any experts with regard to the physical safety of eating this ham that is 50 years old?

[00:34:27] **Craig:** I have not consulted any experts. I did a few very brief Google searches and was not dissuaded by that.

[00:34:34] **John Hodgman:** Because—you were not dissuaded, because it gave you the news that it was okay to eat 50-year-old waxy, hard ham? Or because it said, “Don't eat this,” but you're like, nah, I don't believe you?

[00:34:46] **Craig:** (*Laughs.*) It was the former. I don't—candidly, at this point, I don't know that there is anything that would be harmful about it. It's more mummified than rotted at this point. I don't really know that it's going to taste very good, but who knows? Sauces can do wonders.

[00:35:04] **John Hodgman:** Now, as an alternative, you have suggested a ham burial ceremony. What do you envision if were to rule against eating the ham and instead—you would dispose of it how? What's the—what's your picture in your—what's your mind picture for this ceremony?

[00:35:22] **Craig:** I would like to lay it to rest in same place as many other beloved pets of the family over the years, in the woods outside my parents' house. If they would permit. If not, we would happily take it to our place and bury it there. I think a brief but solemn and respectful graveside service would be appropriate and allow it to return to the world from which it has been kept for half a century.

[00:35:53] **John Hodgman:** What do you think about that idea, Bettie? The funeral service for the ham?

[00:36:00] **Bettie:** (*Chuckles.*) I think it's unnecessary and a little bit hysterical to think of the whole thing. Maybe I should have just asked Clark to put it in his will. What should we do with his ham?

(*They laugh.*)

[00:36:11] **John Hodgman:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean, obviously this is a—

[00:36:15] **Jesse Thorn:** That's why you work with a good attorney. (*Laughs.*)

[00:36:16] **John Hodgman:** Yeah. Estate planning is really important. If you're a young couple and you don't have plans, this is the time to think about it, honestly. I know it's grim, but you could be left with a ham in your basement that you don't know what to do with. Bettie, tell me about the pet cemetery on your land as if this whole episode wasn't creepy enough.

[00:36:36] **Bettie:** (*Laughs.*) Well, we live in very deep woods. We built our house in the woods. And the first—I don't know—eight or ten dogs that I had, and I lost, we buried them on our property. Made a nice little grave and everything. And then, it got to the point where it was—I don't know, maybe one died in the summer, and it was too hot to dig a grave. So, then I started sending them for cremation. So—and there might have been a few little things that

Craig, he buried. I remember he buried some moles that he found when he was little and probably lizards and stuff like that. But it's a big property. So, it's—there's plenty of room.

[00:37:20] **John Hodgman:** Sure, I understand, and I'm sorry for the loss of all those wonderful companions and also the moles, I suppose. But when you were having your dogs cremated, did you continue to lay their—inter their ashes in this pet cemetery? Or did you just put them in a heavy plastic bag?

[00:37:38] **Bettie:** No, they're in the house.

[00:37:39] **John Hodgman:** Oh, they're in the house. Okay.

[00:37:40] **Bettie:** No, they're in an urn in the house.

[00:37:42] **John Hodgman:** That's lovely. So, Bettie, how do you feel about Craig's—do you think that burying the ham in the pet cemetery among all of your previous generations of German shepherds would be... sacrilege?

[00:38:03] **Bettie.:** (*Beat.*) No. No, I don't think so.

[00:38:06] **John Hodgman:** Would you be open to that possibility? Let me ask you—let me ask you a little bit more plainly.

[00:38:11] **Bettie:** I would. I would. Okay.

[00:38:16] **John Hodgman:** Do you want him to bury his ham brother with your beloved companions? Yes or no? If it's your choice—and it is.

[00:38:26] **Bettie:** Can I say it would be okay?

[00:38:29] **John Hodgman:** Okay! That's fair. You're a good mom. If I were to order that this ham be cooked and consumed, would you eat any, Bettie?

[00:38:39] **Bettie:** (*Decisively.*) No. No—I was—I smelled it when he opened it, and I touched it, and I said no. Not for me.

[00:38:47] **John Hodgman:** Right. Do you want your only son, your only child in this world, to eat a more than 50-year-old waxy, hard ham?

[00:38:59] **Bettie:** No! I don't.

[00:39:00] **John Hodgman:** What is your fear?

[00:39:02] **Bettie:** That the—that it would—that there would be some sort of bacteria lurking in there that would—even though it's dormant, maybe (*laughs*)—boiling it, they would all come to life, and then he'd be eating this buggy ham.

[00:39:18] **Craig:** I think we have another IP for you fine folks.

[00:39:21] **John Hodgman:** I know—I—this one, Bettie, have you ever considered writing horror fiction?

[00:39:27] **Bettie:** (*Laughs.*) No! But I could try! I won't watch it, but I could write it.

[00:39:31] **John Hodgman:** Yeah, fair enough. Craig, you've heard your mom's wishes. It was originally her ham—her and her beloved late partner's ham. The ham is older than you. The ham is your older brother.

[00:39:46] **Craig:** Yes, your honor.

[00:39:48] **John Hodgman:** And she doesn't—she would prefer—she doesn't want you to eat it, and she'd prefer to just throw it away. Why—what does this ham mean to you that you would have me overrule Bettie, your mom?

[00:40:04] **Craig:** I think it—to me, it has a link to my childhood, but also both of my parents. And I think in a way, having lost my father this past year and knowing that he held onto it all this time, I think we—I think we need to do something with it. I think we need to get it out of the house. I—the thing I would like least, even less than having it thrown away, wrapped in a heavy duty, ham construction contractor's bag and denied even to the rats, is for it to continue to linger.

[00:40:43] **Bettie:** It sounds like we have rats in our basement. We don't. (*Laughs.*) When I said the rats, I was referring to taking it to the dump.

[00:40:51] **John Hodgman:** Right.

[00:40:51] **Bettie:** Throwing it in the dump, where the rats live. We don't—we, fortunately, have never had any rats in our basement. We have occasional mice, but I don't think that they can get their teeth through it.

[00:41:01] **John Hodgman:** Yeah, no, I think that that was an—that was evidence of Craig's overreach and trying to argue his case by suggesting that your basement in your well-kept home is full of vermin just waiting to get their fangs into that ham.

(*Bettie laughs.*)

But I am curious. Alright. I think I've heard everything I need to in order to make my decision. I'm going to go into the secret basement room here at WERU. I'm gonna put my

finger in the knot hole and open the secret door to go into my inner sanctum. I'll be back in a moment with my verdict—or will I be?! Maybe I'll be eaten by a ham!

[00:41:36] **Bettie:** Or it may fall on your head! (*Laughs.*)

[00:41:38] **John Hodgman:** Precisely.

[00:41:40] **Jesse Thorn:** Please rise as Judge John Hodgman exits the courtroom.

(*Chairs squeak, followed by heavy footsteps and a door closing.*)

Craig, how are you feeling about your chances?

[00:41:47] **Craig:** Well, I think I came off as far less stable than I had hoped to, coming in.

(*Jesse laughs.*)

Uh, so, not fantastic. Um. I think at least we outlined what the situation is, and I'm not optimistic about the ability to actually eat the ham at this point. I seem to be vastly overruled by wiser minds, but I feel at least that I've been able to make a case for the fact that it deserves something other than a garbage bag and being just tossed out after all this time.

[00:42:33] **Jesse Thorn:** How do you feel Bettie?

[00:42:35] **Bettie:** (*Sighs.*) Well, I would definitely—I would definitely feel rather upset if he decided to eat it, but I have to say in all honesty, I would be okay burying it. I don't expect to have a marker at the grave or anything like that. But we got plenty of room where we could dig a hole, and I wish I knew what Craig—what Clark would want. But I've been trying to get an answer, but I'm not getting any answer. So, he's off today, I guess. I don't know.

[00:43:12] **Jesse Thorn:** Well, we'll see what Judge Hodgman has to say about this when we come back in just a moment.

[00:43:16] **Sound Effect:** Three gavel bangs.

[00:43:20] **Sound Effect:** Three gavel bangs.

[00:43:23] **Jesse Thorn:** We're taking a break from the case and we're making preparations for our first ever tour of Europe!

[00:43:30] **John Hodgman:** That's right. That's correct, Jesse Thorn! We've already spoken about how we are going to be at the London Podcast Festival. Of course, that country is no longer part of Europe. I'm sorry. But we are going to Europe. We're going to Ireland, and we're going to Denmark, as well as other cities in the United Kingdom of non-Europe. We're so excited about this. We've been wanting to do this for a long time. Jesse, run it down for them.

[00:43:55] **Jesse Thorn:** September 10<sup>th</sup>, we're in Belfast, Northern Ireland. That's my Stepmother's hometown! We're also headed to Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland. We're gonna do a show in Edinburgh, Scotland. Of course, two shows in London at the London Podcast Festival. I'll be doing three shows, 'cause I'm doing *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* as well. And then—

[00:44:14] **John Hodgman:** And then!

[00:44:15] **Jesse Thorn:** Continental Europe, folks! Copenhagen, Denmark, one of the greatest cities in the world. All 20 of our fans in Copenhagen have to come to this show. *(Laughs.)*

[00:44:25] **John Hodgman:** Yeah. Get thee to the Comedy Zoo in Copenhagen, Denmark.

[00:44:30] **Jesse Thorn:** John, I have a comedy friend in Copenhagen. My friend, Anders Reinholdt, got us this gig. And he's gonna open for us with his podcast partner, also named Anders.

[00:44:43] **John Hodgman:** The two Anderses?

[00:44:44] **Jesse Thorn:** All in Denmark are called Anders!

[00:44:46] **John Hodgman:** Both Anders and us.

[00:44:48] **Jesse Thorn:** And they all look like handsome sea captains.

[00:44:50] **John Hodgman:** Handsome sea captains! So, look, here's the good news. If you are a member of Maximum Fun, if you have gone in the past to [MaximumFun.org/join](https://MaximumFun.org/join) and you are a member, check your email, 'cause you're getting a code right about now for the presale, which starts Wednesday—today! That's today, the 26<sup>th</sup> of July. If you don't have to be a member, you can fix that, but you'll also be able to buy tickets starting on the general sale day of Friday, July 28<sup>th</sup>. [MaximumFun.org/events](https://MaximumFun.org/events) is the place to go for all the info and ticket links. General sale begins Friday, July 28<sup>th</sup>. If you're a member, check your email today—Wednesday, July 26<sup>th</sup>—because you got a code to get early tickets right away. Please go get 'em. We're going to Europe!

[00:45:36] **Sound Effect:** Three gavel bangs.

[00:45:40] **Jesse Thorn:** Please rise as Judge John Hodgman reenters the courtroom and presents his verdict.

*(Chairs squeak, followed by heavy footsteps and a door closing.)*

[00:45:45] **John Hodgman:** Speaking to both of you—and it has been lovely to do so—I was reminded of my visit to the Whaling Museum in Nantucket, Massachusetts. I've only been to Nantucket once in my life, and I went to the Whaling Museum. And in the Whaling Museum

in Nantucket, Massachusetts, there is suspended from the ceiling the skeleton of a sperm whale. And if you look to the floor, you'll see an oil stain where the sperm whale skeleton—which has been dead for, I don't know, a century—still will occasionally drip some whale oil down.

[00:46:28] **Craig:** (*Laughing.*) Oh, no!

[00:46:30] **John Hodgman:** I mean, the persistence—I don't know what this is metaphorically, if it's at all metaphorically tied to what we're talking about here. It was just something that reminded me the persistence of oil, I guess. Not life, obviously. 'Cause what we've also been talking about is life passing and the transitions of life. But the persistence of dripping oil is just—you know, some things just never stop. Some things just never give up. That's what makes this ham—that just makes this ham so creepy. It's still going!

(*They laugh.*)

Just the idea of salting and curing, you know, fresh meat in order to rid it of moisture, to reduce microbial growth and to save it and preserve it without refrigeration like this is just—it's astonishing persistence of things like whale skeletons and hams. Just, you know, something to think about. Another thing to think about is, yeah, that skeleton still dripping whale oil, but I'm not gonna eat it. That doesn't mean it's good to eat! And I hate to say this to you, Craig, and your glorious and gluttonous veterinarian wife, but you're not gonna eat this ham. You're not gonna eat this ham. Now, I could say because it's not safe. I don't know. I don't know. We consulted with a food safety expert and food historian, Marion Nestle. She's a molecular biologist, nutritionist, and public health advocate. She's written a lot of great books about food. And she's seen the photos of the ham, and her verdict was, “If it doesn't smell horrible and isn't crawling with living whatever,”—bugs, I suppose—“it is probably okay. It looks pretty well preserved, but it isn't something I'm interested in trying. I would rather leave the experiment to someone else.”

So, there. Marion Nestle opened the door for me to rule you performing this experiment, but I'm not going to for these reasons. One, USDA and all of the country ham websites that I consulted suggest that a whole uncut, dried, cured, or country ham can be stored safely at room temperature for up to one year. One. That's one year.

(*They laugh.*)

Now, obviously the USDA and these country ham websites are covering their hams, if you will. Covering their ham hocks, covering their butts. That's probably a very conservative estimate for how long a ham is good, but one year is about one—somewhere between one 50<sup>th</sup> and one 60<sup>th</sup> of the amount of years that this ham has been in a basement. I think that it is probably unlikely that this ham would kill you or even make you sick. I think that it probably would be very hard to rescue from its mummified state into something that is good to eat or nice to eat, and also maybe it could kill you! And I want you to live, Craig. I don't want my podcast to be any part of a storyline where a wonderful woman who has raised 14 German shepherds and had a 58-year marriage and raised a wonderful, funny, and likable son who loves *Judge John Hodgman* who has just lost her partner of 58 years, to then lose her son to a basement ham.

(They laugh.)

I don't wanna have anything to do with that. I wanna stay away from that. But the final and most important reason why you can't eat this ham is your mom doesn't want you to, and I'm not gonna get in the way of that. My jurisdiction does not supersede Mom's jurisdiction in this case. So, we're taking that literally off the table. I'm sorry, but I do agree that the ham's gotta come off of the terrifying freezer locker in your basement and go somewhere else. You know, it's Bettie's property, this ham. She has every right to just wrap it up and throw it out. And yet, you have made the case that you have a relationship with this ham, and there is some unanswered mystery as to why Clark kept the ham. And you've done a fair amount of thinking as why that might be, and I find your—I mean, we can't read minds, but I think that's a pretty good guess that he didn't wanna waste that food. That resonated with me, in any case. Whatever the reason that he held onto this ham, that mystery is part of what connects you to it and to him.

I think it's an extremely terrifying thing to keep in your basement, and it would be hard to part with—to go into that basement. I also feel as though it is a curse that Bettie is finally getting free of. Truly, she's been trapped in the house by a ham for a long time, and either the ham's gotta go or she's gotta go. I just hope that getting rid of the ham breaks the curse instead of causing a new curse because you got rid of the special ham, something terrible's gonna happen. I don't know. That's a different horror—that's an IP that we haven't developed yet. I do think the ham has gotta get out of there. It's gotta be exorcised from that basement. And so, here are your options. One is to bury it with all of the German shepherds, which I think is very sweet of Bettie to allow you to do. When I asked her “yes or no, do you want this?”, she gave a very, very decent mom answer was (*sighing*) “it would be okay”. That, as all parents know—including you, Craig—when you say, “Uh, that's okay,” that means, “No, I do not want you to do that.” But it is part of my—but it's part of my job to let you do things that are dumb. It is part of my job to let you live your own life. And even if—and eventually replace me.”

That said, maybe, maybe you can get Bettie from a (*reluctant*) okay to a yes if you frame it such as: in many, many cultures around the world, burial rituals involve burying loved ones with things that they loved, maybe—and often with things like horses and other—and food provisions to provide for them on their journey to whatever afterlife that culture believed in. And I think you started to make an argument, and maybe I'll help you complete it, Craig, by saying if you bury that ham, burying that ham with all of those dogs is better than throwing it to the rats in the dump. Burying that ham with all those dogs is giving those wonderful dogs a feast in the afterlife. They're gonna love that ham. They're gonna be so happy. How many years did those dogs look at that ham and want to eat it? How many basement trips did they make to stare at that ham and maybe lick some of the sweet, mummified ham grease that dripped off of it? That's one way to do it, and I'm gonna let you and Bettie choose if that's the way you want to do it.

I'm gonna just throw a—I'm just gonna throw another idea out there. We don't know what Clark's final wishes were, other than he started a letter to the defunct Smoots Virginia Ham Company. The intent was to ask if they wanted it for their ham museum. I love the fact that he presumed that there was such a ham museum there in—what's the town again, Jesse Thorn? Mt. Jackson, Virginia? Is that right?



*(Jesse confirms.)*

But we now know there is no ham museum there. There's just a general store that's for sale. To some degree, Clark was curious as to whether this ham could be returned to where it came from, for someone else to enjoy or to use. Thanks to the detective work of Bailiff Jesse Thorn, we have an address in Mt. Jackson, Virginia, where potentially this ham was purchased. If you and your mom and your family, Craig, wanted to take one final ride down those country roads to take ham home, I would—I think that that would be also very symbolic and fun and interesting. Maybe your mom can verify through memory whether this was the place where the ham was purchased. Maybe not, but that might be a fun trip. It's about two hours and 38 minutes—151 miles according to my mapping program here.

I'll let your mom decide which one she likes better: either feed the dogs or try to bring that ham home and bury it there with how much of—however much of the letter Clark wrote before he set it aside. Either way, that ham is going in the ground. This is the sound of a gavel.

[00:55:56] **Sound Effect:** A cartoonish dripping sound.

[00:55:57] **John Hodgman:** Judge John Hodgman rules. That is all.

[00:55:59] **Jesse Thorn:** Please rise as Judge John Hodgman exits the courtroom.

*(Chairs squeak, followed by heavy footsteps and a door closing.)*

Craig, how do you feel?

[00:56:07] **Craig:** I feel that that's a very reasonable and appropriate resolution that will result in potentially the loss of another family member—namely me—if the ham situation were to go poorly. I will say I certainly respect the decision, and I will respect whichever choice my mother makes. I will say there's a lot of wisdom in the judge's suggestion, and as much as he disliked windy roads, my father did love car trips and road trips. So, that might be a fitting tribute.

[00:56:44] **Jesse Thorn:** Bettie, how do you feel?

[00:56:46] **Bettie:** Well, I have to say that one point that the judge made about the fact that Clark was interested in getting the ham back to its home and getting it into a museum tells me that he probably would want to hold onto it. And so, putting it in the ground would probably be what he would want. So, I would be happy with that.

[00:57:22] **Jesse Thorn:** Bettie, Craig, thanks for joining us on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

[00:57:26] **Bettie:** Thank you.

[00:57:27] **Craig:** Thank you all so much.

[00:57:28] **Sound Effect:** Three gavel bangs.

[00:57:30] **Jesse Thorn:** Judge Hodgman, I have a little bit of good news for our listeners as we say goodbye to this case.

[00:57:35] **John Hodgman:** Oh, what's that?

[00:57:36] **Jesse Thorn:** Stay tuned through the credits for a conversation with America's number one ham celebrity.

[00:57:42] **John Hodgman:** Number one ham celebrity?!

[00:57:45] **Jesse Thorn:** Number one ham celebrity in the entire nation. I don't know if there's iberico celebrities in Spain that outstrip him. It's possible. But here in the United States, the number one ham celebrity. It's a little something called a tease.

[00:57:58] **John Hodgman:** Consider me teased.

[00:58:00] **Jesse Thorn:** Another *Judge John Hodgman* case is in the books. In a moment, we'll have Swift Justice. Our thanks to Redditor Kmac (*kuh-mack*)—could be K-Mac, but I feel like Kmac is funner—for naming this week's episode, “Special Prosciutto-cuter.” Join the conversation over at the Maximum Fun subreddit. That's at [MaximumFun.Reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com/r/MaximumFun). That's where we've been asking for your case names. Evidence and photos from the show are posted on our Instagram account at [Instagram.com/judgejohnhodgman](https://www.instagram.com/judgejohnhodgman). Make sure to follow us there.

*Judge John Hodgman* was created by Jesse Thorn and John Hodgman. This episode was recorded at Clean Cuts Music in Baltimore, Maryland, and at WERU in Orland, Maine. Our thanks to Joel Mann at WERU for engineering this episode. Marie Bardi runs our social media. Our producer is Jennifer Marmor.

Now, Swift Justice, where we answer small disputes with quick judgment. Redditor TheWillThe says, “My girlfriend hates when I use our kitchen sponge for cleaning pet food bowls. She throws it away for fear of cross-contamination. I don't think it matters what you wash with it as long as you're using soap.”

[00:59:20] **John Hodgman:** Uh, I'm gonna say this: it's just food. I get it. People get skeeved out. You know what? I get skeeved out. We—you know, sometimes our cat eats some special food—that's how we get her to eat her anti-itching medicine, 'cause she's a very delicate lady.

*(They chuckle.)*

And of course, the cat never finishes all that food. And there's just like crumbs of wet food in there. And I'm gonna tell you what, it's disgusting. Is it cross contamination? No. That's food.

It's food for animals. It's food for us. It's not gonna harm anybody. It's not gonna make anybody sick. And it's probably—it's been out of the can for 35 seconds before the cat eats the two bites that it deigns to eat and leaves the rest behind. And now, it's our human job to take that disgusting food and get rid of it. But we could get rid of it just by eating it. We wouldn't be sick. We wouldn't be sick. All that said, I'm with the—I'm with TheWillThe's girlfriend here. I would wipe that out with a paper towel that I throw away before I use my dish cleaning sponge do it. Not because I'm afraid of getting sick, it just grosses me out. That's my threshold. Just get a separate sponge. What does a sponge cost, TheWillThe? Get a sponge that's shaped like a cat. You know, like a silhouette of a cat or something. Get a—use that, and then everyone's happy.

Hey, it's still summer, and we still need some summertime cases. And I'm gonna open the screen porch door to cases regarding ham... burgers?! Yes, that's right. I want some grilling disputes. You know? Outdoor cooking disputes.

[01:01:07] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah, I'd love that.

[01:01:09] **John Hodgman:** What's the best way to grill a burger? How do you make a smash burger outside? Uh, have you ever had a clam bake? Clam rhymes with ham! Have you ever gotten into a fight at a clam bake? Maine Mann Joel Mann, have you ever gotten into a fight at a clam bake?

[01:01:27] **Joel Mann:** No.

[01:01:29] **John Hodgman:** I don't believe you. I don't believe you for a second.

[01:01:31] **Joel Mann:** Have you ever put fish sauce on your hamburger?

[01:01:34] **John Hodgman:** No.

[01:01:35] **Joel Mann:** Try that. Yeah. \

[01:01:36] **John Hodgman:** No. There we go! We got one. Me vs. Joel Mann: fish sauce on a hamburger. Send them on in. And any of your summertime disputes. Stuff to do with public pools, stuff to do with private pools. The country club, summer camp. We've got another Robin Hood Camp story coming in, and I'll read it to you if we get enough summertime disputes. So, send 'em on in. Also very important: London. We're going there for the London Podcast Festival. You can get tickets, obviously; we talked about it already, but we need those disputes. We need those London-based disputes. We got a couple rolling in. If you're gonna be in London in September and you're coming to the show, think of who you're coming with and think of what's wrong with them. Think of a fight you're gonna pick with them in order to get on stage at a podcast. It's gonna be a lot of fun, and we're gonna have a wonderful time, so we can't wait to see you there.

[01:02:23] **Jesse Thorn:** All of those and all your disputes, go onto the internet at [MaximumFun.org/jjho](http://MaximumFun.org/jjho). [MaximumFun.org/jjho](http://MaximumFun.org/jjho). Just type that into your computer and submit

your dispute. Don't worry about—you don't have to pre-judge whether your dispute's good enough or something. Don't worry about it!

[01:02:42] **John Hodgman:** Don't worry about it.

[01:02:43] **Jesse Thorn:** We'll check it out. We check 'em all out. [MaximumFun.org/jjho](http://MaximumFun.org/jjho). I'm about to say, “We'll talk to you next time on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast”.

[01:02:49] **John Hodgman:** Right.

[01:02:50] **Jesse Thorn:** But there's a little treat coming for you. A little treat. We'll talk to you next time on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

[01:02:56] **Sound Effect:** Three gavel bangs.

[01:02:59] **Jesse Thorn:** Judge Hodgman, I promised that we would have a conversation with America's number one ham celebrity, and I'm prepared to deliver. Our guest at the end of this *Judge John Hodgman* podcast is a legendary comedy writer who, among many other films and television programs, wrote for *The Simpsons* for many years. He was the writer behind the infinitely memed steamed hams episode of that program and has in the years since become one of America's premier social media food chroniclers, as well as—I presume—the president for life of the Steamed Ham Society, Bill Oakley. Hi, Bill. How are you?

[01:03:44] **Bill Oakley:** Thank you for that spectacular introduction and for the multiple plugs therein. I appreciate it greatly.

[01:03:50] **Jesse Thorn:** Bill, do you have a Steamed Ham Society title? I gave you president for life but—

[01:03:54] **Bill Oakley:** I didn't have one until that moment. I like that one. President, founder, all those things. Creator, you know, whatever. Emperor. I haven't—I haven't gone too far down that road yet, but thanks for getting the wheels turning.

[01:04:08] **Jesse Thorn:** Are you a ham eater?

[01:04:11] **Bill Oakley:** I'm not a super ham enthusiast, you know. Given a choice, I'd rather have a roast beef or something like that, but I don't have anything against ham. And I do—I'm familiar with the varieties of, you know, the country ham, the smoked ham, things like that. And I wouldn't say I seek it out, but when it's served, I don't run away.

[01:04:30] **Jesse Thorn:** Let's say it seeks you out.

*(They laugh.)*

[01:04:35] **John Hodgman:** Yeah, we have an almost supernatural ham to discuss with you in a moment that does seem to have a mind of its own and stays with people. But before we

get into that, I just wanted to ask you—so, you're known obviously for your wonderful reviews of fast food in particular, convenience food, I suppose. You know, there have been obviously roast beef fast food places, hamburgers, hotdog-specific, chicken obviously, but there's never been a ham sandwich from a fast-food place other than like at a subway, I suppose. But no one's ever tried to put out like a Big Hammy or something like that. Am I missing something?

[01:05:13] **Bill Oakley:** I think you are. I think there's—I think that Arby's I believe at some point had a thin sliced ham sandwich. And I know that Burger King had one a decade or two ago that was called the Yumbo, like jumbo, but with a Y, I think. And I think it was on that long bun with sliced ham. I'm pretty sure that was a ham sandwich too. But you know, ham is more—people consider ham more of a sit-down food, I think. It's like turkey. And that's why Honey Baked Ham is the—you know, when you think of a chain that sells ham, you think of Honey Baked Ham, and they don't—to my knowledge, I think there was a *Seinfeld* episode all about this at some point—they don't serve food that you can eat there, or they didn't. They serve ham that you take home, and you serve to your family for Easter or whatever. Right?

*(John affirms.)*

So, it's—

[01:05:57] **John Hodgman:** You would actually go into a storefront might be like—it would look like a McDonald's or a Burger King, sort of in the parking lot of a larger strip mall or whatever. And Honey Baked Ham, you would go in there and they just would have cases full of hams that you would take out of there. You would never eat there.

[01:06:14] **Bill Oakley:** *(Chuckles.)* Right. It's an interesting thing that, given America's fondness for pork stuff in general, that ham and sliced ham hasn't really taken off as its own thing.

[01:06:25] **John Hodgman:** And our episode today, we were talking about a family—a mother and a son. And the mother and her late husband bought a Virginia country ham in the 1960s, and it has lived in their basement ever since. And now, the mother wants to throw it away finally, and the son wants to eat it. My question to you is: if you were guaranteed that you would live, would you eat a 50-year-old country ham?

[01:06:58] **Bill Oakley:** *(Beat.)* Boy, there's a lot of clarification needed to that question.

*(They laugh.)*

If I live, but if I live and be on dialysis for my entire life or something like that. Like, you're saying I live, and I wouldn't have any long-term medical issues.

[01:07:10] **John Hodgman:** You've done some negotiating with genies before, haven't you?

[01:07:14] **Bill Oakley:** Maybe.

[01:07:14] **John Hodgman:** Like getting some clarification, getting it in writing, getting all the—getting all of the conditions worked out before you agree to anything.

[01:07:23] **Jesse Thorn:** We may have to replace some of your internal organs with a monkey's paw.

[01:07:27] **Bill Oakley:** (*Laughs.*) You know, I knew the topic of this in advance and I didn't Google it. So, therefore I have to use my own instincts as to how long a country ham—I know a country ham is the kind of thing that could definitely last for five years or more. Whether it could last for 50 years, that's a judgment call. And I think part of it would be—it might be inedible. I mean, I don't know—I don't—I haven't heard the rest of this episode, but it could be so hard that it wouldn't be possible to chew it, for instance.

But if it didn't smell, if it didn't have visible mold or something on it, and it didn't give off signs that it was somehow rancid, yes, I would eat some of it.

[01:08:09] **John Hodgman:** Wow. Just for the—just for the curiosity?

[01:08:13] **Bill Oakley:** Well, I think that things that are smoked and preserved like that are, you know, are to last—you know, I don't know that I would just—I wouldn't eat a slim gym from 1975, but there are some—

[01:08:23] **John Hodgman:** Ah, there you and I differ, sir.

*(They laugh.)*

[01:08:26] **Bill Oakley:** I think—I mean, I feel like that country ham could conceivably be like wine and could—might even get better with age, but I could be radically wrong about that.

[01:08:34] **John Hodgman:** Alright. Bill, what—moving off of ham for a moment, what's the most exciting fast food you've eaten recently?

[01:08:41] **Bill Oakley:** Well, okay. I'm—this—it's Culver's. There's no question that Culver's is the best fast food in America to me. I don't know if you guys live in an area where you have Culver's.

[01:08:49] **John Hodgman:** I don't even know what it is! I'm over here in Maine, and I've never even heard of a Culver's. What is it?

[01:08:54] **Bill Oakley:** You guys don't have very many regional specialty fast foods—right?—up there in Maine. I never hear about anything from there.

[01:08:59] **John Hodgman:** No, no, we don't really.

[01:09:01] **Bill Oakley:** Culver's must have a thousand locations, but they're all kind of between Ohio and Idaho. So, they're not well known on the coasts, but their fast food is the best fast food in America. And I would—I'd put money down on that and I think people would agree. Their double butter burger with cheese, their roast beef sandwich, their cheese curds, their concretes. It's somehow a cut above everybody else.

In terms of food that everybody can get, I wouldn't say there's a—I wouldn't say that there is a real clear-cut winner right now. But I'd say if—the most widely available item that is delicious is the McDonald's quarter pounder deluxe, which, you know, they now use the fresh not frozen beef, and that's the one with lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise on it. And that could be gotten anywhere, obviously. That would be the one that would really stick out. After that, it would be Wendy's junior cheeseburger deluxe for me.

[01:09:58] **John Hodgman:** Hey, Joel, here in Maine. Do you know if McDonald's is offering lobster rolls this summer?

[01:10:03] **Joel Mann:** I don't think they are.

[01:10:04] **John Hodgman:** No. I guess they stopped doing that. I heard they were pretty good.

[01:10:07] **Bill Oakley:** I've heard that too. And you know—and they also have specialty things in the Delmarva region with crab. You know, Maryland, they have an Old Bay fillet-o-fish in Maryland.

[01:10:16] **John Hodgman:** No! Really?!

*(Bill confirms.)*

Eeh, someone's having fun at McDonald's, I suppose. I'm looking through the Culver's menu. This all looks delicious, but I don't see any ham. I see opportunities. Oh, here—"contact us". I'm gonna—I'm gonna send them a letter. General feedback. Continue. Start to provide my feedback. Suggestion. Please select topic, uh, something else.

[01:10:43] **Jesse Thorn:** Ham.

*(They chuckle.)*

[01:10:45] **John Hodgman:** *(Slowly as he types.)* "I'm here talking with Bill,"—do you mind if I drop your name, Bill? 'Cause it might get—might get to the—

[01:10:51] **Bill Oakley:** No, please! Go ahead. It might get me a free t-shirt or something.

[01:10:52] **John Hodgman:** Yeah, might get to the manager. "... here talking with Bill Oakley about your lovely chain. But I, Judge John Hodgman, have a question. Where's the ham?"

*(They laugh.)*

[01:11:12] **Jesse Thorn:** Topical parody.

[01:11:14] **John Hodgman:** *(Chuckling.)* Would I—would I like someone from Culver's to follow up with me about my feedback? Yes.

[01:11:18] **Bill Oakley:** Yes, I'd be curious to know what they say. I almost guarantee they've had a ham thing at one point. It's the kind of place that would have a ham thing, given its like Wisconsin roots.

[01:11:30] **John Hodgman:** I'm giving them my email, and they're invited to write me back. And Bill, if I find out—if I can confirm that for you, I will let you, and obviously the listeners know. And maybe we can meet at Culver's sometime. 'Cause I'm very, very curious about this place.

[01:11:46] **Bill Oakley:** Oh my god. It will blow your mind. I mean, it's 20% better than the best fast food you've ever had from any place. At least.

[01:11:52] **Jesse Thorn:** Bill, I'm—it's just occurring to me now, but the Steamed Ham Society often has exclusive menu items at restaurants, especially in the Portland area, but around the world. Maybe the next—maybe the next collabo could be a ham thing!

[01:12:13] **Bill Oakley:** There's been—there's been discussion of that. And I'm excited—you know, if anyone from, let's just say Arby's is listening to this, it has been discussed—

[01:12:20] **John Hodgman:** Yeah, let's just say.

[01:12:21] **Bill Oakley:** It has been discussed seriously amongst myself—

[01:12:23] **Jesse Thorn:** We don't wanna say it. We don't wanna say the name. Let's call it Arby's. *(Laughs.)*

[01:12:28] **Bill Oakley:** Arby's is certainly the best equipped to serve a ham sandwich, probably a ham and cheddar type sandwich, and make it a Steamed Ham Society special. And as I—and I'm a big fan of Arby's too. They have a lot of—you know, they get a lot of crap, because their name is a funny sounding name. You know, Jon Stewart was the pioneer of that.

[01:12:46] **John Hodgman:** *(Disdainfully.)* Oh, I know.

[01:12:47] **Bill Oakley:** But in reality, their fast food is so much better than Burger King, for instance. Many of the items on their things are a home run. Their fish sandwich, surprisingly, is a home run. The roast beef and cheddar, obviously. And so, yes, Arby's. Let's do a ham—let's do a secret menu item for the Steamed Ham Society, a ham and cheddar type thing with some—perhaps some horseradish or something like that. Mustard.



[01:13:08] **John Hodgman:** Can we get in on the collab? Can it be like the Judge Ham Hodgman sandwich? And it's got ham—well, wait a minute. First of all, it's got old ham, the oldest available ham.

*(Bill laughs.)*

[01:13:21] **Jesse Thorn:** Aged ham.

[01:13:22] **John Hodgman:** Plus—Taylor, I'm gonna say it just this one time. Normally, I say pork roll. Taylor ham on top of that. Extra horsey sauce?

[01:13:32] **Bill Oakley:** I like this. I like where it's going. I think it needs a little cheese though. But your choice of cheese.

[01:13:37] **John Hodgman:** Well, no, no. It's your choice of cheese. This is a collab; it's not just a dictatorship.

[01:13:41] **Bill Oakley:** Oh, okay. Well, I would say cheddar then, or perhaps some kind of like interesting, weird one like fontina.

[01:13:48] **Jesse Thorn:** What about if we set this up at Wendy's? It could be called the Dave's Judge John Hodgman Ham Society ham sandwich.

[01:13:59] **Bill Oakley:** *(Laughs.)* I like that name.

[01:13:59] **Jesse Thorn:** And it's so called, because they used ham that originally belonged to Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's.

[01:14:06] **Bill Oakley:** *(Chuckles.)* That's also good. That's also good. And it sounds like it could really take off big time.

[01:14:12] **John Hodgman:** Tell us about the Patreon and how—and what people get when they join.

[01:14:17] **Bill Oakley:** Absolutely. Well, you know, everybody—people are familiar with the phrase steamed hams. It's a euphemism. If you've seen the sketch, you know it's a euphemism for hamburgers.

[01:14:26] **John Hodgman:** Right.

[01:14:26] **Bill Oakley:** So, I started this club about a year ago with a Patreon called the Steamed Ham Society, which is for people who like to talk about food. You know, like I feel like fancy food is amply covered by newspaper critics and by the Michelin Guide and the Zagat Guide, but nobody really seriously covers stuff like—well, how the new cheesy jalapeno quarter pounder or things like that, or the new frozen pizzas that are coming out or things like that.

So, this is a—it's not just fast food. It's actually what we call everyday food. And for people who are interested in talking about that, we have a discord, we have merchandise, we have a newsletter, we have live streams. And there's also a special level for *Simpsons* fans, because of my connection to *The Simpsons*, where we have special guests from the his from classic *Simpsons* on live streams to talk about stuff. It's a fun organization. We have merchandise and hopefully, you know, it's kinda like that thing like Oprah. Remember how Oprah has that Favorite Things? And when she says, “These caramels are the most delicious caramels in the world,” and then that company becomes huge? We would like to have that kind of power in the next few years, the Steamed Ham Society, to say this hot sauce is the best hot sauce that we've had all year. And, you know—and thus, thrust it into the limelight. So—

[01:15:43] **Jesse Thorn:** This is fundamentally a power grab, you're saying?

[01:15:45] **Bill Oakley:** For sure! For sure. Absolutely, but it's also fun. And people love—some people like to talk about food a lot, and they should all join this club. It's not—and by the way, it's not just—it's not just un unhealthy stuff like potato chips as well. There's also a vegan channel. We had our first vegan secret menu item, and we also have people who like to barbecue—professional barbecue chefs and things like that. Like it's—I would say it's not what you'd call fine dining, but it encompasses almost everything else in the American cannon.

[01:16:17] **Jesse Thorn:** Bill, thank you for sharing both your time and your ham celebrity with us. It's always great to talk to you. I look forward to seeing you. Next time you're in Los Angeles, we'll go to my favorite fast-food restaurant, Taco Fiesta.

[01:16:30] **Bill Oakley:** Fantastic! I've never even heard of it, and I can't wait to try it. Is there something special that we should get?

[01:16:36] **Jesse Thorn:** It's near my house. We're just gonna get hard shell tacos.

[01:16:38] **Bill Oakley:** Okay! (*Chuckles.*) Beautiful.

[01:16:40] **Jesse Thorn:** Yeah.

[01:16:40] **John Hodgman:** Thank you so much for joining us, and I look forward to seeing you at Culver's, and I hope you'll come back on the podcast some sometime again.

[01:16:48] **Bill Oakley:** It would be my pleasure. Alright, thanks guys.

[01:16:50] **Sound Effect:** Three gavel bangs.

[01:16:52] **Sound Effect:** Cheerful ukulele chord.

[01:16:53] **Speaker 1:** Maximum Fun.

[01:16:54] **Speaker 2:** A worker-owned network.

[01:16:56] **Speaker 3:** Of artist owned shows.

[01:16:57] **Speaker 4:** Supported—

[01:16:58] **Speaker 5:** —directly—

[01:16:59] **Speaker 6:** —by you.