

Sawbones: Nose Blowing

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Clint: *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.

[intro music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to *Sawbones*, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: I'm so excited about this one, Syd, because...

Sydnee: You seem punchy.

Justin: I am punchy, because when you found this topic, I was sitting next to you, doing some business of my own.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Some work business.

Sydnee: You were playing a game.

Justin: I am—That is a part of my job, is what you're saying.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: Very fortunate of me. But I heard you go, "Nooooo..." Like sometimes I—you make this noise like "Oh, I'm going to have to do this episode but I don't wanna do this episode, but I think I have to," and that is certainly the noise that I heard you exclaim today. I have no idea what that is in reference to, but I feel... pretty confident that that was your attitude.

Sydnee: That is definitely the attitude I had. Especially this week, this topic, in reference to what I have been experiencing this past week, it felt targeted. When I thank the listeners who sent in this topic recommendation. I'm gonna try not to say it in a kind of like sarcastic way.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: 'Cause what I'm saying is thank you Will and Kiana for this topic recommendation, but what I mean is... [overly sarcastic] Thanks, Will and Kiana.

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: Thanks.

Justin: Thanks.

Sydnee: For making me research this and learn that... as you can tell, as you can probably hear, I have been struggling with an upper respiratory infection. Which started out as all of us had experienced some sort of viral infection.

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: I suppose, I mean it wasn't—it was some non-COVID, that's all we know now, right?

Justin: I had to cancel—

Sydnee: We tested for COVID, it's not COVID. Then we—

Justin: I had to cancel a signing.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: At Books-A-Million, here in Barboursville, and listen, signings aren't—ain't that hard. [chuckles] So if it had been—if it hadn't been really, really bad I would've done it, but oofa doofa, it laid—like, we took a lot of tests, like a lot [chuckles] of COVID tests.

Sydnee: Right, because—

Justin: 'Cause it felt so much like COVID.

Sydnee: Well, and it went through the whole family, all of us, and then finally I was the last. The last one standing to fall to the illness.

Justin: Yup. Y'know—

Sydnee: On the day I turned 40 is when my symptoms started. The day. Isn't that cruel?

Justin: Yeah, it is cruel.

Sydnee: That cruel. But what happened to me is, and this may happen to you sometimes when you're ill, my original viral illness was running its course.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: I was getting better.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: And then I got worse.

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: And I developed a secondary bacterial infection.

Justin: Oof.

Sydnee: As one may do. And I am particularly prone to when it comes to sinus infections.

Justin: I've seen, well—

Sydnee: Or sinusitis.

Justin: Sydnee's a tough cookie. I've seen these things lay her out in her room.

Sydnee: If you've had a real deal sinus infection. And I don't just mean like you're sniffly. You know what I'm talkin' about if you've experienced this. The pain in your face, in your ears, in your teeth, your jaw—I mean, it's all up in there, honey. It's like your whole head's gonna explode. It's rough.

That is what I have been experiencing. I am thankfully now receiving proper treatment.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: I did not treat myself.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: I reached out to my family doctor. There's a little plug for family doctors out there. And she took good care of me, and I am getting better. But what I've been doing a lot of this week... Or longer—actually, longer than a week, is blowing my nose.

Justin: [chuckles] Not sustained.

Sydnee: Not the entire time.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: No, like intermittently blowing my nose. And I think that we all take for granted this idea that it's—that's good.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Not only do we blow our noses. When that is necessary.

Justin: Yup.

Sydnee: We teach our kids to. This has been an ongoing battle with us recently.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Teaching our—because we've all passed this thing around.

Justin: And they're bad at it?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Like, I didn't think you could be bad at it, but they're like bad at it. Like Charlie at first was like—

Sydnee: Now, don't embarrass her.

Justin: When she was younger.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: I'm saying as a young child, she would hold the tissue or what have you like two inches from her face and blow, like it was like a net. And it's like, "No honey, we're not—it's not like that. That's not the way to approach it."

Sydnee: Now here's what I'm gonna throw at you, Justin.

Justin: Not one of the tissues!

Sydnee: No. No, although there is a pile of your tissues on this table, which we're gonna talk about later.

Justin: Of my tissues? No ma'am, those are not my tissues.

Sydnee: They're the little teeny ones when you get a nosebleed. I know what's happening.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: Anyway, I'mma throw this idea at you. I think Charlie is probably technically better at blowing her nose than we are.

Justin: No kidding.

Sydnee: We've been doing it wrong.

Justin: What?

Sydnee: And I'm going to call into question the idea that we should do it at all.

Justin: Oh, come on.

Sydnee: I know.

Justin: Sydnee, can we just have one thing?

Sydnee: I know. Now, I can't sit here and tell you the history of nose-blowing. I don't—I—There may be a cultural historian who could document such practices. That—That is beyond—

Justin: I can't—that is the most natural thing in the world.

Sydnee: That is beyond my particular research capabilities. Obviously, the idea of clearing your nose when it feels stuffy is very ingrained in us, and there's a whole etiquette system developed around it, right? It's been around so long that we know you shouldn't blow your nose at the table.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Or if you do blow your nose at the table, you should at least turn around. Which, the fact that has to be in a book somewhere is kinda disturbing to me.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like don't blow your nose directly over the food.

Justin: How would you turn arou—like you sit backwards on your chair, like a coach talking to young folks, and then blow your nose?

Sydnee: No, just—does your body not rotate? [laughs]

Justin: It does, it doesn't need to turn around.

Sydnee: Just turn around. Or go—or excuse yourself. So, like I said, I can't cover the complete history of, "When did the first human say—"

Justin: "Hey wait, I can blast this stuff [chuckles] clean out." [wheezes] "Hey, I find if I plug one of the holes, I can really blaze—I can really—" [wheezes] That had—that I do wish I had been there for like that cultural moment in—when the uh—in the early man. When he was like "Hey, if I plug this and I—" [wheezes] "I can really blast it out."

Sydnee: Well—

Justin: "This is a new thing and I call it 'The Derek'. It's a new thing I've come up with."

Sydnee: I mean, if—I just—I'm gonna talk a little bit about handkerchiefs and Kleenex as a way of sort of indicating our relationship with nose-blowing. Okay? That's sort of my conduit that I'm using. Because I can't tell you when they first started blowing their noses, so I'm gonna talk about handkerchiefs.

But I think it is fair to say that since, I mean, colds and stuffiness, allergies, all the various reasons why your nose might need—you might feel that it needs to be blown date back to as long as there have been people, there probably were—that was probably what happened first, right? People were just sort of like... Snorted it right out there. Just like right there.

Justin: Just blazed it right out.

Sydnee: Maybe put a hand up, maybe not. Who knows.

Justin: Maybe not "snorted." "Snorted" is inward, I feel like. I wouldn't "snort it out."

Sydnee: Well then what is the word for blowing it out?

Justin: See that's what I've been struggling here, I think I said "blazed" or "blast." That's not accurate. "Blow"? That's the word. It's blow.

Sydnee: Blow?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Okay. And we can look back to ancient history for indications that we used to carry something around to use, like an all-purpose utilitarian cloth that you may have on your person.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: For whatever you needed, and certainly these pieces of cloth would have been used for y—I don't know, gently dabbing sweat from your brow as well, I suppose. And you can find depictions of this as far back as like 1000 BCE in the Chao dynasty, there are depictions of figures holding like pieces of decorative cloth that you would just carry on your person. So we can kind of—

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: If you can look back to why would someone just carry around a piece of cloth all the time.

Justin: Even intergalactically it's well established that everyone has a towel. I think Ford Prefect drops that on Arthur Dent. The most useful thing you can have is a towel, and what is a handkerchief except for a small towel?

Sydnee: Well that's true, Justin. What are you referencing?

Justin: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.*

Sydnee: Ah, okay. A historical document.

Justin: A historical document.

Sydnee: Yes. So as I said, these were multi-purpose. These were also used to like put on your head, to shield you from the sun. And we're going to get into that with our modern—

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: The Greeks and Romans would've carried around a small piece of cloth—especially for like, if you—the sort of image of a sporting or athletic event.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Like waving a white cloth. That would've been very common, but the idea of a kerchief. And when I say a kerchief, I mean a piece of cloth that covers your head.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Which comes from like the French words—

Justin: A hand kerchief! I just got it!

Sydnee: Did you just get that?

Justin: Yeah, I had no idea. Okay. Okay.

Sydnee: And “kerchief” is from the French for like “head” and “covering,” so...

Justin: Hey linguistics, I see your etymology.

Sydnee: Yeah, so that's what lead to—The widespread use of the kerchief, obviously, predates the handkerchief.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Although again, people have probably been carrying around dirty rags for...

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: ... bodily functions for a long time. People would carry—

Justin: [laughs] "This is my human rag, [chuckles] that I have to have for all the various secretions."

Sydnee: It is so—I like this kind of thing because it's—and this is medically adjacent, right, the history of a handkerchief.

[Justin chuckles]

Sydnee: But it is so human to say "I'm gonna carry around—" I mean that's what it is. "It's my human rag for my bodily secretions." It's so grody when you put it that way.

Justin: I can't—

Sydnee: But like the way—

Justin: You can't think about it too much. You can't. Because if you start thinking of bathrooms like that, like how absolutely wild it is that we're like, "Well, it's a normal thing, being a human. One little like quirk that we have is that every once in a while, we have to go to a hole to pu—" [wheezes] "—some of the stuff we've stored up."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Justin: "Into the hole."

Sydnee: Just sort of dangle our bottom over it.

Justin: "We put the bottom over the hole and some of the human goo comes out, and you don't—I know it's gonna seem like you need it."

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: "You don't, trust me. It's just completely fine."

Sydnee: I like though that we've created—I mean much the same way that you and I have themed bathrooms in our house.

Justin: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Sydnee: We have created a sort of fun playfulness around—[chuckles]

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Around this, this very basic elimination function.

Justin: This is our *Twin Peaks* bathroom.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: This is our—this is our, our—

Sydnee: It's a TARDIS, but it's actually the bathroom.

Justin: It's the TARDIS, but it's actually, you poop on the inside.
[chuckles]

Sydnee: So anyway, people would carry a kerchief in their pocket.
Originally—

Justin: You know the TARDIS bathroom is actually smaller than you expect it to be. Like you get in the TARDIS and it's like "Whoa!." And then you see a huge door to the bathroom and you open it, and it's very small and you have to crouch down, it's a very tiny, like half-bathroom.

Sydnee: Well, it is a half-bath—I will say, it's like a normal-sized door.
You say like a huge door.

Justin: No, in the TARDIS.

Sydnee: It's just like a door.

Justin: In the bathroom on the TARDIS, I'm saying.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: The bathroom on the real TARDIS.

Sydnee: Oh! Not our TARDIS bathroom.

Justin: Is a huge door. And then you open it and it goes into a very small bathroom. It's like a [unclear]

Sydnee: Does the Doctor go to the bathroom?

Justin: Can't. He can't.

Sydnee: Okay. So people would carry a kerchief in their pocket because you would need it to cover your head periodically.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And it began to become like a fashionable thing.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: To have a kerchief for different reasons.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And initially it was—it's dated back to royalty were the first to like—Instead of having something that you just sort of, again very utilitarian, tucked in your pocket in case you have to needed it, to have something lovely that you would have on your person where you could see it. You know that others could view it too.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: And that you could use for all kinds of things. And it is at that point that you start hearing people refer to them not just as kerchief, but handkerchiefs.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Or handkerchiefs. And then they start to take on different meanings at this point. So you start to see the idea of a handkerchief being a token of affection. You know? Something that you could give to a lover.

Justin: [saucily] Mmm.

Sydnee: Something that could be beautiful, that could have embroidery on it, that could have your initials or with some sort of message. They could be used to show your social status. You know again, they were associated with royalty early on, so can see—We've talked about this before. You know, if a king does something, it becomes popular.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Even if that's like getting a fistula. Remember?

Justin: Yeah!

Sydnee: Yeah, even getting a rectal fistula was something that you could—that could catch on.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: That could be all the rage.

Justin: Those were very trendy for a little bit.

Sydnee: And especially if they were ornate or embellished in some way. It's a—It's like a lot of things. "We all need to carry this. I'm going to make mine prettier."

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: "To show how fancy I am." And as handkerchiefs caught on, it really became popular—Like throughout all this time period, we're talking about like the Middle Ages where, you know, we write about like ladies giving gentlemen their handkerchiefs and all these kinds of things. And you know, they play big roles in things like *Othello*. A handkerchief is an important symbol Shakespeare writes about.

But it's not until the Industrial Age that you see everybody everywhere needs a handkerchief, and they really start taking off. And the reason is because we start to have these kind of more crowded, urban areas, pollution is a bigger problem, and we are aware enough that there's something about the air that is different that makes us think we need something to occasionally cover our face or blow out that... city crud.

Justin: Ah, yes.

Sydnee: You know what I'm talking about. [chuckles]

Justin: Mm. That's why I moved out here. To the hills. Away from the city. That city air got to me, Syd.

Sydnee: Yeah, don't—don't say too much 'cause we do live in the chemical valley, so—

Justin: Hey, but still. They're not in the air, it's in the water and— [wheezes] water and dirt.

Sydnee: Listen, don't—

Justin: Some in the air.

Sydnee: Don't blame it all on cities. We—Us out here, we're pretty good at polluting the air too. [chuckles] We all find our own way.

So—and they ranged. At this point, you kind of see like this variety of different handkerchiefs for different purposes and different—

Justin: The code. We all know about the hanky code. [chuckles] It's the code.

Sydnee: What's the hanky code?

Justin: You don't—You—I thought you were talking around the hanky— [chuckles] Just avoiding—The han—

Sydnee: Oh! You mean like flagging?

Justin: Is that—I guess? Maybe?

Sydnee: Like to show what you're into?

Justin: Yeah yeah yeah.

Sydnee: No no no, I'm not talking—I'm not talking about that.

Justin: That stuff gets confusing.

Sydnee: I—Yes.

Justin: You gotta be careful with the hanky code. I looked it up, just to make sure that I could—In case you were unaware, I could have a specific point to reference. And there's a lot of like—a lot of things in the hanky code are like—It—Just to give you an example, it's pocket dependent. So a lot of it's like "I like belly button stuff," and if you put it in the right pocket, and then the left pocket is like "Avoid my belly button [wheezes] at all costs!" You just gotta be really, really careful about the safety.

Sydnee: I feel like you'd need to carry a chart.

Justin: You need a flow ch—yeah, you absolutely need a chart. I don't believe that this is in actual practical daily use, but it is a fascinating—I'm looking at like a, legitimately like—This chart that I'm looking at [chuckles] has like "mustard, gold lamé, rust, brown lace." Like it's—there's a lot to just keep track of here with this hanky code.

Sydnee: It sounds like you'd need to be really good at differentiating colors.

Justin: Yes, that's true. You could be a color-blind person that has a very surprising evening. You have to be careful.

Sydnee: Well that is not—I was talking more about the idea that as handkerchiefs were popularized, you had everything from like your snot rag.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Which was just some torn piece of fabric that was very functional, to like a pocket hanky that would look nice, that would like maybe som—Like a, you know, someone who considered themselves a gentleman may, you know, may carry around. Maybe offer it to... I don't know, a hysterical woman. [chuckles]

Justin: Yeah, of course.

Sydnee: I'm saying that in—with sarcasm.

Justin: Oh, okay. Why are you shaking your head and saying "No, I'm not. This is how I feel"?

Sydnee: No, I'm not. I—

Justin: "These are my real words."

Sydnee: Don't pretend like I'm doing that.

Justin: You're giving me a double thumbs-up, Sydnee. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Well, I feel like in the context of our show, people would know that if I used a phrase like "a hysterical woman" that I'm being sarcastic, but I don't know, maybe you're a new listener and you think "Oh my gosh."

Justin: "Gosh. This took a turn! I was enjoying it."

Sydnee: Um—

Justin: "Until all the stuff about the hanky code and the hysterical woman bit."

Sydnee: [chuckles] You could perfume them, tuck them in your sleeve. That would be lovely. There were all kinds of specific occasions, like wedding handkerchiefs. Special baptismal handkerchiefs, to dab off, you know, baby's head, after it's been doused. And all these things could be embroidered with dates and names. You know, important events and that kind of thing. Prayer handkerchiefs, which also could be used—It's funny because I was raised Catholic, and I think about my upbringing. A lot of the adults in my life always had handkerchiefs.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And some of that dates to the fact that when my mom was growing up, going to church, if you forgot to cover your head, 'cause this was traditional at the time in their faith, you would just pin a handkerchief on your head as you walked in.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: And so she can recount many times just having like her—

Justin: That was a thing?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: Her mom's handkerchief just dropped on her head and bobby pinned into place. I know!

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: And this was not—This was before my time. This was not something that I experienced, but I remember handkerchiefs always being around, and having like the monogrammed ones and... You're looking like you don't believe me.

Justin: No, I believe all of it. I just—I—[sighs] I just um—I just feel like... Whenever someone would have one of—Dad would have one sometimes. And normally like, I think there's definitely a place for re-examining cultural stuff and being like, "Did we move away from this too far?." You know, there's people that want—who like pine for a simpler era and they cling to some of these like things that we don't necessarily like—They're not a necessity but it's nice to have. You see someone with like a, I don't know, a pocket watch or something like that, right?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: There's—It's just... the idea that you would keep this rag with you and then offer it to other people, or even have it in your pocket, or use it and put it back in your po—I just feel like the first day that someone came up with disposable, everyone should've been like, "Okay, guys! Handkerchiefs in the fire! Never again!"

Sydnee: Well, Justin. You have led us to someone coming up with disposable.

Justin: Yes!

Sydnee: But before we talk about that... Please follow me to the Billing Department.

Justin: Let's go.

[ad break]

Justin: I hope whoever came up with disposable tissues wasn't too proud of themselves, because I just arrived it inevitably, [chuckles] you know. And all I have is the benefit of their previous existence.

Sydnee: Now, you've gotta understand that at this moment, we're about to talk about disposable... not handkerchiefs at this point. Tissue.

Justin: Yeah, it's hard to say.

Sydnee: I'm not gonna use the brand new.

Justin: Yeah. It's hard not to.

Sydnee: Well, I am gonna use a brand name, but I'm not—it's—that's like—it's—We're not there yet.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: There's a flow here.

Justin: No, I know. I'm not trying to rush, I'm just saying it's hard to not say.

Sydnee: It's true.

Justin: The brand name.

Sydnee: So we're in the 1900s, and at this point handkerchiefs are ubiquitous, and so the designs and patterns and colors. It could be a way for a fashion designer to like kind of start introducing their look or their style. With new patterns, like a geometric print or a certain color palette, that kind of thing. The first—

Justin: Use up a fabric they don't like? They have extra cut-offs?

Sydnee: Yeah, exac—Well, and I mean, all of this would be a way of saying "This is the direction of fashion."

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: They were also used for things that are practical, like you could have recipes, cocktail recipes were a popular thing to have on a handkerchief. And you can find—there's tons of these if you want to look for examples or these from throughout the 1900s, of beautifully designed, ornate, or like funny. There was ones with cartoons on them and comics, like funny how-to guides.

Justin: Aw, I bet you were busting up every time you got that out. You got a *Ziggy* in there.

Sydnee: [scoffs]

Justin: You got a *Beetle Bailey* to enjoy.

Sydnee: All of those things.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: All of those things would be on there. There were like your hobbies, how to do things. Things like palm reading were popular things. You could get a handkerchief that would show you how to read someone's palm. There were things like maps. It was popular to put maps on them.

Justin: Nice.

Sydnee: That was a very practical thing, just put a map on a handkerchief, you can carry it with you. So all kinds of things. So handkerchiefs are really this sort of—I mean you could see where that would catch on. It's not just sort of like a... style of status. It's who you are.

Justin: Like a slap bracelet. It's showing you personality.

Sydnee: This is who you are.

Justin: It's like carrying around the *Whiz* backpack, everybody knows what your deal is.

Sydnee: I think it's like the equivalent of what we do with water bottles today, right? Everybody's got their reusable water bottle and it's a certain brand and color and style, and they do things with it and that tells you everything.

Justin: I would—

Sydnee: There's lots of TikToks that tell you exactly who you are, based on your water bottle.

Justin: I wa—The main criteria that I look for in a water bottle is one that would say nothing about who I am, other than "This is a man who enjoys hydration."

Sydnee: I wanted one that was big, but not too big.

Justin: Yeah, you failed. You got one that was extremely, extremely big.

Sydnee: It's very big. So right as handkerchiefs are really on the rise, or course a disruptor has to—

Justin: Gotta disrupt it.

Sydnee: Right. Mess it all up. So there was a company called "Kimberly Clark," and during World War One they made these crepe paper filters for gas masks. That's where this starts.

Justin: [uneasily] Okay.

Sydnee: They—In the 1920s, they took that sort of—I wouldn't say "formula," but that product and refined it into Kotex.

Justin: Oh, the—Oh, right.

Sydnee: For menstrual cycles. Fir—And so first come the Kotex, and then they take that product, make it softer, lighter, thinner. And by 1924, they rename the Kotex to the Kleenex.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: And they start marketing Kleenex. Now initially—

Justin: But Kotex is still a thing, right?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Oh, it's just the company name rather than the—I got you.

Sydnee: They just didn't call those Kotex.

Justin: Got it.

Sydnee: If you're gonna use it on your face, it's called a Kleenex. And that's what Kleenex were for, to wipe cold cream off your face.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: That was the initial purpose of Kleenex. They were very heavily marketed as if all the celebrities, when they would—'Cause that was a common beauty practice of the time. Was to cover your face in cold cream after you removed your makeup. To remove—All the celebrities, after they covered their face in cold cream, they use Kleenex to remove it, 'cause they're soft and gentle on your skin. And that was where Kleenex started.

Justin: People still use cold cream after they take off their makeup?

Sydnee: I'm sure there are people who do.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I don't think—Do I think that it is as popular as it was? No.

Justin: My mom always used to do that. Yes.

Sydnee: Yeah, my mom was a big Vaseline fan.

Justin: Mm. Perfect for a slippery face.

Sydnee: No, there are—Again, I learned this from TikTok. There are lots of products to remove your makeup now. So I think it's very variable, and up to how much you want to spend on it.

Justin: I'm sure, with everything.

Sydnee: So, initially people are just using them to—I mean that's—It was like a beauty product. And it was very much associated with femininity, too.

Justin: Ah. Yeah.

Sydnee: It was not something that a masculine person would want to use, because you wouldn't put cold cream on your face either, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So about five years after they're introduced, one of—And this is "the story" that is told. One of the researchers at Kleenex has a cold. And is using the facial tissues to blow his nose. And thinks "Well this is better. Because after I use this, and it's full of snot, I can throw it in the trash can. That's so superior to these handkerchiefs that we all carry around." And so at that point, they start marketing them not just for removing cold cream, but also for blowing your nose.

Justin: Mm...

Sydnee: Or wiping your nose, or in some way, you know. Are you sneezing? Are you coughing? Do you have a runny nose? That kind of direction. And what they really harp on is this concept of "You know, with a handkerchief, you're putting the cold right back in your pocket."

Justin: Yeah! Guys.

Sydnee: Or your purse or whatever.

Justin: Yeah!

Sydnee: And this was a really compelling idea to people, and it would take a few years for everyone to adopt it, but obviously Kleenex took off—

Justin: Unthinkable. It should have been one headline in one newspaper, and then everyone was like “Yes, burn the rags.”

Sydnee: [chuckles] Well but again, a couple things. One, we’re talking about a price point. A leftover piece of cloth was accessible for almost anyone at this time.

Justin: This is true, yeah. That’s—yeah.

Sydnee: While buying a box of tissues was a whole other matter.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And also like again, they had become part of culture. And they were associated with things. I mean, it was. It was a very romantic gesture for a, you know—I think you kind of—you get this image of like—And again, these are stereotypical images of like a woman be—getting overcome with emotion and starting to cry, and then a very nice man in a trench coat and hat like handing her his handkerchief. And it was all very romanticized, right? So you had to like fight that.

Which they did, and then specifically introduced products like “tissues for men.” [chuckles] To fight the idea that only women were supposed to use Kleenex. So there were marketed—

Justin: I mean—

Sydnee: Like in the ‘80s, Kleenex for men.

Justin: You la—You laugh but within the last like 12 hours, I saw Dude Wipes in store. [chuckles] Like it’s still—We still feel the need to label who we think is the best target demo for our various wipes.

Sydnee: Well, and I think it’s interesting ‘cause what you’re fighting against is this same sort of like—This idea that somehow it’s masculine to use a dirty piece of cloth to wipe off your nose, and that it’s also then...

affectionate, gentlemanly, romantic, whatever word you wanna use, to take that dirty piece of cloth.

Justin: That same cloth!

Sydnee: And offer it to someone.

Justin: That same cloth.

Sydnee: Yah.

Justin: And we know—we knew about germs at this point.

Sydnee: So.

Justin: We knew.

Sydnee: And so, at this point, Kleenex kinda take over.

Justin: Yeah!

Sydnee: And a lot more people are using them. Now the handkerchief doesn't go away, the handkerchief has not gone away to this day.

Justin: [sadly] I know.

Sydnee: But definitely I think people are more likely to use Kleenex. Now, all of that goes away 'cause at this point I think we're kind of into today, where most of us would use Kleenex. And I'm gonna talk about the blowing the nose too. But the question is which one is more sanitary.

Now if you use a Kleenex in the way that you wipe your nose, put that immediately in a trash can, and wash your hands, I can see a great sanitary argument there. But I think we all have been guilty of taking that Kleenex and like shoving it into your pocket.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Or balling it up and putting it in your purse. How many of us have those memories? Going through a loved one's purse and finding balled-up Kleenex.

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: And you know, that happens.

Justin: Yeah, oh yeah.

Sydnee: And we all are guilty of that.

Justin: [quietly] Not me.

Sydnee: Also, even if you do throw it away.

Justin: Yip, yeah.

Sydnee: And you don't leave it on the podcasting desk. Or on the arm of the couch. Even if you throw it away, did you go and wash your hands immediately after?

Justin: Yeah, definitely. Right, if I didn't throw it away, probably not.

Sydnee: So there does become this sort of question like, well I mean with perfect use, yes this seems more sanitary. And certainly I think we can all agree that like if you think about a traditional handkerchief, a piece of cloth that you blow your nose on, sort of wrap up the snotty part to cover it, and then tuck it into your pocket or your bag or whatever. And then you've got this like dark, warm area with germs in it.

[Justin sighs heavily]

Sydnee: It's like you've just made yourself an incubator.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: Yeah yeah.

Sydnee: Like you—It's like you're trying to grow something.

Justin: None of this is any different from traditional handkerchiefs though. So far, that I can think of, right? Like this is all—

Sydnee: That's what I'm saying.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: No, I'm talking about traditional handkerchiefs.

Justin: That's—okay, yeah.

Sydnee: I'm saying you can see why that would be a problem.

Justin: Yip, understand.

Sydnee: And I don't think it's realistic to say "I have a reusable handkerchief, but as soon as I use it one time, I throw it in the washing machine." I think that would be difficult for most people. But then there's the sustainability issue.

Justin: Yeah. That's it.

Sydnee: You know, we throw away a lot of Kleenex. That's a lot of waste.

Justin: Mmm... Yeah, but it's gonna be a lot of waste if you wash those handkerchiefs as frequently as you should, which is every time you blow your nose. Sooo, I don't know. Pfft.

Sydnee: It was a big—There were articles written about it all throughout the pandemic about this idea that like handkerchiefs either should be done away with once and for all. Do we finally see? Like this is ridiculous, get rid of reusable handkerchiefs. And then other people who argued the other side of it. "No. This—just like—'Cause if you fold it right, you're hiding the germs better. And you're not throwing away the tissues. Let's be honest, you're not."

Justin: Just say you're a—

Sydnee: "And you're not washing your hands."

Justin: Just say you're a nasty dog who loves this dirty rag and move on. Stop trying to justify it. Kids could be reading that, you know what I mean? Kids. Our nation's kids!

Sydnee: If you use—I will say, the final word on whatever you use. After you use it, whether you're throwing it away or putting it in the washing machine, you do need to wash your hands. Which is something that people still, even after—I don't wanna say after. During, continuing COVID, people are not consistently washing their hands.

With all that being said though, wiping your snot is one thing. Should you be using these implements to blow your nose? So when you blow your nose, this probably doesn't surprise you, you generate a lot of pressure inside your nasal cavity. Okay? And is that a wise thing to do?

Justin: I mean, are you actually asking me, because I'm a little too smart to just like barrel into this—this question, knowing that there's some sort of trick coming.

Sydnee: Okay, there's a study.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: There's a study done at University of Virginia.

Justin: Studies, tricks, same thing with these scientists. [chuckles]

Sydnee: [chuckles] In the year 2000, and basically they put a thick liquid dye into the nose, they squirted it into the nose of adult volunteers for this study. And then they had them either sneeze, cough, or blow their nose. And they would make them sneeze by like putting something under their nose that would trigger a sneeze, okay? And then they actually did CAT scans of their sinuses afterwards.

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: And this is upsetting to me. What they found is that people who blew their nose had some of that dye in their sinus cavities afterwards.

Justin: Oh my gosh.

Sydnee: Whereas people who coughed or sneeze didn't. And it—it kind of gave rise to—

Justin: I mean that—The pressure, right?

Sydnee: The pressure that you generated by blowing in your nose.

Justin: Uh-huh.

Sydnee: Blasted some of that, not just out of your nose.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: But into your—

Justin: But back into the brain tube, that connects to the brain.

Sydnee: Well not into the brain tube. In the holes in your skull that we call "sinuses."

Justin: Mmm, the brain tubes.

Sydnee: And what they said, one of the researchers who's an infectious disease specialist, begged the question... If we are blasting some of that mucus—

Justin: [wheezes] You keep saying "blasting"! [laughs]

Sydnee: Well I mean that's what you're doing! You're generating an incredible amount of pressure.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: If you're blasting some of that mucus into your sinus cavities, and that mucus is laden with some sort of germ, viral or bacterial or whatever, are we worsening the condition? Are we setting ourselves up for exactly what I have just developed, which is a secondary sinus infection? After this... viral upper respiratory infection.

Now, the study did not go on to like chart rates of sinus infec—You know? 'Cause that's what you need to do, right? To prove whether or not this

mattered, you'd actually have to see, do people who blow their nose more often, or at all—

Justin: Which outcome.

Sydnee: Have more—Yes, have longer infections, require antibiotics more, have more sinus infections. Documented sinus infections, not just like yah think you had one but like actually whatever criteria you're gonna use, clinical or CAT scan. So you need to do more than that, but there's a question there. Is it bad to blow your nose?

Justin: [weakly] No.

Sydnee: And there are other risks. There have been documented cases. First of all, blowing your nose can lead to more nose bleeds, which doesn't seem that big a deal, right?

Justin: Yeah, yeah.

Sydnee: Okay, so your nose bleeds. Most of the time, that is a benign condition.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Can be serious but most of the time isn't. But also there have been cases of things like air in the brain or air in the inner ear, or even like as a result of blowing your nose, you blow your nose so hard that you blow air into your brain.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Seriously. There was a case of an orbital blowout fracture, like the orbit.

Justin: [laughing]

Sydnee: Your eye socket like breaking because you blew your nose so hard.

Justin: [wheezes]

Sydnee: And they're—you read these case presentations and like someone comes into the emergency room and they're kind of sleepy and out of it, and there's clear fluid running out of their nose, and that's their cerebral spinal fluid running out of their nose! And it's because they blew their nose so hard!

Justin: Did you—You need—I'm assuming... that is—

Sydnee: Yes, you need cerebral spinal fluid. Yeah, you don't want it running out your nose, that's usually a bad thing. So now, again, these are incredibly rare, right? The reason they're case reports is—

Justin: Incredibly rare—Incredibly rare—

Sydnee: —because they're incredibly rare.

Justin: Incredibly rare but Sydnee did wanna take a moment just to make sure that was somewhere in your brain every time you blow your nose, from now until the end of time.

Sydnee: Well—

Justin: Just let—[indistinct babbling]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: That's like Sydnee's version of like "Doesn't she look tired?." Like it just slips it in there a little bit. Just like—

Sydnee: I—

Justin: Just something to think about.

Sydnee: Listen, I—If blowing your nose was clinically proven to be a good idea medically, a healthy idea, then I think in an assessment of risks and benefits.

Justin: [quietly] Yeah.

Sydnee: You would look at these things and say "Oh my gosh, this is incredibly rare. This doesn't weigh in." But if you can't prove that blowing

your nose is a good idea... You start to look at these rare complications, 'cause you're like "Well, was it even a good idea?," you know, "Was there any benefit?."

There was another do—study done in 2021, and I think this might be a middle ground. For you.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Normally I abhor a middle ground, but please go on, Sydnee.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Blowing out noses has not been proven to be helpful. It feels good.

Justin: Yeah. Which is helpful.

Sydnee: But it also might blow mucus back up into our sinuses, and maybe that's bad. We don't know, maybe.

Justin: Or as you've demonstrated, explode your brain. So I think my pleasure of it will be somewhat subdued from this point forward.

Sydnee: So this study looked at is there a safer way to blow your nose. So, when you blow your nose, Justin... Do you pinch one nostril closed?

Justin: I think we've established that I do.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Can't really blast it out without that pressure.

Sydnee: This study looked specifically at whether or not it was safer— Well, not necessarily—Safer in terms of the pressure generated. So if it turned the pressure that was generated inside the si—inside the nasal passages, if you just blew your nose instead of pinching one nostril shut.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And it looked at the objective clearing of the nose that you can get in that way. And what they found is that if you just blow your nose. So—and what I mean is you don't shut one nostril off. Just blow your nose. The pressure you generate is like half of the pressure you generate when you close off one nostril. Okay?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So we're worried about this sort of incredibly rare, you know, unicorn complications.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: This does decrease that risk, right? 'Cause the pressure's so much lower. They also found that objectively speaking, you clear your nasal passages just as well when you blow both at the same time, as you do when you do one at a time. Now—

Justin: Well, that's just not true.

Sydnee: The only hang up is that subjectively, meaning when they ask people "How clear does your nose feel?," they felt that it was clearer when they pinched off one nostril and blew one nostril at a time. Even though objectively it wasn't, they felt like their nostrils were clear.

Justin: Maybe they were just confused, due to the huge hole they'd just blown in their skull, with their awesome nose blow. Possibly.

Sydnee: Well you know, the average adult, when they have a cold, they found blows their nose like 45 times a day. So what I would posit is perhaps we need to blow our nose a little less. Less vigorously. You know when you're goin' for it. You know when you're really trying to blow it out. You know what I'm talking about.

Justin: Every—Every—Hey, Syd? Every single time, okay?

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: No half measures here. I live my life a quarter-mile at a time, okay? I use all eight cylinders. All eight, all the time.

Sydnee: What I'm saying is calm it down. I'm saying calm it down. Don't blow your nose quite so hard. Consider this technique; blow both nostrils at the same time, don't pinch off one nostril at a time. These may all be safer alternatives. You still clear out your nose.

Justin: [quietly] Okay.

Sydnee: That's all I'm saying, is just—

Justin: We'll take it under advisement.

Sydnee: Is just take it down a notch.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: You don't have to sound like Tommy Smirl when he blows his nose.

Justin: It's brutal, folks.

Sydnee: Yeah. And I—All I'm sayin' is that—just calm it down.

Justin: Just calm it down.

Sydnee: And wash your hands.

Justin: Thank you so much for listening to our podcast, we hope you've enjoyed yourself. Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our programme. And big thanks to everybody that supported us during the MaxFun Drive, we very much appreciate your support, it means the world to us.

That is gonna do it for us for this week, so until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

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

[outro music plays]

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