

Sawbones 112: The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits

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Justin: Hey folks, Justin McElroy here. Listen, just wanna warn you ahead of time while this week's show will still be free of profanity as you've come to expect from us. We do get into some adult topics. So if you're listening with the kids, you might wanna make sure that they're comfortable with that, I guess. [chuckles]

[Sydnee laughs]

Justin: I don't know what your relationship is like with your kids.

Sydnee: I'd have that whole birds and the bees talk with them before listening to this episode, if I were you.

Justin: Do go ahead and knock that out. Thanks.

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.

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

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: Sydnee, welcome to the show.

Sydnee: Thank you, Justin.

Justin: I dunno why I just said that.

Sydnee: How are you today? Are you feeling better?

Justin: Yeah, my tummy's feeling better. We had some tummy illness in the McElroy household.

Sydnee: We-

Justin: It was a not cool week.

Sydnee: No, we all- it struck poor Charlie first and then it took me down the next day. Oh, two days later.

Justin: On my b-day.

Sydnee: On, on Justin's birthday. Unfortunately.

Justin: Sadly.

Sydnee: I was quite, I don't think I made it out of bed other than to get our child to sleep the entire day.

Justin: But we're doing better now. My tummy's doing better. My brain, however, is not.

Sydnee: Well what's going on with your brain? I mean, other than like the, I mean, I know like, I mean, I'm married to you, I get the-

Justin: Oh gosh.

Sydnee: - you know, what's going on with your brain-

Justin: Oh, golly.

Sydnee: - but, the new thing,

Justin: Okay. So Charlie likes to watch a little kiddie videos sometimes when we're like-

Sydnee: As in kiddie, as in kids, not kitty.

Justin: She probably would like kitty videos though.

Sydnee: I'm sure she would, everyone on the internet loves kitty videos, so.

Justin: She– there's this one she likes and the song is stuck in my head and I can't get it out. Hop little bunnies, hop, hop, hop. Hop little bunnies, hop, hop, hop. Hop little bunnies, hop, little bun– I don't know the words.

Sydnee: Hop little bunnies, hop and stop.

Justin: Hop and stop. Okay.

Sydnee: Hop and stop. It has a– that's a kind of a creepy song, because it has this part where the bunnies are sleeping and the line is, "They're so still, are they ill?"

Justin: And it immediately says, "No, wake up bunnies."

Sydnee: Yeah, they're not ill. But for a second, I thought it was about to take a dark turn that song.

Justin: I nee-

Sydnee: Like why is she listening to a song about a bunch of dead bunnies?

Justin: I need to get this crummy song outta my head and you're the only one who can help me, Sydnee. Do you have something to help get bunnies outta my brain?

Sydnee: No, but I have something about bunnies, which is related.

Justin: Fine.

Sydnee: So you wanna hear, you wanna hear a crazy story about bunnies?

Justin: I'm so ready to hear a crazy story about bunnies.

Sydnee: Well, first of all, I want to thank Julie for this crazy story about a woman named Mary Toft and bunnies because-

Justin: [sings] "Hey, Julie, look what you do to me". [continues singing quietly]

Sydnee: [chuckles] Sharing an awesome story about a lady and some bunnies is what she's doing.

Justin: Oh, not doing that.

Sydnee: No. But thank you, 'cause I was not familiar with Ms Toft, or her strange medical history. And I am thrilled to share this story with you now.

Justin: Lay it out for me.

Sydnee: So Mary Toft was born in 1701.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Mary Denyer is her maiden name, in Godalming, Godalming, Godalming? Surrey, England.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: She was a servant. She was of the peasant class. She was 25 years old at the time that these events took place. What happened to her prior to that, not much record, right? 'Cause she was a poor servant, not, you know.

Justin: It's not a very good story so far, Syd.

Sydnee: Well, things get better.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So she is– she's married to, by the way, to a journeyman clothier. Do– did you know– Named Joshua Toft. Do you know what a journeyman is? 'Cause I didn't.

Justin: He's somebody who's finishing apprenticeship but is not yet a master craftsman. Correct?

Sydnee: Did you, did you read that?

Justin: No, I play video games. So like that's, that's a crafting ranking.

Sydnee: Uh-oh.

Justin: That in your crafting skill, as your crafting skill improves.

Sydnee: I thought it was like Steve Perry.

Justin: Oh, no.

Sydnee: Like a journey meant Journey.

Justin: No. Okay. I see you wrote that joke here in your notes, so you wouldn't forget that good joke.

Sydnee: I wouldn't forget. [laughs]

Justin: That good, good joke.

Sydnee: So I wouldn't forget he was a member of Journey. [laughs]

Justin: Right. Okay. Got it. Yeah.

Sydnee: I do love Journey, I just can't name any of the members of the band-

Justin: You don't want.

Sydnee: – without putting them in my notes. [laughs]

Justin: You don't wanna let that gem slip away.

Sydnee: Shut up. Oh, I didn't know what a journeyman was.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Do you know where the name comes from?

Justin: No. Actually I don't.

Sydnee: That it's a reference to a day's journey or a day's work. Because you could– you were allowed to charge for each day's work that you did.

Justin: Mm-hmm. I don't understand much–

Sydnee: And it had– the word journey somehow is connected to the term– to the old– the vulgar Latin, was the term I found, for day and–

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: I don't know. Anyway, that's where that comes from. Well, I didn't know that.

Justin: Good to know.

Sydnee: That doesn't really matter. I just thought that that was an interesting, I didn't know what a journeyman was.

Justin: Well, thank you for the sidebar.

Sydnee: Anyway, Mary was documented to have been pregnant in August of 1726. We know that, but unfortunately she had miscarried.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Oddly though, what we find in records after that is she still appeared to be pregnant.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And the story gets stranger because it's, it's also written that on September 27th, so a month after she had... had had her miscarriage, presumably, she went into labor.

Justin: Weird. Okay.

Sydnee: So she called upon her neighbor to help her out, to help deliver her baby. 'Cause this was a time when you wouldn't necessarily have called a doctor. Right? You would've caught him midwife, but her neighbor was nearby and able to help her. And she also called her mother-in-law and eventually her sister-in-law. Her sister-in-law was actually a midwife. To come help deliver her baby. And instead of a baby, they delivered what was described as a liverless cat.

Justin: A liverless cat?

Sydnee: I think that's strange 'cause that to me, insinuates that they dissected it.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: How else did you know that it was liver- I mean, I don't think you can tell if a cat has a liver by looking at it.

Justin: Also that's kind of burying the lead, you know? I think you just need to say a cat. Like it- you don't need to further make it like, "And get this. It was a Calicoooooo." Like, okay. But, but like a cat?

Sydnee: [laughs] That didn't- But I mean, strangers still, it didn't have a liver.

Justin: Yeah-

Sydnee: That's the weird part. [laughs]

Justin: But like here's the weird part. No, it's not. It's really not the weird part.

Sydnee: I mean, and I'm assuming that our cats have livers, but I guess you can't tell by looking at them, like they look like-

Justin: Maybe they look jaundiced?

Sydnee: I mean, they're fine.

Justin: They look jaundiced?

Sydnee: Well, I mean, I don't know. They have fur.

Justin: They have fur.

Sydnee: Anyway.

Justin: Okay, anyway.

Sydnee: So they called for Dr John Howard, who was an OB from nearby Guildford, to come check this out because, right? They delivered a cat.

Justin: And that's weird.

Sydnee: And that's weird.

Justin: Again, just to recap.

Sydnee: [laughs] That's weird. He was not thrilled about this. Like you got this story, he got word. And he was like, "Yeah, I don't know about this." So they sent him... the remains-

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: To examine. To kind of entice him to come check her out. Uh, what he received- He wrote- because he kept a record of all of these happenings. There's lots of records of this actually, as I'll talk about, he wrote that it appeared to be, and this is from his journal, "three legs of a cat of Tabby color and one leg of a rabbit. In them were three pieces of the backbone of an eel".

Justin: Oh, the what?!

Sydnee: The backbone of an eel. [chuckles]

Justin: Eels have bones?

Sydnee: Ca- Well, I don't know. 'Cause this is what I was gonna say. This doctor who is an obstetrician is very skilled in veterinary-

Justin: Yeah. I guess he knew very-

Sydnee: — like, medicine. I don't know anything about animals

Justin: Jack of all trades in, in this time period.

Sydnee: So this got Dr Howard intrigued and he took off to go visit Mary in her hometown and, and check her out and see what this was all about. By the time he got there the next morning, they presented him- the patient and her family, presented him with more animal parts that they had supposedly delivered overnight. He took those to examine and when show, he showed up again the next morning they had yet more animal parts to show him.

So at this point he decides, "You know what? I gotta kind of hang around. To monitor this woman, 'cause every time I leave, she gives birth to animals and I'm missing it. I'm missing the action. So I think I'm just going to camp out here and monitor the situation."

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Which he does, and over the next month, according to Dr Howard, she delivered a rabbit's head, a cat's legs, and in one day, nine baby rabbits. Not living, unfortunately.

Justin: That would've been a thing. That would've been-

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: -quite a feat. That is crazy.

Sydnee: And this is written in hi- I mean, this is, this is documented by Dr Howard, that this woman is giving birth to these animals and bits and things.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And like I said, he- not only is he writing this down, he's actually sending out letters to other doctors. Because at the time, you know, I mean now we take for granted that if, you know, if I need to consult with one of my colleagues or something, I'll just, you know, call them. Or we have secret texting apps that we can talk to each other on or email them.

Justin: Uh, madam,. If a woman delivered nine dead baby rabbits, your colleague would read about it on BuzzFeed.

[Sydnee chuckles]

Justin: Like the same day.

Sydnee: [laughs] I'm sure this is already on BuzzFeed.

Justin: You would not be saying by telegraph, "My dear fellow, did you hear the ne-"

"Yeah. Yeah. Like, I have Twitter. Yes, I heard. What, are you kidding me?"

Sydnee: [laughs] But no, this– At this time, you would've sent a very well, well written, carefully worded letter to all of your colleagues to say, "Hey, I think I could use some help. Get this, there's this lady." And this is from one of his letters.

One of such letters on November 9th, "I have taken or delivered the poor woman of three more rabbits, all three half grown, one of them a dunn rabbit. The last leap'd 23 hours in her uterus before it died. As soon as the 11th rabbit was taken away, up leap'd the 12th rabbit, which is now leaping. If you have any curious person that is pleased to come post, may see another leap in her uterus and shall take it from her if he pleases. I do not know how many rabbits may be behind."

Justin: I'm freaking out. This is– this is the most bizarre thing I've ever heard in my life.

Sydnee: that's the thing I think that is most interesting at this point is that Dr Howard is writing letters, not saying, "Okay, there's something weird that– Like, there's something odd here that we're missing." It's, "This woman's giving birth to rabbits and I am certain she's about to give birth to more, so if you wanna come deliver some rabbits from this woman..."

Justin: Big ups this guy for even like constructing sentences. They're lucky they didn't just get like a charcoal etching of his face, like, "Whaaaat?!" That face. Did Dr Howard have that face in his cannon?

Sydnee: I love the "I do not know how many rabbits may be behind".

Justin: "Homie, you have to get down here."

Sydnee: There could be endless rabbits. [laughs]

Justin: "The situation is off the chain. This woman's delivering bunnies like nobody's biz, you got– you gotta get over here."

Sydnee: Now, as I think would've been the fa– would've been appropriate at the time, he sent letters to the King's court, King George I, and, they were of course, [chuckles] intrigued with this news.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: There's a woman in their kingdom delivering bunnies. And he sent [laughs] the-

Justin: [laughs] Which has gotta be a portent of some sort in this time period.

Sydnee: Yeah, really?

Justin: For certain.

Sydnee: Like, your crops are either really great or all the women are gonna deliver bunnies next year.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I don't know. Something.

Justin: Something.

Sydnee: One of the two is gonna happen. So the king sent his Swiss surgeon anatomist to the king, Nathaniel St Andre, as well as the secretary to the Prince of Wales, Samuel Molyneux to go check it out and report back to him.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: You know, what is- what's the deal? Um, St Andre, and this is interesting to know, was not known for being a brilliant doctor, anatomist, surgeon or any of these things. It was widely believed that he had been hired by the king mainly because he was able to speak German, which was the King's native language, and he liked other people who spoke German to be around him. And so that's why many of his court- So he was already kind of not admired-

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Necessarily by the general public. Okay.

Justin: Yeah. I'm glad we have the B team on this.

Sydnee: [laughs] And it is, it is worth noting that he believed– St Andre believed Mary even before he arrived in Guildford. He was– he had already bought the whole story. He was going to see the amazing woman who delivered rabbits, not try to figure out what this bit of weirdness is. He got there on November 15th already convinced that this was the real deal. By the way, at this point, Mary has been moved to Guildford, which is slightly larger, to be closer to where– I guess Dr Howard got tired of camping out-

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: ... I don't know, out back in the shed or whatever, and said, "Wanna come to where my office is?"

Justin: Well, you see a woman deliver a dozen rabbits, it's kinda like I get it. Yeah. Like I said, "I get what's going on here. Why don– call, call me when it's a, a mongoose."

Sydnee: No, he moved your closer. Which was another thing that– Remember we read that in one of those old obs– obstetrics books that you should probably try to be somewhere close to where your OB lives, so it's convenient for them.

Justin: Mm-hmm. Sure.

Sydnee: So she did that. So she moved to Guildford, to be closer to Dr Howard, where he could deliver all of her rabbits, and when St Andre got there, and the secretary, they– she had some more rabbits. She gave birth to more rabbits in their presence.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: The pair examined the rabbits. And it's interesting, 'cause they note at this point. It's documented that they– they notice something about the lungs and the livers of the rabbits that made them question whether or not the story may be true.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Now, I don't know what that is. Again, we're talking about some like guys who aren't veterinarians, who are doing some like really detailed

animal work, and also still kind of missing the point that she's giving birth to bunnies.

Justin: Like I'm freaking out, this is the weirdest. I know like I'm not adding anything constructive here. I understand this. You've had time to live with this story for a few days. Like, I can't- I can't even process it.

There is literally no situation, th- how this resolves, where it is not like, completely just like... upending my worldview. There's no part of this. There's no- this does not work out okay. For me, in the end, this is absolutely astounding.

Sydnee: It is interesting how quick everybody is just buying this strange situation. And maybe it just speaks to the time. But I think that there's also something really important at play here. So St Andre bought this story. He sent word back to the king, "This is legit, this woman's giving birth to bunnies." And why would all these doctors be so eager to believe this story? Well, there is one thing that is compelling. There was the theory of the time of something called "maternal impression".

Justin: Oh, what's that?

Sydnee: Maternal impression was the theory that basically all the things that a mom would do or feel or see or experience while she was pregnant, could leave some sort of impression on the child. And it was, more importantly, it was the explanation we had for any kind of congenital defects that a child might have. We basically blamed it all on mom.

Justin: Now that-

Sydnee: Well, it's because you, you know, let's say you were sad during your pregnancy? Then they'll say, "Well, that's why you have depression. Your mom was sad a lot while she was pregnant. So that's why you're depressed." Or, you know, "Your mom read a really scary book that one time while she was pregnant and so now her child is very nervous as a result."

Justin: There's a They Might Be Giants song called Sensurround about a mom who goes to see a movie in Sensurround, which is a technology where the floor would shake to heighten the audio effects as I understand it. And

it's about how it changed the baby in her womb. I don't think it's a scientific song though. It's not on "Here Comes Science". To be clear.

Sydnee: [chuckles] No, but this would've been very in line with the thinking of the 1700's, in fact-

Justin: And that hung around a while, right? Because I remember books that you've had from the 1800's that are- talk about how women shouldn't see scary movies.

Sydnee: This actually stayed around until the 1900's.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: It was the early to mid 1900's when we finally- and there were papers written trying to disprove this even before that.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: But that's finally when it kind of fell out of general medical favor.

Justin: Okay, but how do you reconcile that with like, what we still tell people to day about like putting classical music, or like talking to the uterus, that kind of thing, while the mother's pregnant?

Sydnee: Well I mean, I think that it's very different. Well, one, I mean, I would question- I think you would have to evaluate each of those claims in particular before you talked about how- How important is it really to listen to classical music while you're pregnant?

Justin: Yeah. There's some suspect-

Sydnee: I don't know, I would need more numbers. I think that anything that- [laughs]

Justin: This is gonna surprise you, there's some suspect sources in terms of pregnancy information out there on the internet.

Sydnee: That is true. And this is-

Justin: [in a high-pitched voice] "Good, good news. Your baby's a lemon now. It's lemon sized. Can you believe it?"

Sydnee: This is what I would say. Being pregnant is hard and whatever makes you feel better, whatever– listening to whatever music, taking your soothing baths or–

Justin: Drinking.

Sydnee: No, not that.

Justin: Not that one.

Sydnee: But what is safe and makes you feel better, is good. It's good for you and the baby, 'cause generally that kinda– Generally the two are pretty, you know, linked.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Pretty connected.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And pregnancy is hard.

Justin: Got it.

Sydnee: Okay? I'll just leave you to that.

Justin: Pregnancy is hard. I believe you 100%. No, I remember it was– it was a nightmare for me. I–

Sydnee: Oh, was it? Was it?

Justin: I cut back my drinking some, so I wouldn't make you feel bad and–

Sydnee: Yeah. Tell me how much it was a–

Justin: Foot– the foot rubs. Oh, the foot rubs.

Sydnee: Uh-huh. Oh man. That must have been– yeah. You'll pay for this later.

Justin: Slept with a giant pillow, no room for the J-man. It was rough. It was rough.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Justin: So I'm sorry, you were saying dear?

Sydnee: Anyway, the most famous example of maternal impression I could give you is what Joseph Merrick said. You know who Joseph Merrick was?

Justin: Uh, the artist formally known as The Elephant Man.

Sydnee: Exactly. Known as The Elephant Man for his, you know, congenital defects and malformations. He blamed his appearance on an incident where his pregnant mother was startled by– there was like a parade, there were elephants in the street, and there was an elephant that kind of almost stepped on her and it startled her. And he said that that is why he looked the way he did. That was why he was called The Elephant Man. He documented this. This is what– this is what he believed.

Justin: Oh yeah. Well I don't know. Poor guy, whatever gets you through the night, E-man.

Sydnee: Anyway, Mary. The why does this tie into Mary Toft, because she claimed that while she was pregnant, she had been out in the fields with some of– some other women and she had seen a rabbit and she had tried to catch it, because she wanted to eat it.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Because you know, that would've been good, good eating.

Justin: You're right.

Sydnee: You know, you wouldn't have, you wouldn't have been able to afford one of those all the time.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: She couldn't catch it and she dreamed of rabbits and craved rabbit after that, but she couldn't afford to go buy one. And she thought this is why this all happened. And the doctors were eager to believe this. 'Cause like I said, people believe the theory of maternal impression. Many doctors did until the 1900's.

Justin: Sydnee, what was happening?!

Sydnee: Justin, I'm gonna tell you what was happening right after we go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go.

[ad break]

Justin: Syd, please don't hold out on me anymore.

Sydnee: All right. So in the time that all this has been going on, that Mary Toft has been giving birth to all these rabbits. Since she's been moved to Guildford and now the King's court is in on it, the media has gotten involved. And people are fascinated by this story.

This was a time when it would've been popular to go see– to like go pay to see medical oddities– You know, what they would've referred to at the time as freak shows. This was kind of when this was very much the fashion. This would've been your entertainment. You don't go see a movie, you go see someone who has some rare medical condition for fun.

So a lot of people wanted to come see her, wanted to come hear about her, wanted to meet her. Would've been willing to pay. The story was published far and wide in a lot of different newspapers. It's also interesting, it led to a huge decrease in rabbit sales for eating purposes. Rabbit stew, which was a popular dish prior to this, fell out of favor for a while, while this was catching national attention.

Justin: Well, yeah, because rabbits might be babies. Apparently.

Sydnee: Sometimes you give birth to rabbits.

Justin: Sometimes we give birth to rabbits. That's just a thing by humans I guess.

Sydnee: Now the king in, in light of all this that was going on, was smart enough to be still somewhat unconvinced. So he sent another surgeon to check her out. [laughs]

Justin: A good one this time.

Sydnee: Dr Siriacus Allers. So Dr Allers wa- He went, he examined Mary and he was skeptical. He watched her give birth to some more rabbits and he was, again, not sure that what he was seeing was real. So he took bunnies back to his lab. And he dissected them again. We've got lots of- lots of people just knowing lots about animals. And he found that the pellets, as in like their poop.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: That was in their rectums.

Justin: I'm with you.

Sydnee: That had not come out yet.

Justin: Oh yeah. Got it.

Sydnee: Contained bits of corn and hay and straw.

Justin: Now that would be odd, because...

Sydnee: They had supposedly just been, he had witnessed them being born. So when did they eat corn-

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: - or hay or straw?

Justin: Now, did she eat corn or hay or straw? That would explain everything.

Sydnee: No, it wouldn't. It would not.

Justin: [laughs] Sorry.

Sydnee: Although at the time, you probably could have made that argument and half of the people would've been like, "Hmm, hmm. Yeah, definitely. Well, she dreamed about corn, obviously. That's what it is."

Justin: "Mm-hmm. Oh yeah, that makes sense."

Sydnee: So he reported this back to the king and said, "Listen, I think this is a fraud. I think something– this is not right. Like, women don't give birth rabbits. [laughs] I don't think this is right." And St Andre and Dr Howard are totally freaking out, they're scrambling, they're like, "Eh, we gotta get more people on our side" because now the King's got one of his great advisors who are going, "No, no, no, no, no, this is not true".

So they call in Sir Richard Manningham, who was a very well respected, well known doctor. Took care of a lot of rich, you know, kind of royalty in London. And he came to check out and verify the story. He watched Mary give birth to what he identified as a hog's bladder.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And he did not buy it.

Justin: A whole butcher shop in there, huh?

Sydnee: [laughs] But he was also willing to go along with Dr St Andre and Howard and not anything at the moment.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: He was like, "Well, I don't think this is real, but I won't tell the king what I think just yet".

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Instead, they decide that they're going to move Mary to London. Where they can really get all the doctors they can find in on this medical mystery. So on November 29th, she's moved at Lacey's Bagno, which was a

bathhouse. She's moved there and she is monitored round the clock by dukes, basically.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: They're just- they- [laughs] they all have different- I guess that's what a duke does. I never knew-

Justin: I've always wondered. And apparently you watch a woman in hopes that she'll give birth to a rabbit.

Sydnee: Just go to the bathhouse and stare at this woman and if she gives birth to a bunny, call me. Well, don't call me. You have to send somebody for me.

Justin: "I never thought I would get the call. I thought when I got to be a duke, it was just an honorary thing. Can't believe you're calling me up. Time for the big show."

Sydnee: And basically in addition to watching her, and all the dukes watching her, they're just saying, "Any doctors who wanna come take a crack at this, you know, come on down."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: "Show on up, tell us what you think is going on." Strangely at this point, now that she is under constant monitoring...

Justin: Dries up, huh?

Sydnee: The bunnies stop appearing. She continues to appear to go into labor.

Justin: Little bunnies hop and stop.

Sydnee: Hop and stop. They stop hopping out of her uterus. And while she does the, like I said, it looks like she's going into labor. She also does become ill at the time. There are no bunnies. A lot of doctors show up, there's a media circus going on. People are coming to London to give- to come view the rabbit woman.

And basically it's crazy 'cause at this time, if you were to poll, not just the public, but like the doctors who were all coming and seeing her, about 50, 50 as to who bought the, "Nah, no, she's just giving birth the bunnies. You know, sometimes, sometimes you give birth to bunnies."

Justin: We weren't good at this stuff.

Sydnee: No. About half of the doctors thought it was probably not true though.

Justin: Good on you guys.

Sydnee: In this time, Dr St Andre again, calls upon another well respected doctor and anatomist, Dr James Douglas to come check her out. And again, same kind of thing, thinks like there's no way this is true. But agrees to keep quiet, although him and Manningham now have teamed up and are– they're gonna uncover this fraud.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So a lot of investigation goes on now between November 29th and December 3rd. A lot of people are going and interviewing her family, visiting her hometown, trying to expose what they now believe to be some sort of fraud, right? And in the meantime, Mary is still not delivering any bunnies.

On December 3rd, Dr St Andre publishes his official account of the whole incident so that he can get really famous. *A Short Narrative of the Extraordinary Delivery of Rabbits*. You can still read this if you like. This is horrible timing because on December 4th, a porter is caught sneaking a baby rabbit into Mary.

Justin: Oh man. That's gonna– that's not– that's not gonna help your sales, my dude.

Sydnee: He uh– He claims that her sister-in-law had bribed him.

Justin: Sneaking a baby rabbit into Mary. Mary is not a building. Okay?

Sydnee: [laughs] No, I mean, into where she was.

Justin: Okay. Thank you. Okay. Thank you for the clarity.

Sydnee: No. Not, not physically inside her. No, I mean like he was sneaking it back into where she was housed at the bathhouse.

Justin: Okay. Okay. Fine. That– thank you. Thank you. Thank you for the clarification.

Sydnee: What adds ammunition to this argument is that investigators now uncover that her husband– they go and interview merchants at the local market where they're from. They uncover that her husband had been buying an unusually large number of small rabbits over the last month.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And so everybody kind of agrees, "Okay, well, clearly we know what's going on." So they start questioning Mary and, you know, demanding that she tell the truth and she denies it and denies it and keeps insisting that she didn't. And this goes on for two days until December 6th, when finally Manningham says, "Listen, if you're really giving birth to bunnies, we're just gonna have to, we gotta stop it. So we're gonna have to do surgery to figure out what's going on up there so we can stop the bunny"-

Justin: Bold play.

Sydnee: – "bunny parade." And, you know, he calls her bluff and it works. On the seventh, she confessed her fraud.

Justin: Also P.S. kind of messed up, just to point it– just your patriarchy break. kind of messed up that A, she was moved against her will somewhere. B, this guy's like, "Listen, we're gonna have to do this surgery," and use that to basically bully her into–

Sydnee: Absolutely. Abso– whatever you think of what Mary Toft was doing, this– she was definitely a victim of the, the patriarchal times 'cause she was, she is now being like kept against her will in a London bathhouse and examined by lots of doctors and-

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: – threatened with surgery.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So-

Justin: Anyway-

Sydnee: So-

Justin: moving on.

Sydnee: moving on from that. what she admits is that– so you probably wanna know how she got away with this. How did 50% of the doctors who saw her-

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: – buy it? So she had actually been pregnant and had actually miscarried. She got someone, she implicated many people when she was interrogated, and nobody's really sure what was the truth and what was said out of fear and you know, duress. Maybe it was her sister-in-law, maybe it was her sister, maybe her mother-in-law, it may have involved Dr Howard himself. It's really not clear. But-

Justin: I would think it would have to. Because– And I'll tell you why, because the... Like the lines about the rabbit like hopping around in her uterus. Like, that very much is trying to imply that there was action going on there. Which of course there would've been none.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: Which seems like a weird mistake to make.

Sydnee: Well-

Justin: Repeatedly.

Sydnee: There was something he would've found. And I think she could have gotten away fooling him for a little bit. Not for as long as she, you know, supposedly did, but for a little bit, because what happened is that

after the miscarriage, like I said, she had gotten an accomplice to- 'Cause her cervix was still open at the time-

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: To insert the body of a cat and the head of a rabbit into her uterus.

[Justin sighs heavily in disdain]

Sydnee: She continued this with the aforementioned baby rabbits and various animal parts, by hiding them on her person. She had sewn a special pocket into her skirt where she would hide them and then when people weren't looking, she would insert them either into her.. If she couldn't into her uterus at that point, in her vagina. And then later then the doctor would deliver it from her vagina. Not, you know, not looking to see had it come out of her uterus, assuming it had initially come out of her uterus, pulling it out of the vaginal cavity and voila, she was giving birth the bunnies.

Justin: Some challenge- challenging ideas. Some challenging visual concepts on this episode of *Sawbones*. Woof.

Sydnee: So my question of course-

Justin: My ha- I'm sorry for the audio there, my hand was literally covering my mouth in utter terror.

Sydnee: It is, it is awful. And it may make you wonder why would someone ever do this?

Justin: Oh yes.

Sydnee: So basically, for reasons that seem sort of mundane in light of how crazy this story is, the fame, the money. Like I said, this was a time when, if you had some sort of medical condition that made you appear uncommon, you know, not like most people, then you could make a lot of money off that living.

And so she knew that, and this was Mary's play to try to support herself and have a better lifestyle and support her family was to be, you know, to join one of these kind of medical shows and let people come see her as the

amazing woman who gave birth to bunnies. And that was the, that was the plan.

Justin: Yeah. I mean-

Sydnee: For the money.

Justin: Once you put the initial work investment in, it's just dividends from there on out. I mean maybe you have to pop out a bunny once every couple of months, you know, just to keep the mystique alive.

Sydnee: Well, well, what she- [laughs] what she was banking on, and what she turned out to be right about for a while, is that people were willing to believe this. That women, when they were pregnant, that- First of all, that were so willing to believe that whatever woman does when she's pregnant is probably to blame for any issues that a baby has. That it- "Well, that's probably mom's fault."

So because men are so eager to believe that anyway, yeah, they'll buy that I gave birth to a bunny because I dreamed about eating a bunny. Men'll buy that. And she was right. Many, many men. And I say, men, 'cause the doctors who were attending her were men. Many men did buy that.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So what happened to them all?

Justin: Tell me.

Sydnee: So Manningham and Douglas, having proved her fraud, maintained their respect in the community. They didn't like to be tainted by this affair, but they were fine. St Andre, however, lost his favor with the court after this. All his patients left him, and he died in poverty in an alms house years later.

Justin: Oh man.

Sydnee: Dr Howard was charged with being part of the conspiracy, but charges against him were just later dropped and he basically went back to business as usual in Guildford. Didn't lose any patients, still had a thriving

practice. In general, the medical profession really took a hit from this.
[laughs]

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Doctors were already thought to be kind of winging it, making it up, which, you know, we were. This didn't help that reputation. It hu- it hurt the reputation of King George's court at the time. And it is the subject of many plays and poems and there's all kinds of satire out this- out there about this that you can find about, you know, basically making fun of stupid doctors who would believe that a woman gave birth to rabbits.

Justin: And what happened to Mary?

Sydnee: So Mary was arrested after this. She was charged with, this was the charge, being a notorious and vile cheat and imposter. Which was something you could be charged with back then.

Justin: Apparently.

Sydnee: Unfortunately you can't be charged with that anymore.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: Luckily for our politicians, right?

Justin: [makes zinger instrumental noises]

Sydnee: Everybody loves those jokes. She ended up serving about five months. And then she was released, mainly because the whole case embarrassed many more people than it was worth. So the court and the medical profession just wanted it to go away. Like, "Let's not make a trial of this whole thing. We were wrong. We looked dumb. Just let her go, go home, let her go home."

Occasionally there was a local duke who would let her have a few extra bucks by showing up at dinner parties. And then his friends would be entertained by, "This is Mary. Do you remember that woman who gave birth bunnies, but didn't?" It's documented that at some point later in her life, she

was arrested again for theft, but released. She had a daughter at some point, and then she died at some point in 1763.

The only reason we know that for sure is that, at the time you wouldn't have mentioned, in like the church bulletin, you wouldn't have known that someone of that, like social strata had passed away, but because of her history, she was listed-

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: As someone who had recently died and her epitaph was listed as "Mary Toft, widow, the imposteress rabbit".

Justin: Now she wasn't pretending to be a rabbit. That's an inaccurate epitaph, but I guess things get lost in translation.

Sydnee: I don't know. Maybe in old English that means, I don't know. The imposteress rabbit.

Justin: Thank you to Maximum Fun Network for having us as a part of their, their family. You can find all their great shows at maximumfund.org. Hey, we're doing a live show here in our hometown of Huntington, West Virginia, December 21st, at 8:00 PM at the Big Sandy Superstore Arena. You can get tickets if you go to bit.ly/candlenights2, it's a show with *My Brother, My Brother and Me*, and it's gonna be a lot of fun and you should come out. Tickets are like 20 bucks, I think. It's gonna be a good-

Sydnee: So come see us.

Justin: Come see us. It'll be fun.

Sydnee: Joining the holiday festivities.

Justin: Uh, thanks to The Taxpayers for letting you use their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. Thanks to you, for listening. Thanks to you, Syd. Great show.

Sydnee: Thank you too, Justin. Thanks for getting better and showing up this week.

Justin: It's my pleasure. Uh, until next Wednesday, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy

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

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