

Sawbones 56: Insomnia

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Intro (Clint McElroy):

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

[theme music plays]

Justin:

Hello, everybody, and welcome to Sawbones: A Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine. I am your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

Sydnee, welcome to the program.

Sydnee:

Thank you for welcoming me to the—

Justin:

Well, we've been—

Sydnee:

It's my program too.

Justin:

I, well, our program. It's— We've been on, um... parental leave for a while.

Charlie:

[cooing in the background]

Sydnee:

That's true, that's true. I—

Justin:

We—

Sydnee:

Should we start making Chuck introduce herself too or—

Justin:

Yeah, hey, introduce yourself, Chuck?

Charlie:

[grunts]

Justin:

Okay. That's about as good—

Sydnee:

Well, she kind of made a noise.

Justin:

That's not bad.

Sydnee:

It was kind of good.

Justin:

It's as good as we're gonna get.

Sydnee:

She's busy. She's eating right now.

Justin:

[laughs] Um, I'm exhausted. So tired.

Sydnee:

Yeah. So, uh, get this. Babies don't sleep much. [laughs]

Justin:

They hate sleeping.

Sydnee:

Well, that's not true. Babies sleep a lot when you don't want them to.

Justin:

If you ever said sleep like a baby, you should punch yourself in the face. It doesn't— I said on Twitter, "My baby sleeps like a frat boy fighting a drunken blackout." Like, "Huh? What? No. I'm up. I'm fine."

Sydnee:

That's really true.

Justin:

Out.

Sydnee:

And she likes to, um, she likes to puke and rally a lot.

Justin:

Yeah, she does puke and rally, that's true.

Sydnee:

She'll eat, eat, eat, eat. And then I'll pick her up, and she will look at me so lovingly, and then just puke.

Justin:

Bleh.

Sydnee:

And then instantly, she's, like, "I'm hungry again!"

Justin:

"I'm hungry! Feed me, Mom!"

Sydnee:

"You just saw my food come back out. You know it's not in there."

Justin:

So we're exhausted. We haven't been sleeping. But we have a very good reason for that. Um, we— There's a child. And it makes noises. These noises, you can't imagine. These terrible noises. Um—

Sydnee:

Now, there are a lot of people who can't sleep. But they don't have a child that's causing that problem.

Justin:

Right, they—

Sydnee:

They just can't sleep.

Justin:

They just can't sleep. They are... uh, forgive me. Using a medical term. That's usually your, uh, area. They're insomniacs.

Sydnee:

That's right. And, uh, we've had several people suggest to us the topic of insomnia.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Through emails and tweets. And, um, in person. I don't know. A lot of people want to hear about insomnia, and it seems very appropriate right now.

Justin:

Yes.

Sydnee:

So I don't know how much sense we'll be able to make, because of our lack of sleep.

Justin:

[laughs] But we will, uh, we'll give it a go. Sydnee, where—

Sydnee:

We'll do our best.

Justin:

Where does it come from? Like, take me back to the very beginning of insomnia. Where does this all start?

Sydnee:

Well, the term insomnia is a reference to the Roman god Somnus.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

The god of sleep. He's the equivalent— You may know him better as Hypnos, the Greek god. You know.

Justin:

Oh, my boy, Hypnos.

Sydnee:

Since you're so much more familiar with Greek mythology than Roman mythology.

Justin:

I've always been— I always tell people, I'm a fan of whichever one is not being discussed then, so then I can plead ignorance. It's sort of, like, uh, it's sort of, like, the... have you ever read Dante's Inferno, not in English version of that, uh, that argument? That defense.

Sydnee:

Do you say that?

Justin:

Not in English.

Sydnee:

I'm glad you didn't say that to me when we were dating.

Justin:

It's true, though. [laughs] I haven't—

Sydnee:

'Cause then Chuck might not be here. [laughs]

Justin:

But it's true. I haven't read it in English.

Sydnee:

Yeah, I know, but... you know. Pretentious much?

Justin:

Yeah. I know. But it's like a—

Sydnee:

Yeah, I know. I get it.

Justin:

You just, like, meet me halfway on this, please. It's been a while. I'm a little rusty.

Sydnee:

Okay. You're gonna have to work on the goofs a little bit.

Justin:

The goofs will come.

Sydnee:

Like, if they're... Yeah, are they gonna get better as the episode goes on?

Justin:

I have no—

Sydnee:

Or is that—

Justin:

I have no guarantee.

Sydnee:

Is that— is that the best you've got right now?

Justin:

I slept four hours.

Sydnee:

Did you just burn that right now?

Justin:

Do you think—

Sydnee:

That Dante's Inferno joke...

Justin:

Can I tell you something? Do you think that this environment is goof friendly. Do you think this is a goof positive environment you're creating right now?

Sydnee:

Chuck looks very receptive to goofs right now.

Justin:

She doesn't do anything to show— she didn't contribute at all. She's useless. She's making coos. Oh, everybody loves those. Uh, cooing.

Sydnee:

Insomnia is a pretty ancient disorder. People have had trouble sleeping as long as they've been sleeping. So...

Justin:

Yeah, well, that makes sense.

Sydnee:

That's all human history.

Justin:

And it used to be [laughs] they just had dirt to sleep on. They only dirt— They had rock pillows and they made blankets out of grass and straw and they made pillows out of rocks. And of course they had trouble sleeping. They slept on the dirt.

Sydnee:

Well— I don't think they were rock pillows but—

Justin:

They slept on rock pillows in the dirt.

Sydnee:

We'll let that go. And the other thing—

Justin:

They made blankets out of their own hair.

Sydnee:

Yes, hair blankets. But we won't get into that 'cause this is about medical history.

Justin:

Medical, right, okay.

Sydnee:

Um, it— So... insomnia is also well-chronicled not only because it's been around for so long, but because, uh, a lot of famous people tend to have insomnia and like to talk about it.

Justin:

Oh, yeah?

Sydnee:

Or complain about it, I don't know. I guess however—

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Um, insomnia was actually mentioned in Gilgamesh. Do you remember?

Justin:

Oh, really?

Sydnee:

Gilgamesh.

Justin:

I have never read Gilgamesh, uh— in English.

Sydnee:

In English? [laughs]

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Uh, I think— Didn't they make us read some of that in school?

Justin:

You were in the smart kid classes, I don't know.

Sydnee:

Anyway, it's, like, the oldest written—

Justin:

I was off reading, like, Five People You meet in Heaven and, uh, Hunger Games. That kind of stuff.

Sydnee:

[laughs] It's one of the— Uh, I believe it's one of the oldest recorded texts, I think.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

I think that's one of the deals with Gilgamesh. But they talk about Gilgamesh himself dealing with insomnia as he becomes mortal. And there were a lot of, uh, writings that uh... insomnia had to do with that bridge between mortality and immortality. I guess suggesting that if you're immortal you don't have to sleep.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So... And then as you become mortal, you just can't sleep. 'Cause you're used to not sleeping.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Man, if you're becoming mortal and you're sleeping for the first time ever, can you imagine how good that would feel. Like how—

Justin:

Good or weird?

Sydnee:

I don't know...

Justin:

Like, think about how you've never had to sleep before.

Sydnee:

But now, I mean, that's your first sleep ever.

Justin:

But you don't— But, like, you used to have full days. You used to be able to stay up and see Kirk Ferguson but now what?

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Nothing. You're asleep.

Sydnee:

That does—

Justin:

You used to be up, used to watch the Carson Daily Show. Now you can't see that anymore.

Sydnee:

That sounds exhausting.

Justin:

I know. Well, maybe— I guess. Yeah, it does provide a nice rhythm to the day. But it's just 'cause what we're used to.

Sydnee:

Are we becoming immortal?

Justin:

No. [coughs] no. Quite the opposite [laughs]. I'm dying everyday.

Sydnee:

Uh, insomnia was also associated with love sickness a lot in writing.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Like that that was the time you couldn't— So either you're becoming immortal or you're crushing on somebody pretty hard.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

One of the two.

Justin:

There's probably a few Cosmos articles about it.

Sydnee:

There was also, uh, throughout a lot of history when insomnia was associated with fear. Specifically, a very practical fear—

Justin:

Lions.

Sydnee:

That crap would happen to you while you were sleeping. That—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

That's exactly it. That you might get killed or somebody might steal all your stuff, all of your human hair blankets.

Justin:

Yeah, all—

Sydnee:

And rock pillows.

Justin:

You took— It took forever to weave those.

Sydnee:

So, uh, but the biggest fear was not that somebody would steal your stuff while you were asleep, but that the devil would steal your soul while you were sleeping.

Justin:

Okay. Uh, a lot of people sleep though. How is he gonna decide whose soul to steal while he's asleep? This is probably— This sounds more like paranoid people. I bet normal everyday Joes weren't worried about the devil stealing their soul while they're asleep.

Sydnee:

No, a lot of people were. Uh, sleeping was considered a, uh... a vulnerable state when, you know, you could be, uh... demons could take you over. You could be, you know, possessed.

Justin:

Well, how would you— How would you, like, take your stand against that?

Sydnee:

Well... Well. There were people who tried not to sleep.

Justin:

[sigh]

Sydnee:

Or at least not to sleep for very long. There were actually... um, it was considered holy to make your bed extremely uncomfortable. It was like a, um... a mark of your faith...

Justin:

Mm-hmm

Sydnee:

...because then you'd wake up a lot at night and it protected you from the devil.

Justin:

I'll bet that wasn't a stretch for most of, like, the old timey period. Dating from—

Sydnee:

[laughs] "My pillow's made of rock, but that's because I'm so faithful."

Justin:

"I'm so faithful."

Sydnee:

"I'm so holy."

Justin:

Are you happy with this, old timey Jesus?

Sydnee:

[laughs] Look how uncomfortable my human hair bed is.

Justin:

Look at my back. It's crazy. It looks like a z.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Z-shaped. I have a Z-shaped back. I'm in hell. You happy now?

Sydnee:

Shakespeare wrote about insomnia, um, in several different plays that it's mentioned that people with, like, mental disturbances have insomnia. So I think, like, Lady Macbeth would be a good example of that, right?

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Didn't she wander the halls awake, talking to herself.

Justin:

Yeah, Hamlet. My boy Hamlet probably wasn't sleeping so good.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Yeah, wasn't sleeping very good. And that was a common thing too. So if you weren't possessed when you weren't sleeping, you may just be crazy was kind of the way people saw.

Justin:

Yeah. Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um... It was also associated, in the 17th century in Europe with morality. So if you were a good person, you didn't sleep a lot. Sleeping was kind of, like, an indulgence, like, you know... sex, drugs, rock'n'roll, and sleep. [laughs]

Justin:

[laughs] That's the Justin McElroy story. Except not so much with the sex or the drugs. And only occasionally rock'n'roll. But definitely sleep.

Sydnee:

So if you wanted to show off what a good person you were, you would stay awake a lot?

Justin:

I guess? That seems to have flipped now right? It seems like all the good people these days get their eight hours in, no questions asked.

Sydnee:

I still think that there's an association with people who sleep in though. 'Cause that was a big part of it.

Justin:

Okay, that's true.

Sydnee:

If you were a good person. Then you were, like, up at five AM..

Justin:

Mm-hmm

Sydnee:

...milking the cows or whatever.

Justin:

Up raising barns.

Sydnee:

Raising barns. [laughs] I'm sure you were doing that.

Justin:

A lot of that.

Sydnee:

And think that persists that, you know, we always, like, lazy people sleep in.

Justin:

Mm-hmm. But that's not real— I mean... It—

Sydnee:

It's not a good quality.

Justin:

And it's not necessarily insomnia, right? I mean, like... somebody who—

Sydnee:

No, this isn't insomnia but people who had insomnia were seen as being more, um... moral. Being as better people. 'Cause they just naturally didn't sleep.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

So... They have—

Justin:

Well, if they were happy about it.

Sydnee:

God had blessed them with a, you know, lack of need for sleep.

Justin:

Uh, how did you combat it back in those times? There's no Ambien.

Sydnee:

No, there was no Ambien. There were— There have been a lot of different cures for insomnia. So if we go all the way back to Egyptians, uh— I found that you could write the name of the spirit who was responsible for insomnia. But I could not actually find the name of this spirit.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

It's lost to history—

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

As far as I know [laughs]

Justin:

Like Prince. Like the artist formerly known as the spirit— The spirit known as the one with insomnia.

Sydnee:

That one. You could write it on a laurel leaf and put it under your mattress or pillow and then you're good. I wouldn't recommend that.

Justin:

No. I don't think that will help.

Sydnee:

Um, but that was better than in the middle ages when they recommended that you just drink some, uh, gall from a castrated boar.

Justin:

Hmm, no I'm good on that front too. I think that it would probably would give me indigestion. And that's always a problem with insomnia because I have trouble sleeping sometimes. And then you know how sometimes you get it and you're like, "Oh I should go to take a Tums but I'm already in bed."

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm.

Justin:

That's probably the worst thing that ever happens to me.

Sydnee:

Yeah. That's the worst thing that ever—

Justin:

That's the worst thing that... [laughs]

Sydnee:

Doing pretty good there, McElroy.

Justin:

Yeah, things are going well.

Sydnee:

Uh— Well, don't worry. You could mix the castrated boar gall with some herbs for flavor.

Justin:

Okay, yeah. Put that on a nice skirt steak.

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm. No.

Justin:

No?

Sydnee:

Hmm...

Justin:

A cast iron skillet? Hmm...

Sydnee:

You could always try instead rubbing some dormouse fat on the bottom of your feet.

Justin:

Or BBOO. Dormouse fat? Gross!

Sydnee:

Yeah, I don't know. Do you know what distinguishes—

Justin:

They have to be living though.

Sydnee:

I mean— Could you know— Would you know a dormouse on site?

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Like if you saw a mouse, would you be like "nah, not a dormouse"? I don't know.

Justin:

Is it just like a really tiny mouse, like a shrew kind of?

Sydnee:

I don't— Is a shrew a mouse?

Justin:

A shrew is in the mouse family.

Sydnee:

I don't know. I don't know anything about animals.

Justin:

Certainly not. Your evidencing lot of this ignorance right now.

Sydnee:

I just wondered— I didn't know if a dormouse was a specific breed of mouse or species of mouse.

Justin:

We should change— We should change the subtitle of the show to A Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine and definitely totally definitely nothing about animals, oh please, oh please.

Sydnee:

[laughs] We don't know anything about animals.

Justin:

[laughs] Don't listen to— We know no— We know less than our baby daughter about animals.

Sydnee:

When I think of a dormouse, I think of, uh, the mice on Cinderella?

Justin:

Oh... I was gonna say Alice in Wonderland, but yeah.

Sydnee:

Oh, well yeah, there's that. That actually is a dormouse.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

I think of Gus on Cinderella. The one with the— Remember? He's carrying the stack of cheese.

Justin:

So I take Gus and I rub his fat little belly on my feet and Gus is, like, "What are you doing?" And I say "I can't sleep." And he's like, "I'm not a dormouse."

Sydnee:

Do you want some cheese?

Justin:

"Wait, have you been listening to Sawbones? I'm not a dormouse." That's ridiculous.

Sydnee:

If you didn't want to do that or you don't have a dormouse—

Justin:

And I don't—

Sydnee:

If Gus isn't visiting you tonight, you could just lather your head with hard yellow soap.

Justin:

I wonder if times get really tight, is the dormouse— You sell yourself into dormouse prostitution. I want— "Things got real bad and I let a sleepy man rub my tummy on his feet. That was the lowest moment for me."

Sydnee:

[laughs] I think— I think it's adorable that you assume that rubbing dormouse fat— that the way we're supposed to interpret that is that they took [laughs] the tummy of a dormouse and just rubbed it on your feet and then let it scurry away. I like that...

Justin:

Maybe—

Sydnee:

...interpretation better than what it...

Justin:

Maybe this is like—

Sydnee:

...almost certainly actually means.

Justin:

I think that maybe what's happening here is you are so tired from chasing a tiny mouse that you fall asleep. [laughs] "Come back here you."

Sydnee:

[laughs] I'm trying— I'm trying not to laugh too hard 'cause Charlie has fallen asleep against me—

Justin:

Well, you picked the wrong husband. Maybe you didn't hear earlier some of my jokes about, um, Dante's Inferno...

Sydnee:

Anyway, so what I was saying is you could just take a bar of hard yellow soap, lather your head in it, leave it in all night, and do that again every night for two weeks.

Justin:

Okay. On it.

Sydnee:

Which is better than the dormouse thing.

Justin:

Certainly. No argument there.

Sydnee:

Uh, in the 19th century there were a lot of theories that it had to do—
Especially the turn of the century going into the 20th, that it had to do with
blood flow. 'Cause everything had to do with blood flow then. We're talking
about, like, prime, like, leeching time.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

So you could take a wet rag and tie it around your wrist. 'Cause they knew
that that was the site of your radial pulse, so they thought that that would
do something to slow blood flow and put you to sleep.

Justin:

Mm-hmm

Sydnee:

Um, there was the theory that it was due to too much blood in the head. So
you would prop your head up on pillows. Or that insomnia could be the
result of a lack of blood to your head. So you prop your feet up on pillows.

Justin:

None of that is accurate I'm assuming.

Sydnee:

Don't prop both up on pillows. I don't know... All the blood pools in your
midsection.

Justin:

And your butt swells up.

Sydnee:

And your butt [laughs]

Justin:

Butt blood.

Sydnee:

Uh, in Japan one cure was sea slug entrails.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

I don't even know how you get those. I guess you get a sea slug, first of all.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Track that down. In, uh, the early colonies you could try a raw onion.

Justin:

To what? Just eat it?

Sydnee:

Just eat it. Eat a raw onion. I don't know why— That would just— I think that would give you indigestion.

Justin:

Absolutely.

Sydnee:

I think that would cause problems.

Justin:

No question. That would make things definitely, definitely worse.

Sydnee:

Nobody wants to sleep with you after that.

Justin:

No, but you have that going for you. You'll have your peace.

Sydnee:

Yeah, that's— In France they would try fried lettuce.

Justin:

I've never even heard of that happening as a thing. I guess fried kale is a thing. I guess...

Sydnee:

Fried kale is a thing.

Justin:

...you could. So I guess you could fry lettuce... That just seems to defeat the purpose.

Sydnee:

That shocks me about the French. They seem so much more sophisticated than to fry lettuce.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

That totally sounds like something we would do here. Would that be a salad—

Justin:

They do love their— They love their butter though.

Sydnee:

"Well, maybe I could fry it."

Justin:

"What if I just took the salad and fried it, I can't sleep."

Sydnee:

"I'm gonna— I'm gonna beer batter this salad."

Justin:

"Beer batter this salad."

Sydnee:

"Then I'm gonna— Then I'm gonna fry it and I'm gonna eat it."

Justin:

"I'm gonna take this crouton and fry it. That should count."

Sydnee:

If you read different accounts, the different places throughout the time and space— time and the world, uh, milk comes up again and again. And it was usually mixed with something.

It could be something herbal, uh— warm milk is kind of an older thing and that's not a new cure. People still say that but, um... with elderberry blossoms and iris was a popular concoction. You could try thyme, uh— chamomile, which people still, you know, drink chamomile tea. Hops, so maybe just have a beer.

Justin:

That's legit. Chamomile had some, uh, calming chemicals in there.

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm. Uh, Valerian, which could help you calm down and, uh, catnip actually. So lots of different herbal cures that popped up throughout history and a lot of those are still in use today. And I'm not saying that necessarily all of them work, but they're still touted for that. Uh, Pliny, of course, had something to say about it.

Justin:

Hit me.

Sydnee:

Now, uh, Pliny did recognize that poppies would work. Uh, and this was not— He was not revolutionary. A lot of people are already using poppies at the time for lack of sleep. And of course that makes sense, you know, opium.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Uh, he also claimed the word poppies came from, and I think we mentioned this before, the infant food Pap? We talked about on the breastfeeding—

Justin:

Mm-hmm. [overlapping] Yeah, yeah, yeah we— on the opium episode.

Sydnee:

Or was it—

Justin:

Oh, no—

Sydnee:

On the breastfeeding episode.

Justin:

Oh, you're probably right.

Sydnee:

Or was it on the opium episode?

Justin:

I don't know.

Sydnee:

Well, whatever. Uh half—

Justin:

I'll check the wiki.

Sydnee:

It was some kind of infant food mixture that they would make with, like, bread soaked in water and stuff like that. And they thought that word, pap, led to papaver which is the word for poppies, the root word.

Justin:

I'm with you.

Sydnee:

Anyway. And that was because poppies were often given to infants, in their pap, to lull them to sleep.

Justin:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Sydnee:

You know. So... Do we want to try that later or...

Justin:

I... At this point?

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

It's got to be the NyQuil I've been slipping her.

Sydnee:

Disclaimer, we're not actually giving our infant NyQuil.

Justin:

No, we're just staring at her and praying.

Sydnee:

No. Please sleep.

Justin:

And begging her.

Sydnee:

Why are your eyes so open?

Justin:

They're so open and awake.

Sydnee:

They're so open. Uh, if you want to try a magic cure.

Justin:

[laughs] Yes. Are you kidding me? Is that a trick question?

Sydnee:

Uh, there's an amulet, there's a stone that is particularly effective in this arena. Uh, lapis lazuli.

Justin:

Mm-hmm. Okay.

Sydnee:

It is, uh— a blue stone. I know that from Minecraft—

Justin:

Minecraft. Yes, correct.

Sydnee:

Thank you very much.

Justin:

Thank you, video games.

Sydnee:

Uh, in addition to helping you sleep, it is also considered the stone of universal truth and friendship.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Yeah, it enhances your psychic ability and energizes your throat chakra. No, it doesn't do those things.

Justin:

I've literally— I literally thought it was made up—

Sydnee:

But, go ahead.

Justin:

When I first encountered it in Minecraft. I thought it was a made up thing, like, red stone.

Sydnee:

I absolutely did too. But no, it's real. And it had magical powers or so the website on healing amulets that I read [laughs] said it has magical powers. So if you are having trouble with your throat chakra or sleep, try that pretty blue stone.

Justin:

You, uh... you mentioned earlier in the program that, um... some well known folks have struggled with insomnia. Can you hit me with a few names?

Sydnee:

Well, Justin... it's been a while. So you may not remember how this works, but before we can go on any further I'm gonna need you to visit our billing department.

Justin:

All right, let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin:

So Syd, famous people. I'm ready.

Sydnee:

Okay, well first of all... you haven't heard of this guy, but his name is Al Herpin.

Justin:

Al Herpin.

Sydnee:

Al Herpin. And I mentioned him...

Justin:

Sounds like a real soul eater type.

Sydnee:

...because he was famous for his insomnia.

Justin:

Oh, yeah?

Sydnee:

He claims to be the man who never slept. He, uh, said that his mother had some kind of accident while she was pregnant right before she delivered him and it resulted in him never sleeping his entire life. He lived to his 90s, he said that at night he would just sit in a rocking chair and rest.

Justin:

I bet his family debated over what room he was gonna do that in.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Not the room where I'm sleeping 'cause that's weird.

Justin:

"AI? AI are you in here? You have to say something, AI. I have to know you're in here."

Sydnee:

He—

Justin:

"Just going to the kitchen."

Sydnee:

Now, he claimed to not have any health effects from the lack of sleeping, which is unusual with people...

Justin:

How would he know? He has no barometer.

Sydnee:

...who have that kind of insomnia. Well, that's true. That's true, he doesn't know. And there were a handful of other people who have that kind of problem, but I thought that was interesting. The man who never slept. Now let's talk about real famous people.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Churchill. So, Churchill was a famous insomniac and he had his own cure for it. He slept in two twin beds. And he would switch between one and the other every time he woke up at night.

Justin:

I love that. That's like the extreme version of cool side of the pillow. Except it's cool side of the bed.

Sydnee:

It's funny that you—

Justin:

The other bed.

Sydnee:

It's funny that you mention that because Benjamin Franklin was another famous insomniac who believed very strongly that heat was the cause of insomnia. Too much heat in the body. And so, at night he would get up over and over again, every time he had trouble sleeping, he would just throw open all the windows and doors and let his room get icy cold.

Justin:

You know, I don't think that that's crazy. Most of the time when I have trouble sleeping, I feel really hot. Like I feel like I can feel all my skin simultaneously and it's very warm.

Sydnee:

You can feel all your skin?

Justin:

I can feel all my skin touching everything in the world.

Sydnee:

Well, it is true that sleeping in a cooler room can help with good quality sleep.

Justin:

That doesn't stop you from complaining about it though. Every single night of my life.

Sydnee:

Okay, you make our room an ice palace.

Justin:

Anybody else, Sydnee?

Sydnee:

Dickens.

Justin:

Sydnee calls me Elsa.

Sydnee:

Yes, I do. I call him Elsa at night 'cause he sleeps in an ice palace.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And poor Chuck and I are freezing.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, Dickens was a famous insomniac. He believed that you needed to sleep in bed pointing north in order to help combat insomnia.

Justin:

Okay, don't believe that.

Sydnee:

So he would use a compass. He would actually travel with one just to ensure that he could always position his bed pointing north.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

And he would sleep in the exact center of his bed. He would actually lay down in the middle of his bed and then hold his arms out to the side until he was certain he was right in the middle.

Justin:

The single life.

Sydnee:

[laughs] He, uh, this didn't work very well. So he spent a lot of nights just taking walks around London. Which is actually probably a good thing for all of us readers.

Justin:

Yeah, 'cause he kept up with his ideas.

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm. Exactly.

Justin:

His stories.

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm.

Justin:

He wrote his tales.

Sydnee:

He wasn't the only one. Napoleon, Edison, Alexander Dumas, they were all insomniacs who just accepted it, didn't really do anything to try to cure it, and put that time to good use.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, Van Gogh, also an insomniac—

Justin:

Not a surprise there. Had a lot of things going on.

Sydnee:

No. And, uh, he would try to put himself to sleep by soaking his pillow and his mattress in camphor to try to knock him out at night.

Justin:

What's camphor?

Sydnee:

Uh, camphor is this waxy substance made from, um... probably dried rosemary leaves is where it's found. And uh, it can put you to sleep.

Justin:

Oh. Okay.

Sydnee:

Well, or at least he hoped it could.

Justin:

[laughs] I hope it works sometimes.

Sydnee:

Um...

Charlie:

[fussing]

Justin:

That kid has been eating for, like, 25 minutes.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

She's gonna pop. I'm really worried about her.

Sydnee:

Oh, she's not gonna pop. She's just probably gonna puke on me later.

Justin:

Fantastic.

Sydnee:

Or maybe you.

Justin:

Or possibly me. You never know. It's impossible to say. Only she knows for sure.

Sydnee:

W.C. Fields was an insomniac and could only fall asleep if under an umbrella that had water falling on it.

Justin:

[laughs] How romantic— He was like a wood nymph, W.C. Fields.

Sydnee:

I guess he hired somebody, is my guess.

Justin:

Yeah, see? I want to sleep underneath a giant mushroom. Find me a big toadstool, see? Yeah.

Sydnee:

Lincoln was famously an insomniac who was known for taking his midnight walks as a result. Bill Clinton, insomniac. Although, after his heart attack he actually made an effort to start trying to fix the insomnia.

He took advantage of it so that he could do more stuff, but then after his heart attack he decided to take better care of himself. Marilyn Monroe had insomnia. Which probably contributed to her eventual overdose.

Madonna is an insomniac and, uh, Margaret Thatcher was an insomniac. Uh, said that it didn't bother her because, "sleep is for wimps."

Justin:

So if I actually want to treat it, Syd, what do I do? What are my options?

Sydnee:

So, there are lots of, uh, medications throughout history that have been used to treat insomnia. There are certainly a lot today. Uh, the oldest drug that was used is definitely poppies or opium.

Justin:

Poppies.

Sydnee:

The Greeks, the Egyptians, everybody used opium. Uh, probably not an appropriate use I would say. Uh, barbiturates were used um... again, Marilyn Monroe probably a lot of people think of. We don't use those nowadays.

Alcohol was used for a while in a lot of different sleep serums. Um... Alcohol is not a good idea. It actually disrupts your sleep cycles and uh, even though it might knock you out at first it will lead to low quality sleep.

Uh, opiates are an inappropriate thing that was used. Marijuana became popular because Queen Victoria used it for menstrual cramps. So that was used for a while. Um... and then finally, we invented the benzodiazepine. Things like Valium. And those became popular. And nowadays of course we've got lots of hypnotics. Um... the ambiens, lunestas, and all those—

Justin:

Hypnotics? That's what those are called?

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

I've never heard that terminology before.

Sydnee:

Uh, now I will tell you—

Justin:

Now Hpnotiq, that works for me. Just a little vile of—

Sydnee:

No, that stuff is gross.

Justin:

It's not good.

Sydnee:

I don't like that stuff. Now, I will tell you, none of these drugs actually work to cure insomnia.

Justin:

Uh-oh.

Sydnee:

A lot of them, even if they temporarily knock you out, are not doing anything to fix the problem of lack of sleep, that you're having difficulty sleeping. The only thing that's been proven to really fix it, is, uh, cognitive behavioral therapy. If it is of psychological origin, I should say.

Justin:

Are there physical?

Sydnee:

Yeah, I mean there are a lot of different— It depends on behavioral things. You know, are you smoking, are you drinking a lot of caffeine, are you drinking a lot of alcohol? Uh, it can be your sleep behavior. Do you try to watch TV at night?

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

That's not good. Uh, lack of exercise. Or it could be something underlying... Depression, anxiety. There are a million different causes. And if you're suffering from insomnia, instead of buying a sleeping pill, I would definitely talk to a doctor about it.

Justin:

But, I mean it can't— It can't kill you is the good news, right?

Sydnee:

Well, that's not true.

Justin:

Oh, no.

Sydnee:

Now for the most part the insomnia that, uh, we would have every once in a while, kind of like you know, everybody has a headache every once in a while. You may suffer from acute insomnia due to life circumstances or... So for that kind of acute insomnia that we may have from time to time, don't worry about it.

You're probably— It's probably not gonna last very long. Even if you have chronic insomnia where you only get a few hours of sleep at night, this is still not what I'm talking about.

Justin:

I mean, worry about it in the sense that like it sucks and make every effort you can to address it but—

Sydnee:

It sucks and— Right, but—

Justin:

Don't lose sleep over it.

Sydnee:

But when we're talking about people dying from insomnia, we're really talking about fatal familial insomnia.

Justin:

Oh, so you can die from it.

Sydnee:

Yes.

Justin:

Excellent.

Sydnee:

It's a very rare disorder. It's a prion disorder? It's, like, a malformed protein in your brain.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

If you've heard of prions before, it's because of mad cow disease. This has nothing to do with mad cow disease but there you go.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Uh, it exists in about 25 different families world wide. So it's extremely rare. You don't— You are born with it. It doesn't start, uh, becoming symptomatic 'till middle age...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

And, uh, unfortunately, the life span after that is about 18 months.

Justin:

Oh.

Sydnee:

You just slowly get less and less sleep until you can't sleep at all. And then you're hallucinating and you kind of stay in this like pre-sleep state until, eventually, you can't...

Justin:

Doesn't that call into question Al Herpin's story?

Sydnee:

Well, that is a problem. And that's why, uh, you know, these cases of people who say that they've never slept... A lot of them obviously weren't well documented or researched.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Uh, some other things... Just interesting facts about insomnia. Uh, animals can get insomnia. Bugs can suffer from insomnia. Researchers have spent lots of time breeding flies that specifically have insomnia for whatever reason. Uh, I mentioned earlier that—

Justin:

That's kind of messed up scientists, by the way.

Sydnee:

Yeah, it really is.

Justin:

If you're lying in bed at night unable to sleep because you've done something very cruel, you have. And that is a good impulse. Lean into it.

Sydnee:

As I mentioned before, a lot of people think that love sickness can cause insomnia. It doesn't. Don't worry about that. And, I thought this was interesting. There's something called sleep concerts. So if you're really desperate, and you're an insomniac, check out a sleep concert.

Justin:

[laughs] What is a sleep concert?

Sydnee:

So, you can still go to these... I don't think there are many in the US, but you can still find them in Japan. Uh, they were popularized by Robert Rich in

the US. This was back in the 80s, and he was an ambient musician— He is an ambient musician, I should say.

Justin:

An Ambien musician?

Sydnee:

Yeah, he makes ambient music.

Justin:

Ambient.

Sydnee:

Not Ambien, the sleep medicine, ambient musician. So he makes really great ambient music [laughs]

Justin:

[laughs] There's nothing that puts me at ease and prepares you to shift on to dreamland like a room full of people who haven't slept for a while. That's excellent. I'm at peace.

Sydnee:

He would put on these all-night concerts. And a lot of it had to do with— He kind of cooked this idea up in the 70s, so it had to do with, like, altered states and, you know, groovy stuff.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

And you would go to this concert, and basically you were supposed to chill out and sleep. And you laugh, but you would totally check that music—

Justin:

I would— Oh, I would go.

Sydnee:

You're going to look up this guy's music. I know you are.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, one thing I should say is, as I mentioned, nowadays we've got lots of drugs out there... um, I would talk to a doctor first. I wouldn't— If you don't have to, I would not use medication. I would recommend against it. And try sleep hygiene. You know what that means?

Justin:

Getting into rhythm, making sure the room's in a good state.

Sydnee:

Yeah. A cool dark room—

Justin:

Make sure you're in a good state.

Sydnee:

Don't watch TV in bed. Don't do anything in bed other than sleep and have sex.

Justin:

'kay.

Sydnee:

And, uh... and cut out the cigarettes and the caffeine and the booze.

Justin:

Booze?

Sydnee:

Yup.

Justin:

Um, I want to say thank you to the people who shipped us uh, gifts. Especially, uh, pertaining to our new baby Charlie. Um, we had a beautiful

blanket from uh, Erica that she shipped us that is just gorgeous.

Uh, Hannah also sent us um... some uh, candy and some uh, booties that she made and a really lovely letter uh, for Chuck. John Bailey sent us a uh, Pliny onesie. Uh, which is really super cute. Says half pint on the back, which is kind of funny 'cause it's for a beer, Pliny the Elder beer.

Um... Aaron made us a hat with little whales on it, which is beautiful. And Anne sent us some, um, postcards from the, uh, apothecary museum in her area and a book that she bought there.

Sydnee:

Yeah, very cool stuff. Thank you, guys.

Justin:

Thank you to everybody who did that. Uh, if you have the urge to send us something at PO Box, uh, 54 Huntington, West Virginia, 25706. We don't expect you to—

This is as far as our contract between each other goes, we just ask for a half hour of your time and in exchange we offer you the world of medical history.

Sydnee:

Yeah, but thank you so much, especially when you take time to make something for Chuck, that really means a lot to us and we will make sure as she wears these items, to get pictures out on, uh, Twitter.

Justin:

Not Twitter. I don't want my baby on Twitter. We'll put them on the Sawbones page, how's that?

Sydnee:

Okay, we'll do that.

Justin:

That's on Facebook, by the way. Just search for Sawbones and you can go join up there and talk about the show. Or you can do that at the Maximum Fun Forum, so that's at MaximumFun.org.

See, Maximum Fun is a podcast network that we are a part of together with other great programs like Stop Podcasting Yourself, My Brother My Brother and Me... Oh no, I said My Brother, My Brother and Me. I'm not supposed to—

Sydnee:

You took my part.

Justin:

Let me try again. Let me try again. Pretend I didn't say it. Uh, Stop Podcasting Yourself, The Goose Down, Jordan Jesse Go, One Bad Mother—

Sydnee:

My Brother, My Brother and Me.

Justin:

Uh, thank you so much dear. So many others.

Charlie:

[fusses loudly]

Justin:

Uh-oh. Folks, that means that it's time for us to go. Please go subscribe to us on iTunes. Give us a review. Uh, uh, and all the other things you do to promote people that you like.

Come to our Facebook group, come to the MaximumFun.org forums and, uh, thanks again to Harry's and thank you to you so much for listening to our program. Until next Tuesday, I'm Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy

Justin:

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

[theme music plays]

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