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Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Welcome to the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast. I'm Bailiff Jesse Thorn, here with John Hodgman.

John Hodgman: This week's episode was recorded live at the Lexington Opera House in Lexington, Kentucky. That's bluegrass country, Jesse!

Jesse Thorn: It was the very start of our tour of this great nation, the Van Freaks Roadshow. Let's go to the stage for our very first case.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Kentucky, you came to us seeking justice. And we're ready to deliver it right here at the Lexington Opera House!

(Uproarious cheers and applause.)

The court of Judge John Hodgman is now in session. Please welcome our first set of litigants, Kathy and Carol.

(Applause.)

Tonight's case, "Wrap Sheet"! Kathy brings the case against her mother, Carol. 30 years ago, Kathy gave her mom a Christmas present: a small sculpture that Kathy wrapped herself. Mom—Carol—loved Kathy's wrapping job so much she didn't want to open it. It's still wrapped to this day.

(Laughter.)

Kathy wants Carol to open her present already. Carol says... no! Who's right? Who's wrong? Only one can decide. Please rise as Judge John Hodgman enters the courtroom and delivers an obscure cultural reference.

(Cheers and applause.)

John Hodgman: *(Singing, imitating Tom Waits.)* I'll take the spokes from your wheelchair and a magpie's wing!

Jesse Thorn: *(Interrupting.)* Is this more of this?!

John Hodgman: *(Without stopping.)* And I'll tie them to your shoulders and your feet! I'll steal a hacksaw from my dad, cut the braces off your legs, and we'll bury them tonight out in

the cornfield. Just put a church key in your pocket. I'll hop the freight train down the hall. We'll slide all the way down the drain to Lexington, Kentucky in the faaaall!

(Cheers and applause.)

(Speaking.) Bailiff Jesse Thorn, please swear them in.

Jesse Thorn: I'm starting to wonder if you're just going to be doing that voice permanently.

John Hodgman: *(Singing.)* Let's see what happens!

Jesse Thorn: Kathy and Carol, please rise and raise your right hands. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God-or-Whatever?

(They swear.)

Do you swear to abide by Judge John Hodgman's ruling, despite the fact that he's doing that voice again?

(They swear; the audience laughs.)

Judge Hodgman, you may proceed.

John Hodgman: Bailiff Jessie, thank you for not revealing the voice! For after all, that is the subject of the obscure cultural reference. Kathy and Carol, please be seated. For immediate summary judgment in one of your favors, can you guess the obscure cultural reference that I made just a few moments ago here, in the Lexington Opera House?

(Thunderous applause.)

People love this opera house! I don't know what it is.

Kathy: It's really good.

John Hodgman: Kathy, let's start with you.

Kathy: Um, is it Tom Waits?

John Hodgman: Is it Tom Waits? Can you be more specific?

Kathy: I have no idea.

John Hodgman: Alright, I'll just put down "is it Tom Waits, question mark" as your guess. It's a good guess. Carol, what's your guess?

Carol: I have no idea.

John Hodgman: Who do you think the singer is? Tell her. Tell your mother. Don't let her suffer.

Kathy: (*Whispering.*) It's Tom Waits.

Carol: Oh, Tom Wait!

John Hodgman: Tom Waits. And what state are we in?

Carol: Kentucky.

John Hodgman: And what's the next word that comes to your mind as the name of the song by Tom Waits? Kentucky what?

Jesse Thorn: Horse statue.

(*Laughter.*)

Carol: Pollen.

John Hodgman: What did you say? Pollen?

(*Laughter.*)

Jesse Thorn: People listening at home, these are references to the things that happened immediately preceding the start of this case.

John Hodgman: That's right.

Carol: Uh, Bourbon or Bluegrass?

John Hodgman: That sounds very good for Kentucky. Unfortunately, the song is “Kentucky Avenue”, named for an avenue in Whittier, California, where Tom Waits grew up—off of his album, *Blue Valentine*, 1978, Tom Waits. In any case, we'll have to hear the case. I'm sorry, neither of you got the cultural reference correctly, so we have to hear the case. Who seeks justice in my fake court?

Kathy: I do.

John Hodgman: Kathy, what is the nature of your complaint?

Kathy: I made a present. I wrapped a present for my mom, and I gave it to her for Christmas, and she hasn't opened it yet.

John Hodgman: And she has not opened it yet. And Carol, where is this gift now?

Carol: Right there.

John Hodgman: Right there. Let the record show she indicated on the floor. I will pick it up.

Jesse Thorn: Inside of some sort of apricot box.

John Hodgman: Yes, in a former Harry and David box, I believe. Oh, excuse me, Hale Groves. Uh, very nice. Which one of you will show me the wrapped present?

Kathy: I'll do it.

John Hodgman: Kathy is showing me the wrapped present. Aha.

(Laughter and applause.)

May I examine it?

(Kathy confirms.)

Let me take a picture of this, so that we can share it.

[00:05:00]

And illuminate our listeners who are listening after the fact. That will be on our Instagram page, [@JudgeJohnHodgman](#), our show page at [MaximumFun.org](#). Jesse Thorn any guesses as to what this present might be? I believe you said in the intro it was a sculpture of some kind.

Jesse Thorn: My first thought is Tom Waits, but—

John Hodgman: Right. My second thought was horse statue, maybe? But I'm not sure about that. Kathy, without revealing the nature of the present, tell us a little bit about it. Did you make it? What inspired you? Again, don't reveal what it is, because the whole surprise of this case revolves around this.

(Laughter.)

Kathy: I was shopping with my mom prior to Christmas, and I think it was 1999, because I would have been 17 and able to drive myself, which comes in later. We were shopping at Pier 1, and she picked up that sculpture and laughed at it and said, "Oh, it's so cute!" And so, then later I went out by myself and bought it. And then Christmas Eve, I went to go wrap it. And my dad is an avid box collector, but this is before Amazon was delivering boxes.

John Hodgman: Let's just go back to “my dad is an avid box collector”.

(Laughter.)

Kathy: Like all dads!

John Hodgman: Is everything okay in your home, Carol? *(Chuckles.)* What kind of boxes does your dad collect? Shirt boxes, curio boxes, ornament boxes?

Carol: Plastic, cardboard.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: All the best boxes.

Jesse Thorn: Frankincense, myrrh.

John Hodgman: Yeah. *(Laughs.)* So, probably your dad was like, I've got just the box for this statue of an unnamed creature.

Kathy: Exactly. We were in the basement looking through boxes to wrap the presents, and I could not find a box for it. It wouldn't fit in anything. Fortunately, we did—today—find one.

John Hodgman: Well, right. Now, with the advent of science, we have boxes that will fit this thing. But back in 1999, we had nothing.

Kathy: I didn't know what to do! So, we didn't have gift bags or anything. And I thought since she had already seen it at the store, it would be funny to wrap it in the way you see now—which is as close to the surface of the sculpture as possible.

John Hodgman: It is. It is a perfect surface map of the object.

(Laughter.)

And it must have taken you some time to get it done.

(Kathy confirms.)

And it's been kept in remarkable good shape by your mother, I have to say. Kathy, how did you feel when you spent your hard-earned money on this gift for your mom, and then she didn't even bother to open it?

Kathy: Um, I thought it was funny on Christmas Day, as we went around unwrapping presents. She'd pick it up and look at it and go, “No, I'll open this one instead,” and put it back down. And then that just kept going. *(Giggles.)*

John Hodgman: Just over and over again, Carol, you refused to open the present. Why?

Carol: I didn't wanna.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: I didn't wanna!

Jesse Thorn: Let the record reflect that she didn't wanna.

John Hodgman: She didn't wanna. Why didn't you wanna?

Carol: You need more detail?

John Hodgman: I don't need, but I'd like.

Carol: Okay. I come from a family of engineers. Three brothers—

John Hodgman: Alright. This was not how I expected this to go. I'm absolutely enrapt. Please continue. By the way, I find in your favor.

No, hang on. I'll hold my piece.

Carol: Three brothers, a dad, an uncle, grandfather. Engineers. And around the dinner table, we didn't talk about our feelings, how we felt about things. We talked about what kind of camshaft is good for a racing car and carburetor linkages. And so, when asked during the pre-game interview why I didn't want it opened, I was caught off guard. Why? What?! Feelings? Alright, so just—

(Jesse cackles.)

Spur of the moment, I said, “Well, it was because my daughter gave it to me, and that was really sweet, and she's a kid and didn't have that much money, and blah, blah, blah, blah.”

John Hodgman: Let me see if I understand what you're saying. Your daughter was younger, she didn't have much money. It was very cute, the thing that she gave you, and then she wrapped it in such a cute way, and you had been to Pier 1 Imports, so you knew exactly what this piece of junk was. The magic was in the wrapping; you didn't want to destroy it, because that was the true gift. Fair? I mean, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but fair?

Carol: My answer about—because she was so—it was a child's gift to her mother really did not answer the question. So, if I look over and I see it wrapped, I think of my daughter's brain and her essence and how proud I am of her.

(John “wow”s.)

If it's unwrapped, it's an identified thing that my daughter gave me. And it's just so much better for me if I can think of my daughter when I see it.

John Hodgman: Kathy, I think you're losing this one.

(Laughter and scattered applause.)

Jesse Thorn: Kathy, why do you hate your specialness?

Carol: I know!

John Hodgman: For a person who comes from a long line of engineers, an emotionless automaton like your mom, she seems to have engineered a response that has truly made us think she is human.

[00:10:00]

She passes the Turing test.

Carol: It took several days.

John Hodgman: *(Laughs.)* I hope the journey wasn't too painful. So, how do you respond to that, Kathy?

Kathy: My response is that I would like it to be either unwrapped—the other issue is I have children, and if you look closely, you can see parts of the wrapping paper that are not as sun-bleached as others. And I think little bitty hands have been trying to peel off the paper, because it's been sitting just in the window where anybody can get to it. And my six-year-old is very sneaky.

John Hodgman: Oh, oh, you have children. I thought maybe there were gnomes or something in the house.

(Laughter.)

Kathy: And I don't want it to be unwrapped without her by some children. And/or I don't want it to—

John Hodgman: You're saying you don't have control of your children, and they might unwrap it, and then—right.

Kathy: It's right there! And then—or I don't want it to continue to disintegrate until it falls apart and then is weird. So, either unwrapped or preserved. Intentionality would be my request.

John Hodgman: Intentionality. You don't appreciate the fact that, in a way, your mother is unwrapping it but very slowly.

(Laughter.)

Kathy: Yes, by default.

John Hodgman: So, you don't have a strong opinion as to whether this unknown animal gets wrapped or unwrapped. You want it to either get encased in plastic in its current state. What's your suggestion for preservation of the artifact?

Kathy: There's like Mod Podge. They could coat it in a clear coat. It could be wrapped again in different paper. It could be wrapped again every year in different paper, which is my husband's suggestion.

(John "woah"s.)

Either unwrapped and rewrapped or continuing to build it out until it is just like completely unrecognizable. These are some of the suggestions.

John Hodgman: It feels like you want to take this present back and give it to yourself.

(Laughter.)

Kathy: Nooo! That's not my idea! My idea is either a display case or unwrapping together with the kids.

John Hodgman: What do you think about those options, Carol?

Carol: As far as the grandchildren go, you've heard of the marshmallow test?

John Hodgman: Uh, I have heard of the marshmallow test. This is—you give a child a marshmallow and you say, "You can eat this now, or you can wait—" I don't know, what is it? Like, 25 years?

(Laughter.)

You give a child a marshmallow in 1999, and you're gonna eat this marshmallow now, or wait until 2023, and then you get two marshmallows. And then the child says, mm, I'm just gonna eat the marshmallow now, thanks. Why—? I'm not—I'm your child, not a test subject. What is going on? Do you love me or are you an engineer? I don't understand.

(Laughter.)

Do I remember it correctly?

(Carol confirms with a laugh.)

Okay. So, in terms of the grandchildren, how does the marshmallow test apply?

Carol: Well, they can wait.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Until when, madam?! Until! When?! When will this be unwrapped?

Carol: I think the paper is sort of turning to dust, so I think it's unwrapping itself.

John Hodgman: I think it's unwrapping itself. Entropy is doing it, is that what you're saying?

(Carol confirms.)

Jesse Thorn: Oh, wait, are you saying that entropy is doing it, or are you saying that it possesses free will? Because I heard the latter.

(Laughter.)

Carol: No, no, no. No free will here.

John Hodgman: Do either of you have a clear memory of what this thing looked like before it was wrapped?

Kathy: I have an inkling. Because in the intervening time, I found a Christmas ornament that is shaped similar to that object but is a lot smaller and has a curly tail, that it hangs on the tree. I wrapped that in a regular box and wrote "gotcha" on it and gave it to her for Christmas. *(Chuckles.)* So, we do have that one. And that is my last sort of inkling as to what it might have looked like.

John Hodgman: Are you worried that you might be disappointed? That your memory won't serve? That maybe it will lose preciousness once it is unwrapped?

Kathy: *(Beat.)* No.

Jesse Thorn: You just want that dang marshmallow!

Kathy: I do. I'm very hungry.

John Hodgman: You want it both ways, either of both ways. Either preserve forever or just tear off the wrapping, tear off the band-aid, and look at this thing once and for all. Why does this middle ground make you uncomfortable?

Kathy: Because it's left up to chance things. Just apathy and—

John Hodgman: Imagine for a moment you don't come from a long line of engineers.

Kathy: That's really hard.

John Hodgman: Your mom worked very, very hard to connect with her emotions. I can see that this makes you uncomfortable even now as you look at it. Here, let me turn it around so it's facing you.

[00:15:00]

Just to maximize—

Jesse Thorn: Well, we're guessing that it's facing you. We don't know what's in there.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Just imagine it leaping towards you.

Jesse Thorn: Imagine it saying meow, among many other possible—

John Hodgman: *(Shouting.)* What are you talking about?! How do we even know?!

Jesse Thorn: We don't know! Just one sound of many it could possibly make.

John Hodgman: What about your mother not unwrapping it? How does that make you feel?

Kathy: *(Quietly.)* I thought it was funny.

John Hodgman: It is funny!

Carol: It's a riot.

Kathy: It is funny, but I think leaving it just to the whims of time is kind of sad.

John Hodgman: But it feels a little sad. The wrapping is getting a little bit run down.

Carol: You should see our house.

(Laughter.)

Kathy: There may be wallpaper from when I was born taped together at the seams in the rooms in their house. So.

John Hodgman: And it is currently kept where? On a windowsill someplace?

(Kathy confirms.)

In full sunlight.

Carol: *(Pleasantly.)* Yeah, so it won't be long.

(Laughter.)

Jesse Thorn: It won't be long for any of us.

John Hodgman: Kathy, if I were to rule in your favor, you would have me—which, you have to pick one. Either preserve it forever or unwrap it with your kids.

Kathy: Ooh, that's hard to pick. I would say preserve it better, so that it doesn't disintegrate over time.

John Hodgman: Hmm. Carol, if I were to rule in your favor, what would you have me rule? Entropy? Inertia? Status quo?

Carol: It's all about the wrapping. I just think of her when I see it. It was so funny that we gave our son a guitar later, and my husband wrapped it like that.

John Hodgman: He didn't have a box for it?

(Carol confirms.)

Falling down on the job, Dad. I think I've heard everything I need to in order to make my decision. I'm going to retire to my chambers for a moment. I'll be back with my verdict in just a moment.

Jesse Thorn: Please rise as Judge John Hodgman exits the courtroom.

(Cheers and applause.)

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Kathy, how are you feeling about your chances here?

Kathy: I am feeling okay. I have no idea how this is gonna go.

Jesse Thorn: You know, when I was at the—when I used to go to the Columbia Park Boys Club after school, in the shop class, we have this thing called plastics. And one of the things—I mean, I'm not suggesting you don't know what plastic is.

(Laughter.)

This activity called plastics. And one of the things we did was you could bring something to the shop teacher, and they would encase it in clear plastic like a—you know, like a bug specimen or something like that. I'm just saying, I know it's in the Mission District of San Francisco, so you'd have to buy a plane ticket, *(chuckling)* but it's available. It's available to you. Carol, how are you feeling about your chances?

Carol: I mean, I'm right. I mean—

(The crowd and John Hodgman erupt into laughter.)

Jesse Thorn: Well, *(laughs)*—well, please rise as Judge John Hodgman reenters the courtroom and delivers his verdict.

John Hodgman: “Well, I'm right.” The daughter, sister, of engineers. You're not an engineer yourself. It says here that you're a retired protein scientist, is that correct?

Carol: Chemist, yeah.

John Hodgman: Chemist, excuse me. Scientific mind all the same. I really wanted to unwrap this thing on stage.

(Carol affirms.)

I really wanted to get my little, shall I say, paws in this thing and bat it around mischievously.

(Laughter.)

It's a cat! Alright, everyone listening?!

Carol: Uh, we can't be sure. *(Laughs.)*

John Hodgman: Everyone—well, you're absolutely right. Because what you convinced me of, Carol, is that we know that it's a cat, because you saw it before. And it looks like a cat. But now it is wrapped in a kind of ambiguity, and I am convinced that if you unwrap this cat, the magic of this gift will die. But remaining inside the Schrödinger's wrapping, this cat is alive and dead at the same time.

(Laughter and scattered applause.)

I was so mad when I read in the notes that Kathy, you did not want to unwrap this cat outside of the presence of your children who are not here tonight. And therefore, I would not get to unwrap it on stage. You understand, to a show person, that's death. Like, you understand Chekhov's Law of Wrapped Cats?

[00:20:00]

(Laughter.)

I have this wrapped cat up here this entire time. I can't unwrap it in front of the audience? I want my present now!

Carol: How about two marshmallows down the road?

(Laughter and applause.)

John Hodgman: I'll see you in 23 years. But! I now understand this cat can never be unwrapped. Yeah.

(Laughter.)

Never, ever. Not even by time and the windowsill. This cat must remain encased in this beautiful wrapping forever. Now, I do think that it would be interesting to encase it in Lucite or something and to truly mount it and make it a work of art. But I don't think this cat—this cat is not a Lucite cat, it's a wrapping cat. You know what I mean? Like the cat in—uh, what's the song? “Opposites Attract”. MC Skat Kat.

Jesse Thorn: “Opposites Attract”. Talking about MC Skat Kat; he's good friends with Paula Abdul.

John Hodgman: Paula Abdul and MC Skat Kat. He's a rapping (*wrapping*) cat. He's not a Lucite cat. You know what I mean?

(Jesse “wow”s flatly.)

I'm sorry, did you say wow or meow?

Jesse Thorn: *(Laughing.)* Two steps forward and two steps back.

John Hodgman: Something, something, opposites attract. That's what I mean, Jesse. Alright, we're going to learn that for the next show. The point is this cat must remain wrapped. And honestly, I liked your idea, Kathy. Which is you wrap it again. You're good at this, right? This is the first time I've seen you smile all night.

(Laughter.)

You want to wrap this thing up again. One more time around the wrapping table for this wrapped cat, and then that will be it. Then that cat can be wherever you want it, but you just bought yourself another few years. And the fact of the matter is, when this thing—when it finally comes—both layers of wrapping come undone, it's going to be disappointing. Keep it wrapped. I think more than two layers, though? Overkill. One more turn through the wrapping paper. That's a phrase, right?

(Kathy affirms playfully.)

This is the sound of a gavel. Judge John Hodgman rules. *(Bangs his gavel three times.)* That is all.

(Cheers and applause.)

Jesse Thorn: Thank you, Kathy and Carol, for being on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

John Hodgman: Thank you so much.

Jesse Thorn: Lexington, believe it or not, we've got more justice on the way. Let's bring out our next set of litigants. Please welcome to the stage, Amanda and Adam!

(Cheers and applause.)

Our case, “Working Pro Boo-No!”—Amanda brings the case against her husband, Adam. Adam wants to take Amanda to a local haunted house. He says it'll be fun. She says absolutely not. Who's right? Who's wrong? Only one can decide. Please rise as Judge John Hodgman enters the courtroom and delivers an obscure cultural reference.

(Cheers and applause.)

John Hodgman: *(Singing.)* There's a house on my block that's abandoned and cold. Folks moved out of it a long time ago. And they took all their things. They never came back. It looks like it's haunted with the windows all cracked. Everyone calls it the house where nobody lives. Bailiff Jesse Thorn, please swear them in.

Jesse Thorn: Amanda, Adam, please raise your right hands. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God-or-Whatever?

(They swear.)

Do you swear to abide by Judge John Hodgman's ruling, despite the fact that he is haunted?

(They swear.)

John Hodgman: I absolutely am haunted.

Jesse Thorn: Judge Hodgman, you may proceed.

John Hodgman: We just delivered our youngest child to college, and I am completely haunted. Thank you very much. Just wander around my house like a ghost going, “I remember when there was life here.”

(“Aw”s from the audience.)

Jesse Thorn: Shaking the chains that used to bind you to something.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: That’s right. Yeah, then I go bother my old business partner. That’s why I’m showing up in your bedroom every night chasing you with chains.

(Laughter.)

Anyway, where was I? Ah! I’m on stage in Lexington, I forgot. I apolo-geeze. *(Laughing at his own mistake.)* I apolo-geeze. I apologize! Amanda and Adam, you may be seated for an immediate summary judgment in one of yours favors. Can you guess the piece of culture that I referenced as I entered this courtroom? Amanda, why don’t you guess first?

Amanda: I cannot.

John Hodgman: Ooh, Adam’s got a big grin on his face. I think he knows it. Guess a song. What’s your favorite song? Oh, “Opposites Attract” by Paula Abdul and MC Skat Kat. Great guess. I love it. Hang on, let me write it down. Where’s my pen? Okay. Mm-hm, go ahead, Adam. What’s your guess?

Jesse Thorn: His guess is “Be Somebody or Be Somebody’s Fool” by Mr. T.

John Hodgman: I’ll put that in as your guess.

(Laughter.)

[00:25:00]

Adam: I was thinking “House of the Rising Sun”, but I’m pretty sure that’s way off.

John Hodgman: “House of the Rising Sun”, with its famous chorus, “the house where nobody lives”.

Adam: Right. There is a house.

John Hodgman: There is a house. And it goes by two names: House of the Rising Sun. And the house where nobody lives. In the songwriting workshop, that would be called a hat on a hat. Too many things.

All guesses are wrong! Shall I sing it the right way?

Jesse Thorn: No!

John Hodgman: (*Adopting his Tom Waits affect.*) There's a house on the hilltop. It's abandoned—

Sound Effect: No! He's back! He's back! The man from my nightmare! Make him stop.

John Hodgman: —out of it a long time ago.

“The House Where Nobody Lived” by Tom Waits, from the album *Mule Variations*.

Jesse Thorn: I don't even like—I don't even like real Tom Waits.

John Hodgman: How dare you. Oh, Amanda. Amanda and Adam, who comes to seek justice before me in this fake court of law?

Amanda: I do.

John Hodgman: And what is the nature of your complaint, Amanda?

Amanda: Every Halloween, since we dispute if I have to go to a haunted house with him or not.

John Hodgman: A haunted house with him. Tomorrow night, did you say?

Jesse Thorn: No, or not.

John Hodgman: Or not. Sorry. Adam, is the haunted house that you want to go to open tomorrow night? Because that may affect my ruling.

(*Adam confirms.*)

It is, as a matter of fact. Alright, well let's just put down “tomorrow night, question mark” in the calendar, haunted house. What is this haunted house that you're interested in?

Adam: The one that I have in mind is called the Dent Schoolhouse. It's in Cincinnati.

John Hodgman: It's in Cincinnati. Ooooh! Many spirits are frightened by the name of the Dent Schoolhouse. They gave some very weak woos.

(Laughter.)

They must be old spirits, indeed. *(Wails weakly.)*

Adam: Very old. 1870s, I'm gonna say.

John Hodgman: What is the Dent Schoolhouse in Cincinnati?

Adam: So, I believe it's a late 1800s schoolhouse. And the lore of it is that some children were going missing at that time, and the town couldn't figure out exactly what was happening—if they were runaways or whatever the case may be. And as it turns out, it was the custodian of the school.

John Hodgman: Oh, one Frederick Kruger, I believe, was his name.

(Laughter.)

Adam: You know, that I'm not sure on. I think it was Charlie, maybe? I could be wrong.

John Hodgman: Uh-huh, okay. Charlie Kruger, his cousin? Yeah. But this is an entertainment purposes haunted house at this point.

(Adam confirms.)

I mean, there is a—is this legend genuine or, is this made up for the—?

Adam: I think the origin story is real from what I've read.

John Hodgman: Okay. But what experience is it now by going to it, and what happens inside the house? Or are we not allowed to know?

Adam: I don't know, because we've not been able to go.

John Hodgman: You've never been allowed to go. Have you been to haunted houses together before?

Adam: We've been to a haunted trail a couple years ago.

Amanda: With our children.

John Hodgman: A haunted trail?

Jesse Thorn: Haunted by the ghost of Davy Crockett?

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Huh. What was on the haunted trail, Amanda?

Amanda: Uh, it was a trail through a little park in a wooded area, and there was just like volunteer actors, but they were all dressed up.

John Hodgman: I'll give you a little secret. All actors are volunteer actors.

(Laughter.)

We all agreed to this. We didn't have to do this.

Amanda: And there would be like little vignettes along the way of different scenes.

John Hodgman: Scary stuff?

Amanda: Scary stuff.

John Hodgman: Like, what kind of scary thing would happen? I remember clowns most distinctively. They liked to get in my face. I did not appreciate it.

John Hodgman: Like, they jump out at you?

Amanda: I had a child attached to my side.

(Jesse barks with laughter.)

John Hodgman: Strange.

(Laughter.)

Amanda: And so, instead of like lunging at us, it was like a slow, very intimidating stare down.

John Hodgman: Ugh! And it scared you.

Amanda: I did not appreciate that any more than a surprise attack.

John Hodgman: Right, you didn't enjoy it. Adam, you had a great time, though, watching your wife squirm.

Adam: Oh, it was great.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: What is it about this house do you think that Amanda would actually enjoy?

Adam: So, there is an option where there are lights on and no actors. And I thought that would be—

John Hodgman: Uh-huh. In other words, house.

Adam: So, you're just left with the lore, and not the folks attacking you. No jump scares, that sort of thing. And I thought that that might be a good enough middle ground. And it's even supposed to be kid friendly, and our kids are wanting to start going to haunted houses and that sort of thing. So, I thought that this could be a good starter.

John Hodgman: You're using the kids against her.

(Adam agrees playfully.)

I see. Adam, is there a history of Amanda asking you to do things that you don't like to do?

Adam: Yes, every year, as a matter of fact.

John Hodgman: Every year, what is it that you do that you don't want to do that Amanda wants to do?

Adam: So, I'm, I'm not real good with crowds. I don't like to be in them. They make me uneasy.

[00:30:00]

Jesse Thorn: *(Very quietly.)* Me too.

Adam: Thanks. Thank you. So—thank you so much. With that being said—

Jesse Thorn: Bring it in.

Adam: I get I get dragged along to the yearly Cincinnati Fireworks celebration. And that brings about 500,000 or so people. But I do it.

John Hodgman: And you get into a crowd, because Amanda wants it. And this you're not enjoying.

Adam: This I am. This I'm not.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Let the record show that Adam pointed at Jesse Thorn, essentially merging mustaches with Adam, whereas I'm just standing beside him with my arm on his shoulder like a pal.

Adam: (*Chuckling.*) This is just true.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Well, we have some exciting news, Judge Hodgman. We have added a whole new dimension to the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

John Hodgman: That's right, Jesse. (*Chuckles.*) We are a little bit behind the time, but now we are right on time. *Judge John Hodgman* is live on TikTok and on YouTube. On TikTok, you're going to see little Swift Justice segments where I hear a little swift case, and I adjudicate it real quick, 'cause that's the TikTok way. It's a little bit of a quick QuikTok (*quick talk*). But the YouTube, we've got whole episodes up there, on video now. Me wearing judges' robes, you wearing a bailiff outfit. Look, if you're listening now you can't see that I'm waving to the YouTubers now. So, go over to YouTube and search up *Judge John Hodgman*. Get over to TikTok, @JudgeJohnHodgmanPod. Smash that like, smash that subscribe, smash anything you can smash, and we'll be not only in your ears but also in your eyeballs.

Jesse Thorn: Smash the patriarchy.

John Hodgman: That's right. Smash that, please. And we'll be in your ears and your eyes! And we're so excited to be there. So, check us out on YouTube and TikTok.

Jesse Thorn: That's TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, where we're also going to be sharing those new short videos. And our thanks to our new video editor, Daniel Speer, to Valerie here at MaxFun, who helped us set up this equipment. And I will mention—not for nothing, Judge Hodgman—but the MaxFun drive is around the corner. (*Chuckles.*) And video producers don't work for free. So, if you love seeing this stuff we hope that you'll take the opportunity to become a member of Maximum Fun. But in the meantime, just enjoy them! It's fun. Look, we're wearing our little outfits and everything!

John Hodgman: Yeah, don't just enjoy them, Jesse. Like them. Subscribe to them.

Jesse Thorn: Smash the patriarchy.

John Hodgman: Share them. Smash the patriarchy. Social media. We finally got it right.

Jesse Thorn: Let's get back to the case.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

John Hodgman: How would you feel—you're not excited by the idea of people sneaking up on you. Like, you would not enjoy an actor dressed up as a werewolf sneaking up on you on stage, for example.

Amanda: That sounds awful.

John Hodgman: *(Beat.)* Sorry, Travis, she's not into it.

(Laughter.)

Travis McElroy: *(From off-mic.)* What?! But I—

John Hodgman: Yeah, I'm sorry. She doesn't want it.

Jesse Thorn: Sorry, Trav.

John Hodgman: Don't—I mean, no, don't go away. Come on, let's get him back to the stage!

Jesse Thorn: Expert witness, Travis McElroy!

(Cheers and applause.)

John Hodgman: Travis McElroy, back to the stage! If you please!

Travis McElroy: Hi, everybody. Hi, it's me, Travis McElroy.

John Hodgman: Let's get Travis set up with a microphone and even a stool if you can sit down on his—yes, right, exactly.

Travis McElroy: A stool and everything? Hi, everybody.

Jesse Thorn: Travis McElroy, of course, from *My Brother and My Brother and Me*, *Schmatters*, *The Adventure Zone*.

John Hodgman: Travis, thank you so much for being here. You are also from Cincinnati. You traveled down here to be with us today.

Travis McElroy: Correct. The Queen City!

(Cheers and applause.)

I'm sure you all have a warm place in your heart for—I actually don't know, is there a rivalry?

(The audience answers no.)

Cool, I love that.

John Hodgman: Well, there is tonight! What do you know about haunted houses in Cincinnati? Do you know the Dent Schoolhouse?

Travis McElroy: I do. I know of it. That is one of the few haunted houses in America I have not worked at!

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Too terrifying even for you.

Travis McElroy: Yeah. No, I just know too many theater kids who work there.

John Hodgman: But you have worked at a haunted house?

Travis McElroy: Many, many haunted houses, professionally.

Jesse Thorn: If there is one thing that binds the McElroy family together, it is volunteer acting.

(Laughter.)

Travis McElroy: Yeah, that's true. I worked at several haunted houses in college. I worked at a company in Los Angeles that set up haunted houses in rich people's garages during the Halloween season, where I was struck in the face by a seven-year-old girl!

(Laughter.)

And I was 31 at the time, and I said, "Excuse me, young lady!"

John Hodgman: Did she crawl out of the television?

Travis McElroy: No, she was dressed as a ballerina at the time. And I was sitting in a fake—

[00:35:00]

John Hodgman: So, she was just in character then?

Travis McElroy: Yes. I was sitting in a fake electric chair, as a scarecrow. It wasn't real. And I was sitting there completely still, and I went, "Ah!" And she looked at me. *(Beat.)* Smacked me! So, it wasn't even—there was a definite decision of, "I'm gonna smack this person."

Jesse Thorn: Travis, is it possible that you, dressed as a scarecrow, sitting in a fake electric chair, were smacked for mixing metaphors?

(Laughter.)

Travis McElroy: Perhaps! What part of “it was set up in a person's garage” were you like, there was deep back story for every character?!

Jesse Thorn: And I mean, also, to be fair—like, I know that we, right now, only have capital punishment in this country in some places, for murder. But—

Travis McElroy: You wanted to kill that little girl?! Jesse!

Jesse Thorn: I would also—I would be willing to consider capital punishment for living scarecrows.

Travis McElroy: They would mostly just catch on fire! Horrible!

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, that’s true!

John Hodgman: It's the only way to deal with them. Anyway.

Travis McElroy: I also once fell asleep in a coffin during a haunted house. Sorry, go on. They're surprisingly comfortable!

(Jesse does a Count Dracula laugh.)

John Hodgman: Have you had an opportunity to—

Jesse Thorn: Wait, hold on. Dracula's can take any nap.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Pass without comment. Um, have you had the opportunity to hear the testimony offered by Adam and Amanda?

(Travis confirms.)

What do you—do you have any opinions so far, or questions you would like to ask?

Travis McElroy: I did miss the part explicitly where your problem was going through a lights on, no actors haunted house. What's your problem there?

John Hodgman: Yeah, that seems like a pretty good compromise, Amanda.

Amanda: I don't think it'll satisfy the kids.

John Hodgman: You don't think it will satisfy the kids?

Amanda: No. I think that would be underwhelming for them. I think I would be fine with that.

John Hodgman: Is the twist of the story that there are no kids?

(Laughter.)

Travis McElroy: Okay, so here's what I want to drill down. Here's—if I may, as an expert witness. What is it?

Jesse Thorn: In fact, it certainly is the role of the expert witness to interrogate them!

Travis McElroy: Yeah. So, permission to treat the witness as hostile?

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Permission granted. Please face back and forth while you're asking.

Jesse Thorn: Travis is but a simple country lawyer.

Travis McElroy: *(Affecting a southern drawl.)* Now I'm just a simple country podcaster, but I am curious.

(Returning to his usual voice.) No, I'm wondering, what is your—if you were to follow your worry and fear to a logical conclusion, what are you worried is going to happen—right?—that makes it so like I don't want to do that? Because what if—blank?

Amanda: Um, I don't know that it's a worry of what's going to happen; it's where my imagination takes me when I see people in those situations. That my imagination's already pretty vivid. I can pre-imagine these ideas, and then you give them to me, and my imagination just sticks to them.

Travis McElroy: Well, can I tell you, what's happening in that situation is they're thinking, "I'm gonna have enough money to buy Pokémon cards later!"

(Laughter.)

And they're very excited about that.

(Amanda concedes.)

Jesse Thorn: I can finally get that Funko Pop.

Travis McElroy: Oh, yeah! I can't wait to go home and drink a lot of Mountain Dew before going to bed.

John Hodgman: You don't think that the lights on will satisfy the kids? That seems like an excuse. Because, honestly, who cares what the kids want? Who cares if the kids are satisfied? They're just going to grow up, and leave you, and go to college.

(Laughter.)

Then your whole life, you think about—

Travis McElroy: Yeah, teach them to fear now so they stay with you!

John Hodgman: You spend your whole life thinking about what they want; they never for once think about what you want. And then they're whole human beings in their own right, and they just go away, and you realize that's the way it was supposed to be the whole time. I should have taken them to that lights-on haunted house. Who cares what they want?

Travis McElroy: I'm so glad that mine and Jesse's kids are still young enough. They'll never grow old!

John Hodgman: This is starting to sound like a very scary story indeed.

(Laughter.)

Travis McElroy: Here's what I will say, having worked in many haunted houses. There is a lot of—especially Dent. Dent is one that happens every year. It's worked by a lot of theatre people, as I said. There's a lot of care and thought that goes into the design. And you know they're going to follow the rules as far as like touching. Right? Some of these fly-by-night haunted houses, you think, “Oh, they're not allowed to touch me!” But they don't care. Right? Dent is a repeated—it happens every year. You know they're strict about it.

Jesse Thorn: Travis, I was a theatre kid. All we did was touch. Just touch, touch, touch, touch, touch! That's why we became theatre kids, so we could touch!

Travis McElroy: Well, each other, but you didn't get off the stage during *Cats* and pet the audience! *(Beat.)* Or did you?!

John Hodgman: As much as you might want to. As an actor, you kept your cat wrapped up on *Cats*.

(Jesse confirms.)

Oh, you're still here.

Amanda: Surprise.

John Hodgman: Uh, do you have anything to say about Adam's feeling of discomfort going to the fireworks and feeling forced to do that, and therefore his revenge as a vengeful ghost should be to make you walk through this haunted house? Does that carry any water with you?

Amanda: I have offered to let him stay home.

John Hodgman: You have offered to let him stay home. Sir, how do you respond to that?

Adam: Yes, she has offered to let me stay home.

[00:40:00]

But it's a family event where I feel like there's an obligation to go. So, even though the offer's there, it's implied that I should still go.

John Hodgman: Also, it wouldn't satisfy the kids.

(Adam agrees.)

And neither of you want to be sent into the cornfield by your demonic children.

(Laughter.)

Travis McElroy: May I ask a question, Judge?

(John confirms.)

Now let me grill the other guy.

John Hodgman: I don't think I can stop you anyway.

Travis McElroy: Let me ask you this question, sir—

Jesse Thorn: You don't invite Travis on your show to tell him not to talk.

(Laughter.)

Travis McElroy: Yeah, that's true. Could it possibly be that you would like your wife to go with you to the haunted house because you enjoy haunted houses? And so you think, if I enjoy them, she will too if she just gives it a chance.

(Adam starts to agree, but Travis interrupts.)

But could it also be possible that she has drawn a boundary saying, “I would not enjoy it, and I support that you enjoy it. And that's beautiful.”?!

Adam: Do I have to answer only yes or no?

Jesse Thorn: You can yes, no, or plead the fifth.

Travis McElroy: Yeah, you can say whatever you want.

Adam: Then I plead the fifth.

John Hodgman: Does the prosecution rest?

Travis McElroy: For now!

John Hodgman: Well argued!

Travis McElroy: I don't know. The prosecution naps!

John Hodgman: You're the most restless prosecution I've ever met.

Travis McElroy: Well, I think I'm prosecuting and defending. I'm not sure where I'm at.

John Hodgman: No, I understand. You're getting to the truth of it, which I think is this: you would like your wife, Amanda, to enjoy haunted houses. She's never going to enjoy it. Don't you agree, Amanda? You will never enjoy it ever? It's impossible. You were cursed by a monkey's paw to never enjoy a haunted house?

(Amanda confirms.)

You're not even willing to give the walkthrough, no actor—I mean, there's gonna be no clowns, right? It's just—is the idea of walking through the haunted house that has a legend attached to it scarier than weirdos attacking you without touching?

Amanda: *(Reluctantly.)* I guess not. I guess it would be fine.

Travis McElroy: Is there an actor you really like? Because maybe you could do lights on one actor. And it's like Pedro Pascal is there, and he's like, “Hi. Come on in. This is my house. Let me show you around. This is *MTV's Haunted Cribs*. This is where the literal magic happens.”

Amanda: I feel like it's gonna be that like I'll go to this, and they're gonna get older, and then they're gonna be like, “Well, now we're gonna do this.” And there's gonna be no like when do I get to just op back out.

Jesse Thorn: It's a slippery slope.

Amanda: Yes, thank you. That's the words.

Jesse Thorn: Travis, have you ever seen someone really upset at one of these haunted houses?

Travis McElroy: Yes, Jesse, but I've seen people really upset at a lot of things. I've seen people really upset at comic book conventions, so... I've seen people really upset at arcades.

John Hodgman: Fair. In your ideal ruling, Amanda, you say you'd like me to rule that you never have to go to a haunted house ever, ever, ever, forever. Adam, yours is interesting. To find a haunted house for her to go to with you that might be family friendly and not super gory. Gore has not entered the conversation until now. Gore enters the chat. Is the Dent School Haunted House gory?

Adam: I don't know.

Travis McElroy: Let me—may I offer a suggestion? Kings Island, also located in Cincinnati, does like horror nights, but it's still like a family amusement park with lights and stuff and rides and stuff.

Adam: So, I did read about that, and they do have a disclaimer that says 13 and under it's not recommended.

Travis McElroy: Damn you, time!

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: It's not suitable. Amanda suggests that your demonic ghost kids would not be satisfied with lights on, and then they would curse you to live forever in a painting or something. Do you think that you might not be satisfied with lights on?

Adam: At this point, I just want to see it. At this point, I think she is right. We do have—our one kid is pretty into Halloween, and it might be underwhelming for him. But I think this is a good test of the waters to see.

John Hodgman: You have kids or one kid?

Adam: Two.

John Hodgman: Two. And what are their ages, if I may ask?

Adam: Nine and seven.

John Hodgman: And does this house have a rating for age appropriateness that you're aware of?

Adam: For that particular event, I believe that one is kid friendly.

John Hodgman: The lights on?

(Adam confirms.)

Okay. I think I've heard everything I need to in order to make my decision. I'm going to retire to my haunted chambers. Can't think of anything better. Sorry. Sorry, Lexington. I'm gonna retire to my chambers and be back home with my verdict!

Jesse Thorn: Please rise as Judge John Hodgman exits the courtroom.

(Cheers and applause.)

Amanda, how are you feeling about your chances here?

Amanda: Not great.

John Hodgman: Why's that?

Amanda: I think that lights on option's really gonna get me in trouble.

Jesse Thorn: Oh, what do you think, Adam? How are you feeling?

Adam: *(Sighs.)* I think it's 50/50. I think there is the inducing somebody to come out of their comfort zone aspect of things that I think that could be a factor. But I also think that sometimes that's encouraged as well, so we'll just have to wait and see.

Jesse Thorn: Do you think it's possible that lights on, no actors, just means only real ghosts?

[00:45:00]

(Laughter.)

Adam: It could very well mean that! We'll have to find out.

Jesse Thorn: Please rise as Judge John Hodgman reenters the courtroom and presents his verdict.

(Cheers and applause.)

John Hodgman: I don't believe in ghosts, and I'm coming to you, Adam, to say (*spookily*) you cannot make your wife love a haunted house! You cannot trick her into liking a thing that makes her scared. (*Returning to normal.*) Because the most scared I have ever been was in—well, Universal Studios used to do a really scary one. What was it called?

Travis McElroy: Halloween Horror Nights.

John Hodgman: Though I do not believe in any ghost spirits, haunts, or haints, I was more scared than I ever have been in my life walking through that controlled environment where I knew that it would be very illegal for any of those people to touch me with their chainsaws and manacles and whatever it was. And yet, I could not handle it at all. It really scared me. And then I went on Haunted Hayride in Los Angeles. They do it up right there in Halloween time in Los Angeles. They really scare John Hodgman. A lot. Even then, I know, it's all make-believe, but it's very, very scary! Someone got up onto the hayride and had a chainsaw. It was fake, but it scared me! A lot! Amanda, I was scared. I'm sorry that I loomed near you. It's scary. Scary stuff. Some people, it just makes their skin curl. Uh, curdle. Whatever it is. You know what I mean. Scary.

She's not going to do it. She's not going to enjoy this, I don't think. Right? And I understand you tried to play every card you had in your haunted deck of cards. “She makes me go to the fireworks, boo-hoo. Uh, my children are gonna be disappointed.” They have a father who will take them to the haunted house. Take them to the haunted house. Leave her behind. You can stay home on the fireworks! Your children won't think less of you. They're not going to curse you to live inside a jar or something for the rest of your life!

(*Laughter.*)

If you're really uncomfortable, you should just say, “Ehh, I don't feel like it because of the crowds.” Maybe you'll enjoy being crowded in by evil clowns and mummies and stuff in this weird thing that you're going to go to. I don't think you should go to lights on. I think you should go to lights off. I think you should go to one where you tell them to turn all the lights off and blindfold me, and I'll walk through by myself. I think you've got to go through it alone. I think you've got to go through it alone. Lights on once, lights out once, so you can figure out whether your kids not only are satisfied but can handle it. And then I think you can decide whether or not you bring your kids. And you can make your case to your wife again. “It really wasn't that bad.”

Here's what you're gonna do. (*Conspiratorially.*) When you go through the lights out one—Amanda, don't listen to this, because it's going to be fun for you. When you go through the lights out one, say, “Here's what I'm going to do, honey. I'm going to FaceTime you the entire time.” And then you like, walk her through it. And you're like, “See, it's nothing. It's nothing at all.” And then you just go into a corner, and then you just collapse.

(*Laughter.*)

Adam: That's perfect.

John Hodgman: Yeah. And then just have someone else pick up the camera and point to you, and you're just standing in the corner *Blair Witch* style, and then the camera goes black. Okay? That'll be a great Halloween.

Adam: I like that. That's perfect.

John Hodgman: Otherwise, Amanda gets to stay at home. This is the sound of a gavel. (*Bangs his gavel three times.*) Judge John Hodgman rules. That is all.

Jesse Thorn: Amanda, Adam, thank you for joining us on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast, and our thanks to our pal Travis McElroy!

(*Cheers and applause.*)

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: That's it for this episode of the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast Thanks to reddit users u/wilcoxchatham And u/drucifer27 for naming the cases in this episode. And our very special thanks to our friend Travis McElroy for participating in this episode. He made the drive from Cincinnati. We could not have been more grateful to see our pal Travis backstage. We were tired from our own travel. Travis is perhaps never tired! (*Chuckling.*) Hard to say, but he really injected some life into us. It was just—

John Hodgman: He's a human shot of adrenaline to the heart.

Jesse Thorn: It was really great to see him. He was so, so hilarious on the show. We were really, really happy to have Trav there. The *Judge John Hodgman* podcast, created by John Hodgman and Jesse Thorn. Our touring producer was the great Laura Valk. This episode, recorded by our pal Stephen Colon. Our producer is Jennifer Marmor. Be sure to follow us on Instagram, @JudgeJohnHodgman and on TikTok, @JudgeJohnHodgmanPod.

John Hodgman: And get over to YouTube, at Judge John Hodgman Pod on YouTube and smash that like, smash that subscribe, and go gently on the notifications, but hit 'em all if you don't mind, and spread the word. We're really happy to be posting full episodes live up there on YouTube, and you can check 'em out at Judge John Hodgman pod at YouTube.

Jesse Thorn: We'll talk to you next time on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

Sound Effect: Three gavel bangs.

Transition: Cheerful ukulele chord.

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