

Sawbones 485: Aquatofana

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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'm your co-host Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy and Justin.

Justin: What?

Sydnee: It's time.

Justin: Oh no, is it time to be real?

Sydnee: It's time to be real right now. This is not—

Justin: Holy crap, I'm sorry, Sawbones, this is not a drill.

Sydnee: This isn't a stunt. It's not—

Justin: It's not a drill.

Sydnee: It's not a stunt. This is real.

Justin: It's time to be real. It's time to be real.

Sydnee: Are you ready?

Justin: I'm ready. Are you— Well, okay, hold your foot there.

Sydnee: Oh, I took the picture right away.

Justin: It's a great picture of me and a picture of you. Okay.

Sydnee: Oh no, is it bad?

Justin: There's no such thing as a bad picture of you, my dear.

Sydnee: There are bad pictures of me. Okay...

Justin: Welcome to Sawbones!

Sydnee: That was not great.

Justin: It's great, I'm sure.

Sydnee: It was not my best work.

Justin: Hey, can you, I opened a soda, can you, would you mind? I opened a soda in the microphone, so if you would, tell me to grip it and rip it.

Sydnee: Grip it and rip it.

Justin: Thank you. I appreciate it, cause I can't podcast unless somebody says grip it and rip it when I open one.

Sydnee: Sorry about that interruption to be real.

Justin: Folks, it's out of our hands.

Sydnee: But when they tell you to be real, you got to be real.

Justin: You got to be real, otherwise it's not real.

Sydnee: I broke my streak yesterday.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: Yeah. Well, I was literally—

Justin: You weren't real?

Sydnee: Well, I just finished a week of hospital service, like, a couple hours ago. Well, no, I'm not officially off call yet. I'm still on call.

Justin: I can tell by your eyes you're still on call. [laughs]

Sydnee: I am. [laughs] You can see the visible weight on me.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: The entire— It's 24 hours a day, seven days.

Justin: As soon as she hands off the service, she's like Grandpa Joe in Willy Wonka. Just up and [sings].

Sydnee: Um... No, I was standing in a patient's room and I could not think of a way to say—

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: "Alright, everybody!"

Justin: I'm gonna get a quick, uh, phone scan of you, if you don't mind just smiling.

Sydnee: If you could smile? Thank you.

Justin: But keep it real, please. This shouldn't be posed.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: It's for a phone scan. These days, you can do anything with phones.

Sydnee: I could not think of any way that would be professional or

appropriate or anything I ever want to do.

Justin: You should have called me. I would have told you the phone scan thing. I just came up with that.

Sydnee: So I did it and I thought, well, I'll just post late. And then I just, I just forgot.

Justin: You could tell them it's a tiny MRI machine.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Oh, it's a tiny CAT scanner. It's a kitty scan.

Sydnee: Do you know what's funny? It makes me feel old—

Justin: [louder] It's a kitty scan, I said.

Sydnee: Oh, like a CAT— Oh, my God. I don't know how I feel about that.

Justin: But Syd!

Sydnee: I feel so old that I remember there was a time, because sometimes we do need to take pictures of things, right, to, like, document, like, is it getting worse or better, or, like, sometimes a specialist can't come in right away, so they'll ask, can you take a picture of a wound or something, and we have ways through our EMR of, like, sharing those pictures...

Justin: Electronic medical record.

Sydnee: Yes, thank you, very good. So that they are HIPAA protected, so that we're not just sharing a picture of your foot with everyone, right? Or whatever it is, it doesn't have to be your foot. But...

A lot of the times we just use our phones to actually access that app and take those pictures. I still remember the time when in our clinic we had the designated camera that you used to take pictures of wounds and you had to sign out the camera to go...

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: ... take a picture of a wound.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like a physical camera.

Justin: A camera. A camera! They don't even make those things anymore. Syd, what is our episode about today?

Sydnee: Justin, usually we cover stuff throughout medical history that we did to try to make people better, right?

Justin: Yep.

Sydnee: Maybe we didn't do a good job of it, but we were trying. I thought we would do something a little different this week and cover something that was specifically created to make people worse, as in sick or die; a poison.

Justin: Poison.

Sydnee: A poison is what I'm talking about, yes. So thank you, Cathy, for this topic recommendation. I'd never heard of this before, but we were gonna talk about aquatofana.

Justin: Sawbonesshow@gmail.com or sawbones@maximumfun.org. That's our email address. So you can email us if you got a similar suggestion.

Sydnee: Yeah, I really appreciate it. 'Cause I had never heard of this poison. And again, I know this is kind of, it's straying a little away from what we cover on this show because it is very much not medical history to— Like, when we gave people poisons, that's, like, murder history.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Homicide history? There are lots of podcasts about that.

Justin: There are, we don't normally delve into that. We live, you know, give unto Caesar what is Caesar's.

Sydnee: But I think sometimes talking about poisons and what was possibly in them and how they worked and why, I think it's, I mean, it's adjacent. And I mean, honestly, we gave lots of medicines throughout history that turned out to be poison, so...

Justin: And Sydnee, one could argue, it has been said, that the dose makes the poison.

Sydnee: Can I tell you that I wrote the dose makes the poison in my notes? As like, sometimes I'll put in my notes something that I think is worth, like, I don't know. It means something just to me, just to my brain. I'll see that sentence and think, I know what I'm talking about. Except I wrote, "The does makes the poison."

Justin: The does makes the poison? Yeah.

Sydnee: That's not anything. So, okay. Why, what is aquatofana? Why did somebody make it? What was its use? This is a poison that has a very specific connotation.

Justin: Yeah. I'm gonna swoop in with the first part of that translation and just say it's water.

Sydnee: Yes. Tofana is a person.

Justin: Oh, Tofana's water. Easy. Done.

Sydnee: It's not surprising maybe to hear that, if we look back throughout history, and this isn't medical history, this is just, you know, regular history, marriage hasn't always been an equal partnership between two parties.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: Still to this day, one may argue that it is not always an equal

partnership between two parties.

Justin: I think it's never an equal partnership. I think in a good marriage, it's an unequal partnership that shifts back and forth as needed. I think that's your ideal.

Sydnee: Yes, but I am not talking about that kind of give and take of a lifelong partnership with another human. I'm talking about more specifically that in many places and times throughout human history, if there is a partner in a relationship who is a woman... She is not necessarily given the same kinds of rights in a marriage as her husband may.

Justin: Hmm... I have heard of this.

Sydnee: Yes. And in a lot of times, women were forced into marriages by societal rules, by cultural expectations, financial obligations of their families, or some sort of power, you know, seeking kind of arrangement, or just, like, literal force, just, like, literally forced into marriages whether they wanted to be or not, and then would be kind of trapped in them.

And the results could vary from just simply a loveless match to people who didn't really care about each other, but there they're stuck, to the worst case scenario where it's an abusive relationship. And...

Justin: Hey, that's stinking thinking. What about the... You said best case is loveless marriage. What about two strangers finding each other against all odds? And I, yeah, I don't know.

Sydnee: No, I see what you're saying, but I think that is outside the purview of this episode because if that was the case, if you were forced into a marriage and then they ended up being the love of your life, you would have no need for aquatofana.

Justin: That's okay, that's fair.

Sydnee: Okay, so if you were stuck in that kind of arrangement, and again, we're talking about a situation where you cannot— You can't leave. You can't get a divorce.

There might not be such a thing as divorce, or you don't have the legal right to get a divorce, or you would bring such shame and humiliation to your family, or you would be destitute. So what lengths would you go to end that arrangement? What wouldn't you do to get out of that situation?

Justin: This is, like, the weirdest thing for my wife to ever ask me.

Sydnee: Well, I mean, I'm happily married to you and I have the option to leave.

Justin: You heard it folks. She's happy in the marriage. We've done it.

Sydnee: And I can leave if I want to!

Justin: She can leave if she wants to! [laughs]

Sydnee: Uh, okay. So back in 17th century Italy, where our story starts...

Justin: [laughing] Not so loud, our kids are upstairs! "Did mom just scream that she can leave the marriage whenever she wants to?"

Sydnee: Uh, back in 17th century Italy, marriage was really the only option for a woman. There's not, there wasn't, there weren't a lot of roles for you in society. I guess a convent. But there weren't a lot of other roles in society if you didn't get married.

And, you know, it was really important for you, for your family, and when you did get married, you still didn't have a lot of options, honestly. Like, pretty much you had one choice, get married, have kids, be obedient. So this is when we start hearing the stories of a woman named Giulia Tofana.

Now, let me say that this is a story that I think is full of as much myth and lore as it is actual fact. I read many different accounts of exactly who this person was, how they came into this poison, the recipe, if you will, for this poison, how many people were killed by the poison, and what was the fate of Miss Tofana. There are lots of different, sort of, spins on that story.

I've read a lot of them. Some of these are like we have evidence for specific instances, and then some were kind of thinking this is probably based on accounts we have, this is probably most likely what happened. So this is, like, the condensed version.

There are lots of histories out there if you wanna read more about it. They're really well researched and documented as to what we do know and what we think we know and what is probably just made up. Most versions of the story start with the inventor of the poison. We know that a specific poisoner, we find a description of an execution, which tells of a poisoner.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: That's how we know the poisoner existed. I mean, cause if you think about, like, record keeping, what records of a person's life are dependable from that far back?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Birth sometimes, death sometimes, marriage might be in there.

Justin: Some of it's harder to...

Sydnee: Sometimes some hospital stuff, if there was some sort of newspaper, you know, it's hard sometimes.

Justin: Yeah, it sounds really sketch.

Sydnee: So Teofania D'Adamo. is who we think invented aquatofana. And then obviously it comes from her name.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: That is where the name comes from. And so therefore, obviously, moving on, I doubt she called it that. In fact, there's no evidence she would have called it after herself. Other people did throughout time. And basically we know that this poisoner had specifically created something that would kill its victim slowly.

Justin: Okay, I'm actually gonna go out on a limb now and say that she almost certainly did not name it after herself. That would have been extremely wild.

Sydnee: 'Cause everybody would be, like, "Well, I mean, obviously we know who did it."

Justin: Just, it's Tofana, go get her, go arrest her.

Sydnee: Go get her.

Justin: It's wild. It says it right here on the bottle. There's her mailing address, like, right on there, "Questions, complaints, husband didn't die? Come here to my house where I live."

Sydnee: And the reason that we connect her to later, Giulia Tofana, who may have been her daughter.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: That is historically theorized based on the records. The way that we connect that is the similarities of the poisons. So there was a poison that could kill a victim in three days, but it could last longer. It depended on how often you gave them the doses of the poison. You only needed a few drops, but it was slow acting and it was subtle.

Justin: Was it cumulative?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So it wouldn't kill you. There was, I mean, I guess you could kill someone after one dose if you gave them enough of it. But...

Justin: That's true of everything.

Sydnee: Well, but what made this a good poison, I guess, if you're looking to murder someone, is that if you serve someone food and they die afterwards, everybody looks at you and goes, well, what the heck did you give them?

If over the course of several days or weeks, someone gradually becomes ill, and has all the appearance on the outside of developing some sort of chronic illness, and then they slowly succumb to that illness...

Justin: Then who knows?

Sydnee: Then who knows what it is? You wouldn't necessarily assume that anyone was responsible for that poison or for that death. You wouldn't necessarily assume poison. And, especially at this time period in history, there were lots of things that slowly killed people and we didn't quite know what they were yet.

Justin: Your teeth. At that point, who knows? You might have mercury in your hat.

Sydnee: I mean, teething literally, now not in older people, but teething was thought to cause a lot of death.

Justin: Look at her paint. Paint's all lead and poison.

Sydnee: There's lots of stuff that kills. So we know that she was caught because she definitely murdered— They think, she created and sold a poison that resulted in the murder of several people. And she had some accomplices she worked with. And the main reason that there were several news articles and we have evidence of this, is that the way that she was killed was really, um, dramatic.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: There are several accounts. She was either closed and bound alive in a canvas sack and thrown from the roof of the bishop's palace.

Justin: Wow, that's intense.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: Sheesh.

Sydnee: Yeah. There was... She was drawn and quartered, perhaps. So anyway, there were, I won't go through all of them. There were several different ways that you could murder people legally by the state, by the church? It feels like the church, I mean, it was off the bishop's palace.

Justin: They didn't have TV. They didn't have TV, so the executions had to be, like, flashy.

Sydnee: Yeah. So anyway, so we have this evidence that there was this woman that did this poisoning, and then all of a sudden we have another figure who emerges several years after this. And again, we kind of think that Giulia Tofana is probably her daughter.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: She originally was in Palermo and there were some murders already. There were some mysterious deaths. I should say at the time, like, nobody knew for sure if it was a murder because what it appeared was happening is people were slowly succumbing to some sort of strange illness.

It just seemed like they all were men they all left behind wealthy widows, [laughs] which of course was raising some eyebrows. So she was originally in Palermo. She ended up in Naples for a while and there were some poisonings that took place there.

And you can start to kind of trace, like, where she's going to sort of some scattered deaths until she ends up in Rome. And, like, Rome is really where we see her kind of create her gang of poisoners and accomplices and how she seeks her clients.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: So the clients she specifically is looking for are women who are

looking to get out of an unhappy marriage, right?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So she sets up shop in Rome. She has a couple of accomplices that make the poison. She has two dispensers...

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: ... which are women who can go out into the community and kind of try to find people. And then she needed a steady supply. One of the ingredients we know was probably in the poison was arsenic, and she needed a steady supply of arsenic. And she found that her connection for that was a priest.

Justin: Oh, yeah.

Sydnee: So part of the gang— This is a very weird Ocean's Eleven, I feel like.

Justin: There used to be like, think about... Friar Lawrence, like, in Romeo and Juliet, man, they used to have all the hookup for all the poisons you need, even if it's, like, a fake death, they just, like, have it.

Sydnee: Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, it's interesting that if you— I mean, all these stories, like, I mean, that must've been pretty common that like a priest would have had access. I mean—

Justin: Got to give them to somebody.

Sydnee: Would— Double as an apothecary?

Justin: Well, I'm sure they did, right?

Sydnee: Yeah. And so anyway, so they hooked up with a... I would say, like, a priest who was probably not obeying all the things priests are supposed to do if he was hooking up a poisoner with arsenic.

Justin: Yeah, probably not. The Bible isn't too jazzed about that kind of stuff.

Sydnee: Yes. And so they have their gang. They got their hookup for the arsenic, which is part of the ingredients. We'll talk about some of the other possible ingredients. And they have the women who make it and they have the women who go out.

And basically they will try to find women who are unhappy, offer them assistance in other ways, offer them support, sometimes as, like, fortune tellers and that kind of, like, drawing people in with that kind of, like, mysticism kind of thing.

And then once they have them hooked and they know more about their personal life and their struggles, then say, "You know, there is something you could do."

Justin: "There is one option."

Sydnee: So I wanna talk about exactly what happened to you when you were exposed to aquatofauna.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: But before we do that, we got to go to the billing department.

Justin: All right, let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

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Speaker 2: A little yogurt and a spoon.

Speaker 3: A small handkerchief that was given to me by my grandmother on her deathbed.

Speaker 4: Maybe some spare honey.

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[ad break ends]

Justin: Okay, Syd, you just slipped me a whole bottle of aquatofana. How am I doing?

Sydnee: So first of all, the bottle of aquatofana that a woman would purchase. So she's been approached by one of these salespeople. They

create, there's a relationship formed. Eventually she says, yeah, I wanna kill my husband, but how can I do it and get away with it? So they would give you a bottle of Mana of St. Nicholas.

Justin: And what's that?

Sydnee: It was a miraculous healing oil that was sweated from St. Nicholas's bones.

Justin: Whoa. I bet that's pretty pricey.

Sydnee: It wasn't, it was aquatofana.

Justin: I didn't even know bones sweated. Sheesh.

Sydnee: It was not that, it was aquatofana. But this is what the bottles of aquatofana said. They would have a picture of St. Nicholas. They would say that it was the Mana of St. Nicholas.

It would look like some sort of remedy that you would have in your house at the time. And a lot of women, especially, like, were kind of catering to a lot of, like, upper class or wealthier women who, you know, maybe already have, like, a large collections of perfumes and oils and cosmetic things.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And you could easily slip a bottle of this other oil among them and it would look pretty innocuous there on your shelf.

Justin: But woe to those who start rifling through your medicine cabinet because they got heartburn and they're, like, "Oh, Mana of St. Nicholas, that seems like it would help. Sounds good. Let's try it."

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: "Oh, that was a double plate of spaghetti. I better do two doses of this stuff."

Sydnee: And let me say, in order to acquire the bottle, it did cost you money, but there are accounts that Tofana would give it to you for free.

Justin: Referrals, an affiliate marketing program.

Sydnee: Well, I mean, there were times where she would get, she would hear stories from women who were so desperate in such terrible situations that she would give them the poison for free.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: So anyway, so once a few drops of the aquatofana is slipped, into your wine or your tea or whatever. First of all, you're not gonna know. It is, it almost sounds like Iocaine powder. It's odorless.

Justin: Is it real?

Sydnee: It's tasteless. No, not to my knowledge. I don't think Iocaine powder is real, now that you say that.

Justin: I'll Google it.

Sydnee: I don't think I've ever Googled it. But you wouldn't know. And again, it's just this pale liquid, no taste, no color, no nothing. You wouldn't know that it had been slipped into your food or beverage, usually a beverage.

Because you don't need to hide it. You don't need to work very hard to hide it. Okay, so when you first have a few drops You're almost gonna notice nothing. You might become a little out of it.

Justin: Iocaine is not real.

Sydnee: It's not real. There we go. This this was real. This was a poison; exactly what was in it is still debated, but this was real. You might get a little weak. You might get a little tired. You're not gonna call a doctor for that first dose. You're not going to after the first time you're exposed to aquatofana. You might not feel great, but especially if, like, you ingested it in wine, you

might just think you have a hangover.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: So it wouldn't occur to you. After the second dose, things are gonna get worse. You're gonna start to feel even more tired and weak. You're gonna get other symptoms like abdominal pain was pretty common. You'll get really thirsty and then your throat is really sore.

And eventually, all of those symptoms are gonna increase in severity. So as you get exposed to your next dose of poison, you might— The abdominal pain gets much worse, you might start having more vomiting into, like, dysentery kind of picture. The fatigue is gonna become unbearable. And again, this is going to look like...

Justin: Nothing—

Sydnee: Nowadays, we would think, oh, you've caught some bug. Now this is before we understood communicable illness. So we're still in like—

Justin: But we know illness.

Sydnee: Miasma theory of disease kind of days. But, like, we knew illness. We knew like—

Justin: Even worse though, right? Like who knows? What's wrong with them? I don't know. It's the freaking 1700s. Nobody's got any idea.

Sydnee: We had, well, we had lots of ideas. Were they right or not?

Justin: Well, yeah.

Sydnee: But like, was it a bad smell that they inhaled? Is it, um, did they upset God in some way? Is this a religious sort of, like, occurrence? You would have looked into—

Justin: Is a wizard involved? Is a wizard involved perhaps? We don't know.

Sydnee: [laughs] We don't know, it could be magic, it could be religious, it could be, I mean, there were definitely illnesses that, like, would be considered, like, swelling could be one of the symptoms.

So then you start thinking, like, we knew that had something to do with the heart, we didn't quite understand what to do about it. And so the doctor would be called in, now you've got a guy who's in bed, he's sick, he's clearly deteriorating.

The doctor is administering the treatments of the day, which might make things worse at that point because you would have no way of knowing that this person has probably been poisoned with arsenic. And then some other things that we think, lead may have been part of it.

Mercury may have been part of it. We see different sort of, like, spins on what we think the formula was. Arsenic is definitely one of the main ingredients. And we know that arsenic can lead to a slow death...

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: ... a slow poisoning. So it makes a lot of sense. And, like, hearing these sorts of, all these symptoms that I've just listed...

Justin: See also, the Sawbones episode about arsenic.

Sydnee: Yes. And so anyway, eventually the person who has been exposed to aquatofana would die. And this entire time...

Justin: Well, eventually, Sydnee, everybody dies. [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, thank you, honey. I'll lay in bed tonight and think about that. So eventually—

Justin: Well, yeah, sorry, you didn't have your wife detail for you all the cool ways that wives would kill their husbands, freakin' deadbeats.

Sydnee: And here's—

Justin: And how easy it would be.

Sydnee: Here's the brilliant thing about it: this entire time that he is sick and slowly weakening and succumbing to his illness, if you're his wife, you're gonna be calling the doctor. You're gonna be keeping the doctor updated. You're gonna be worried.

You were going to be tending to your sick husband every moment of every day wiping his forehead with a cloth, bringing him whatever he desires to eat or to drink.

Justin: Oh, my gosh.

Sydnee: As you sit—

Justin: You're giving him more. "I don't know. He just keeps getting worse."

Sydnee: As you sit by his bedside, tending to his every need, the sad...

Justin: If you would just not look so happy.

Sydnee: Saintly.

Justin: You look so happy. Like, so delighted. If you just not look so delighted.

Sydnee: It's a very clever poison because the entire time the woman can be right there, bedside tending to her husband as he's dying and also murdering him. So, and then afterwards, of course, this was sort of part of the formula.

So after it's over, as the wife who is now grieving, you will demand, "I want a postmortem." I want you, and at the time, of course we didn't do this a lot, right? "But I want this body examined. What killed my husband? I need to know." And the beautiful thing about this poison, this aquatofana is that allegedly you could find no trace.

There was nothing on examination that would have ever revealed to the doctors and professionals at the time that this person had been poisoned.

And so at that point, And the other thing this did, by the way, is if someone did suspect the wife, because as more cases like this started to arise, you can imagine that word was getting out.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So if anyone tried to accuse the wife...

Justin: They'd get it next.

Sydnee: Well, you get twofold things. One, she's the one—

Justin: "That's a really interesting suspicion. Have some tea while you think about that, officer."

Sydnee: She's the one demanding the examination that will prove her innocence. And then also, if it is the family of the deceased man, who has demanded, like, or who has accused her, she can use that as evidence to say, I must remarry.

I can't carry the name of this family who would accuse me of murder, that my name has been sullied, I must detach myself from this other family, I must remarry, which wasn't always done at the time.

So it was like, aquatofana, in its completely imperceptible nature, disguised in bottles with a saint's picture on it that was supposedly a holy oil, you know, that proved a person's holiness, that proved how devout and faithful the owner of this liquid was.

It was slow acting, it was undetectable, you could demand a post-mortem, you could be feeding your husband the poison as they were dying from the poison and no one would ever suspect you. Um, so many men started to die this way. How many is not exactly clear.

Justin: Many.

Sydnee: So enough...

Justin: Enough.

Sydnee: Enough that people got concerned because there were even, one of the ways that they figured it out is a lot of these women you may imagine were Catholic. And in case you're not, I can tell you this from experience, one of the things we Catholics are expected to do is go confess to our sins periodically.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Well, just because they're willing to murder doesn't mean they're willing to betray their faith.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So there were a lot of priests bringing to the attention of higher religious authorities that they had heard the confessions of quite a few women who had admitted to murdering their husbands.

Justin: They're not supposed to do that, right? That's like a big deal.

Sydnee: No, they're not. Well, and they, so, but you know who they're telling, they're telling the bishops and the cardinals and eventually the Pope. So that should all be, I mean, it's kind of, like, them sharing information with each other should be in theory, the same as if a patient tells me information, private medical information, and then I'm worried that I need to talk to, like, a kidney doctor about them.

And so I say, I'm gonna talk to your kidney doctor and then I go talk to the kidney doctor. Me sharing that what they've told me is all, like, HIPAA protected, right? Like that's okay. It's okay that I do that because it's all within the circle of trust.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: In theory, that was all within the circle of trust. But in reality, a bunch of men figured out that a bunch of women were killing their husbands and they told everybody about it. So what started to happen is that the

deaths became obvious. There started to be notices put out to the public, like, "Be careful, your wives might be trying to kill you, beware of aquatofana."

I don't think it wouldn't be until many years after that people would figure out what the bottle looked like and piece all these different things together. And then there was another case, like I said, there's a couple.

There might have been a sting operation that led to their final arrest where they had a woman pose as, like, wealthy wife who was seeking poison and then once they, like, exchanged money and poison... I don't know, the authorities swooped in and arrested everybody.

Justin: It also seems like I was just reading a little bit here that there's a difference between saying, "Mary poisoned her husband and, speaking generally, I have heard an uptick, holistically speaking." Like, it's any, like, you know—

Sydnee: Yeah, and like I said— Yes. That is what, as far as I can tell, that is what was being conveyed to the higher religious authorities, is a lot of people are telling me they're killing their husbands. Not, "Here's a list of people." But like, "Generally speaking, I am disturbed at the number of women who came to my confessional today and said...

Justin: Just quick heat watch, murder— Staying in a loveless marriage, tired, murdering your husband with a secret poison, wired. That's, it's hot, that's in.

Sydnee: So, there was also another story where they helped kill a very high profile Duke. They helped the Duchess murder him and then afterwards the wife sort of caved and admitted it and that. Anyway, whether or not Tofana herself actually got arrested is still kind of a question. There are multiple stories of how she ended her life or how her life ended, I should say. There are stories that she was never caught...

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: ... and died peacefully.

Justin: She's still out there.

Sydnee: No, this was the 1700s. There are stories that she was arrested and died in jail. We don't think that she was executed. There was a lot of evidence that, even though some of her, like, gang was arrested, that they didn't, like, it was so salacious and so...

Such a media frenzy that they wanted to, like, quiet it as quickly as possible, and they never actually arrested or brought her into trial or anything, and that she just sort of disappeared. They cut off her supply of arsenic, they cut off her team, everybody knew about aquatofana, everybody knew about the potential for this poison, and she just kind of escaped and got away with it.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: But the legend was enough that, I mean, there were public warnings for years after this about the possibility that symptoms of a chronic illness might actually be your wife poisoning you to death and that you need to be on the lookout also for women like Giulia Tofana because that's what—

I mean, you see kind of, like, the underlying sexism of some of this, like, let's look for these evil single women who might be selling potions, which would, you know, overlap with any woman who was reading fortunes or who just didn't attend church or who was single or, you know. Who didn't want to get married for whatever reason, like, all of that could have been thrown together...

Justin: Read too much.

Sydnee: Exactly. But also, like, there was a woman who sold poisons that helped kill people so I don't want to... [laughs] I don't erase that piece of it. Another interesting kind of footnote to this story is that it was so well known and everyone was so afraid, that when Mozart fell ill his first thought is that he was being poisoned by aquatofana. That was his first theory.

Justin: Sounds like— Sounds to me like maybe you should straighten up and fly right there, Amadeus. Maybe, I don't know, that's not where my

mind would go, Amadeus. That's all I'm saying.

Sydnee: I mean...

Justin: Not what I would think.

Sydnee: And can I say, this led me to read extensively about Mozart's death, because I knew nothing. This is a medical mystery. This is a bit of a mystery itself. How did Mozart die? There is no evidence that it was from poisoning, I should say.

From my, and granted, that's not what the whole episode is about. I can't tell you exactly what Mozart died from, but it does not seem that it was aquatofana or his wife who poisoned him or something that would be similar, but he did think it.

Justin: So do we know what it was?

Sydnee: Arsenic was the primary ingredient for sure. We know that. And then like I said, we think that there was mercury in it. We think that there was lead. And then there was another corrosive ingredient called solomado...

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: ... which was also used at the time for things like syphilis. So like some of these components were, I mean that's why I thought this kind of fit into our history. We used all of these things as medicines.

Justin: Yeah. Well, and it occurs to me that, like, making our medicines was so imprecise at the time, there's no reason to think that the exact formula for this would be written down and and saved, right?

Sydnee: No.

Justin: I mean, it's pretty much a single source.

Sydnee: No, and I mean, I really think, like, any one of these things

probably could have done the trick. I think the key was in the amounts. I think that was really what made this work is it had to be small amounts slowly over time or else you'd get caught. And these are also, like I said, slow acting poisons. You don't immediately die from arsenic the way you do from cyanide.

Justin: Thank you so much for listening to this absolutely chilling episode.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [laughs] I hope you are just as shaken as I am. Thank you to the Taxpayers for the use of their song, Medicines, as the intro and outro of our program. And thanks to you for listening. We really appreciate you.

Oh, real quick, we're going to be recording our Sawbones bonus episode for the upcoming Max Fun Drive. And as again, we are answering kids' questions. If a kid in your life has a medical question, shoot it on over our way, sawbones@maximumfun.org. That's gonna do it for us. Until next time, my name's 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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