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Transition: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: It is the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast. I'm Bailiff Jesse Thorn. With me, Judge John Hodgman. This week's episode, recorded live in Madison, Wisconsin.

John Hodgman: We had a wonderful time returning to Madison, Wisconsin. You don't hear it in this episode because it's visual, but the Majestic Theater is the only theater I've ever played in that literally turns a corner in the audience. It's an amazing space full of amazing people, and we had some amazing cases. We talked about propagating plants, how to pronounce the word—hamm-ock? Hm. And boardgame rules.

Jesse Thorn: I also got a really sweet vintage Chris Mullin t-shirt at the vintage t-shirt store around the corner. Let's go to the stage at the Majestic Theater.

Transition: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: People of Madison, you asked us for live justice, and we are here to deliver it. The court of Judge John Hodgman is now in session.

(Cheers and applause.)

Let's begin our first case. Please welcome to the stage: Darcy and Parker!

(Louder cheering.)

Darcy and Parker have been dating for two years, and Darcy will be moving into Parker's house this spring. Parker is excited to share his home with Darcy, with one exception: Darcy's collection of dozens of tiny glass jars. Darcy says he needs those jars! Who's right? Who's wrong? Only one can decide.

Please rise as Judge John Hodgman enters the courtroom.

(Cheers and applause.)

John Hodgman: Thank you. Darcy, Parker. Glad to have you here. Love your glasses frames. So—

Jesse Thorn: Hey, hold on. Let's also address their matching sleeve rolls.

(Laughter.)

Darcy: I specifically brought it up.

Jesse Thorn: Great.

Darcy: We got ready at separate houses.

(Jesse affirms with a laugh.)

John Hodgman: Oh, because you do not currently cohabitate.

Darcy: We do not currently cohabitate.

John Hodgman: So, who seeks justice in this courtroom?

Darcy: I do. I would like to keep my jars.

John Hodgman: And you—oh, you have the jars. So, you would be Darcy?

(Darcy confirms.)

Okay. So, Parker, what's your problem with the jars?

Parker: I fear that, as the jar collection grows, it's going to take up more and more shelf space that is limited. I don't have a huge house. And I'm concerned that—and a lot of it is recycled or reused food jars.

John Hodgman: Rrrright. Okay.

Parker: So, some of it is—

John Hodgman: Presumably they've been washed since the food inhabited them.

Parker: They've been washed, but it is—instead of into the recycling bin and then out to the street, they are onto the shelf.

John Hodgman: Now, look. Darcy, I don't wanna make your case for you, but you realize that these jars—they don't necessarily have to be on shelves, right? They could be stacked up around your bed half full of rainwater and urine, for example.

(Laughter.)

Parker: That would make, you know, midnight runs a little easier. But—

John Hodgman: How many jars are there currently, Darcy, would you say?

Darcy: Ohhh, um—

(Laughter and scattered applause.)

Over 60.

John Hodgman: Over 60 jars. Parker, is that an accurate assessment, would you say?

Parker: That's accurate.

John Hodgman: Okay. Very good. Now, Darcy, I don't know if you're familiar with the court of Judge John Hodgman. We have a rule about the difference between a collection and a hoard.

Darcy: Very familiar with this rule.

John Hodgman: And what is the rule?

Darcy: The nuance between a hoard and a collection is how it's displayed.

John Hodgman: Right. If you have a display case, it's a collection.

Darcy: I have an *(inaudible)*.

John Hodgman: If it's in a pile that has crushed a house pet, for example, that would be a hoard.

(Laughter.)

You have a display situation?

Darcy: I do argue that it is displayed.

John Hodgman: Okay, well let's take a look. We have some evidence, and we're gonna share these pictures—obviously, on the show page at MaximumFun.org, as well as on the *Judge John Hodgman* Instagram account, et cetera. Let's take a look at the first exhibit. Producer Jennifer Marmor is making it happen. There we are. There we go. Round of applause for producer Jennifer Marmor, by the way!

(Cheers and applause.)

Oh, thank you. Thank you very much. Would you mind pouring this into about 60 jars for me?

(Laughter.)

Alright, so this is your display.

Darcy: These are the currently empty jars.

John Hodgman: Well, clearly I can see that.

Darcy: Most of the time the jars are in use for propagating plants.

(A single, enthused cheer from the audience.)

John Hodgman: For propagating plants. And you're not just talking about plant propaganda. You're not handing out pamphlets.

Darcy: No.

John Hodgman: What does propagating plants mean for those who don't know?

Jesse Thorn: This is like a *Little Shop of Horrors* situation.

(Laughter.)

Darcy: Yes.

(Laughter.)

Propagating plants means I'm taking cuttings of my existing plants and creating new plants out of them to help them root in water.

[00:05:00]

So, I can either gift them to friends, or make new plants, or stuff them back into my existing plants to make them fuller and bushier.

(A cheer.)

John Hodgman: Got it. Well, everyone loves a full bushy plant. And so—oh, so you fill these jars up with water. But these are jars in waiting. These are not the display jars.

(Darcy confirms.)

Let's take a look. Let's take a look in the next slide, please. Okay. Whoop! Wait a minute. Alright, there we go. Yeah, okay. So, here we have a number of test tubes in which plants are propagating. Is there anything you wanna say about this? What's going on here? This looks fairly tasteful, I have to say, Parker.

Jesse Thorn: Well...

John Hodgman: Ope, I'm sorry.

(Laughter.)

I say it looks tasteful, but Jesse Thorn needs to weigh in.

Jesse Thorn: I think we see the test tubes. I agree with you. What kind of plant is that, in our rack of test tubes there?

Darcy: We have some pothos there. We have a monstera there. We have some hoyas and scindapsus. Quite a variety there. There's also some thrifted jars there that have some beach glass from Lake Michigan.

Jesse Thorn: Okay, so these are all various plants that appear spontaneously in your house if you're between the ages of 20 and 45 and you've ever looked at Instagram.

(Laughter. Darcy confirms.)

Then as we move along the photograph, we're finished with the rack of test tubes. What other vessels do we see here?

Darcy: We have some little jars that I thrifted from an antique store. That is—one of those is a vintage motor fluid additive bottle. There are some little jars that had corks in them. And I found interesting shapes that I saw at Target.

John Hodgman: You ever get some old jars of Old English brand processed cheese? Those are good for things.

Darcy: No, it's mostly— If it's food jars, it's mostly like pickles and olives and stuff.

John Hodgman: Alright, let's take a look at the next one, Exhibit B. Okay! Well, feed me Seymour! Now! This feels less like a display and more like a threat.

(Laughter.)

How do you feel about that when you see it, Parker?

Parker: That actually I do feel like, having been walked through all of the plants there—

John Hodgman: You've been initiated into—?

Parker: I've been initiated into it. That particular shelf does not offend me. The concern is that every shelf in the house will look like that.

John Hodgman: It does not offend you? Every shelf in the home.

Parker: Because the plants won't be limited in propagation by the number of jars, which is the current limit right now.

Jesse Thorn: Judge Hodgman, have you ever looked at the subreddit Male Living Spaces?

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: *(Chuckling.)* No.

Jesse Thorn: It's an incredible subreddit. There are men— Apparently, per male living spaces, men live in two types of domicile. One is this, which is to say 20,000 plants sitting on a shelf. And the other is basically *American Psycho*.

(Laughter.)

Like, those are the two— *American Psycho*/low-rent Airbnb.

John Hodgman: Where everything's very spare.

Jesse Thorn: There's just nothing present. Everything is either black, white, or gray.

John Hodgman: You don't have a lot of furniture, 'cause you need a lot of empty floor space to put your plastic down.

Jesse Thorn: Exactly!

(Laughter.)

Sometimes, those people have like color change LED underlighting on things. Just like miscellaneous things, like their pets and stuff.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Well, the good news, Parker, is that according to Jesse's Reddit research, this is not the evidence that Darcy, your beloved, is a psycho killer. In fact, he's a highly oxygenated person.

Parker: Oh, very much so.

John Hodgman: Yeah. So, you're cool with this?

Parker: With the one shelf, yes.

John Hodgman: This is one shelf.

Parker: The one shelf.

John Hodgman: Right. And do you live in a larger space than Darcy currently occupies?

Parker: Yes, but not by much.

John Hodgman: Do you think that Darcy is simply moving in order to expand the tendrils of his territory, like an invasive ivy or something?

Parker: I don't think that's his main concern. But...

John Hodgman: Okay. Let's look at the last exhibit, if I don't mind. This is a closeup. Okay. I'm not sure what we're supposed to be seeing here, but I see a little dog wearing a top hat.

(Laughter.)

And I wanted to know about that.

Jesse Thorn: Is he smoking a cigarette?

Darcy: He has a tiny witch's broom in his mouth. He's a Halloween decoration.

John Hodgman: Okay. Is he a Halloween de decoration or what you might call a familiar?

Darcy: Yes.

John Hodgman: Does he have a name?

Darcy: No, actually. He's only been there for like a week or two. He hasn't earned a name yet.

John Hodgman: Whoa!

(Laughter.)

Let me send a message to that little dog. "Someday you'll earn a name, little guy!"

Darcy: But what we have here is demonstration of jars in use.

John Hodgman: Demonstration of jars in use. No, I never had any doubt that you weren't using these jars. So, Parker, how long have you lived in your current—is it a home, an apartment, a condominium?

Parker: It is a home. Yes.

John Hodgman: It's a home? Freestanding home? Wonderful. And what have you been doing to prepare for Darcy to move in?

Parker: Well, I bought it in the spring, so it's been pretty laid back as far as that goes. You know, it's all been first time—

John Hodgman: So, you're just getting— This is not a place that you've lived in for a long time?

[00:10:00]

Parker: No, I have not established myself yet.

John Hodgman: Oh, wow. You haven't even—yeah. You haven't even put down your own roots, as it were.

(Laughter.)

Parker: Exactly. My own jars.

John Hodgman: Don't laugh at that! It's terrible. It's terrible. I was just trying to think of a thing to say. That's all I ever do, you know, is I just try to think of things to say.

Jesse Thorn: John, that's what—podcasting is just saying stuff.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: That's true. So, if you keep the jars, Darcy, what's your plan for this new place you're moving into?

Darcy: Well, we had talked about having plants scattered evenly throughout the home. And we had talked about the idea of having a kind of vine chandelier art project with some kind of LED string lights. Which means that I need a lot of vining plants. And it's cheaper to make my own.

John Hodgman: Right. To propagate, if you will. That's right.

Darcy: Yes! Yes. And so, I'm really busy getting a bunch of vining plant propagations going.

John Hodgman: Right? 'Cause if you go around buying vining plants from garden supply stores here and there, and you're buying too many, you get flagged at the FBI as a weirdo.

(Laughter.)

Jesse Thorn: It's like buying too much Sudafed.

John Hodgman: Yeah, exactly. If you're making them in your home lab, they'll never know.

Darcy: Or alternately, it's just not doable on a self-employed income.

John Hodgman: That could be true as well, I suppose. When you—so, I'm not sure— We can go back to our—we can end that exhibit now, go back to our arch, please. Thank you very much. Parker, is your primary concern the jars or the plants?

Parker: The primary concern is the jars. Because I would like the jars to be more thoughtfully chosen, if they're going to be on display, per the show requirements.

John Hodgman: I don't know how you could accuse Darcy of being thoughtless. It's not like he's just buying things at the grocery store and then sticking plants in there. He's going to thrift shops to get old motor oil bottles!

Jesse Thorn: Well, in addition to buying—yeah.

Parker: In addition all of the ones— He uses the pretty ones first, but his stash of—we'll say—ugly jars is, per the first piece of evidence, impressively large.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Let the record show that Darcy is registering a shocked Pikachu face at the term ugly jars.

(Laughter.)

Yeah. Darcy, would you acknowledge that some of your jars are uglyyy?

Darcy: They're less interesting than some others.

(Laughter.)

Jesse Thorn: I mean, Darcy, I saw like some full-on Tupperwares there in that last picture.

Parker: The deli cups.

Darcy: ... Yeah.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Yeah. What's the style of jar that you hate the most, Parker?

Parker: I would say like if you get like Vlasic pickle spears. Because it's really big and wide, and the mouth is really wide. And I don't— It's too squat for me.

John Hodgman: You want something that's a little slender, a little—

Parker: Yeah, maybe it's got some shape to it, you know? The pickle jars are just—eh, it's a pickle jar. You can't pretend it's anything else.

John Hodgman: Parker, you would like me to order Darcy to leave a plant behind if there isn't an interesting enough jar to put them in. Is that correct?

Parker: That's correct. And specifically also to “one in, one out” with the thrifted jars before accumulating any additional.

John Hodgman: So, a total of 60 jars. Can you do it with 60 jars? Yes or no?

Darcy: *(Begrudgingly sighing.)* Yeah.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Do you feel that you could commit to sophisticated non-pickle jars, going forward?

(A beat. Laughter.)

Darcy: If I can find them.

John Hodgman: I sense that you have some hesitation, so maybe this would be a good time before moving in to tell Parker when Parker says, “I want you to leave some cuttings behind unless you have a jar I approve of,” how does that make you feel as a future cohabitant?

Darcy: I worry that—

John Hodgman: Don't tell them! Tell Parker.

Darcy: When I hear you say that—

(Laughter and applause.)

John Hodgman: I love where this is going. You're gonna be great cohabitants.

Darcy: When I hear you say that you want me to leave cuttings behind, because the jars aren't aesthetic enough, it makes me worry that I'm losing opportunities for beautiful plants.

(“Aw” from the audience.)

And I worry that I don't have the opportunity to find the jars that meet your aesthetic.

John Hodgman: Why wouldn't you have that opportunity? By the way, nice self-expression.

Darcy: Because sometimes thrifting gets pricey. And I don't get to thrift stores often enough, because I go at them like a feral animal.

(Laughter.)

[00:15:00]

Self-restraint means not going thrifting.

John Hodgman: Okay, I understand. Alright, here's my verdict. I think that you're doing a wonderful job trying to meld your lives together, and having this conversation before you do so, and identifying these points of friction that are gonna come up. I especially appreciate your having this conversation on stage in front of strangers.

(Laughter.)

That shows a lot of faith that you have in the relationship and in going forward. And it's a real point of vulnerability to open your home to someone new and to join that home. And there is often a fear of a power imbalance. Like, it's your—technically, I mean, you're the owner of the home. And you are trying to assert the fact that you also live there, and so forth. So, I would say honestly that—I have to say that I love what you're doing. Propagation of plants is a net positive in this world. I don't love Vlasic pickles. I think they're really basic.

(Laughter.)

I'm a Grillo's guy myself. Grillo's, sponsor *Judge John Hodgman*.

Jesse Thorn: Don't let our friend Bill Oakley hear you endorsing any pickle other than Grillo's.

John Hodgman: Yeah. But of course, Grillo's doesn't put anything in jars, unfortunately. Get out of plastic, Grillo's. Until then, you can't sponsor on *Judge John Hodgman*. I told them!

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, take that, Grillo's!

John Hodgman: I think that if your partner's only worry is that you're gonna put beautiful plants and ugly jars, then that's kind of a net win for you. But I think the onus then is on you, Parker—as the homeowner—to source some beautiful jars that you feel okay with. Because as you know, Darcy can't go thrifting or else he gets feral. So, you've gotta—

Jesse Thorn: You've seen the mouth foam!

Parker: I have!

John Hodgman: You've gotta meet him halfway. Get some beautiful jars, and hold it at 60. That's my order. *(Bangs his gavel three times.)*

Parker: Alright, thank you.

Jesse Thorn: Thank you, Darcy and Parker!

(Cheers and applause.)

Transition: Three gavel bangs.

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Transition: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Please welcome to the stage: Sarah and Matt!

(Applause.)

John Hodgman: Swift Justice continues with Sarah and Matt.

Jesse Thorn: Sarah and Matt are married. When they first got together, Sarah made fun of the way Matt pronounced a certain word. From then on, Matt has never said the word again.

(Laughter.)

Instead, he will alternately say “the thing between the trees.” Sarah wants Judge Hodgman to order Matt to stop saying that mysterious phrase. Judge Hodgman.

John Hodgman: Sarah, the thing between the trees.

Sarah: Two trees, usually.

John Hodgman: Oh, the thing between two trees?

Sarah: Yes.

John Hodgman: Well, aside from that being the title of my favorite indie crime film, what does that mean?

Sarah: He won't say hammock.

John Hodgman: He won't say hammock. The thing between two trees is a hammock. And how did Matt say it when he first and last said that word?

(Laughter.)

Sarah: The last time I heard him say it, it was hamm-ock.

John Hodgman: Hamm-ock. And how long ago did that happen?

Sarah: That was probably 12 years ago.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: 12 years ago. And Matt has not said the word hammock since.

Sarah: No. It doesn't come up all the time!

John Hodgman: Well, no.

Sarah: But when it does, it does sound serious.

John Hodgman: It's not a common phrase, like propagating plant jar.

Jesse Thorn: And Sarah, when he said hamm-ock, what did you ha-do?

(Laughter.)

Sarah: I was curious! I was, you know, wondering where does this come from? We're both from the Midwest, but not the exact same parts. And I thought that sounds weird. It sounds really weird!

John Hodgman: Matt, where in the Midwest are you from?

Matt: I'm from—I grew up in Minnesota and Wisconsin, mostly.

John Hodgman: And would you just say the word hammock right now, please?

Matt: No.

John Hodgman: Ah!

(Laughter.)

What happened?

Jesse Thorn: Sorry, hold on. What's the word that you won't say, Matt?

Matt: The one that rhymes with hadd-ock.

John Hodgman: Do you mean haddock?

(Laughter.)

Matt: Nope!

(Applause.)

John Hodgman: This is an interesting game.

Jesse Thorn: Captain Hadd-ock is drunk again!

John Hodgman: Sarah said that you said hamm-ock. Maybe you didn't, maybe you didn't. Did you?

Matt: I did.

John Hodgman: Is that how you grew up saying the word where you came from?

Matt: Yes.

John Hodgman: Okay. So, that is a regional—? Alright, I understand.

Matt: I believe so.

John Hodgman: Alright, sure. Are there other people in your family who say the same thing?

Matt: There are! A lot of my friends say it that way. Some of my family do as well.

John Hodgman: Hamm-ock. Right. But you won't say it?

Matt: Nope.

Sarah: Not anymore.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: What is—?!

Matt: This is not The National concert, by the way. Just I'm a little surprised.

John Hodgman: Yeah. *(Laughs.)* Oh, did you think you were going to see The National?

Matt: Turns out no!

John Hodgman: Yeah, no.

Jesse Thorn: Matt, this isn't even The War on Drugs.

John Hodgman: I can't imagine you're disappointed.

(Laughter.)

Matt, what is—quote/unquote—“the streak”?

Matt: It is 12 years, I believe.

John Hodgman: So, you refer to the 12 years that you have not said the word that signifies the thing between two trees for 12 years as the streak.

(Matt confirms.)

And you don't want to break the streak.

Matt: Nope.

John Hodgman: Why?

Jesse Thorn: Is that because you're afraid you'll lose your Xbox achievement?

(Laughter.)

Matt: It is longstanding. It started out as a— When I first met Sarah, we met on a picnic bench in Korea, teaching English over there.

John Hodgman: I'm sorry, do you mean a pic-a-nic bench?

(Laughter.)

Matt: Uh, no!

Sarah: That's how my dad says it.

Matt: (*Jokingly.*) A pic-nock bench?

John Hodgman: A pic-nock.

Matt: So. But she was very witty, and she always had a lot of facts. And anyone that would say anything, she could add something to what they were saying, which was very impressive. And I really respect that about her. Still do.

John Hodgman: I don't mean to put you on the spot.

Matt: That's fine.

John Hodgman: But do you have an example?

Matt: I could say virtually any country, and she would be like, “Oh yeah, the capitol is known for, you know, the high amount of Buddhist followers there,” and I’d have no idea! Yeah.

Sarah: (*Laughs.*) Silly things.

John Hodgman: What about—? Okay, what's a country?

Matt: I don't know.

(*Laughter.*)

John Hodgman: Argentina.

Jesse Thorn: I went to public school, dude.

Sarah: The capital is Buenos Aires.

John Hodgman: That is true. What can you say about the capital of Buenos Aires?

Sarah: I don't know. Go get some meat there, I guess.

John Hodgman: They are very carnivorous there in Buenos Aires. The main drag is the *Anita* Cinco de Mayo. Did you know that?

Sarah: I have not been, no. I didn't know that.

John Hodgman: Do you know what they call the White House there? Casa Rosada, the pink house!

Sarah: Interesting.

John Hodgman: That's right. I went there. I loaded the deck again! That's whatever. Anyway.

Jesse Thorn: He went to Yale, so he went to Argentina. I went to UC Santa Cruz. So, I went to a place called Felton, California where they had a Sears portrait studio.

(Laughter.)

[00:25:00]

John Hodgman: For your study abroad?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah. Yeah. Felton or Ben Lomond. Those were the choices.

John Hodgman: Sarah, when Matt says the thing between two trees—whenever it comes up naturally, and he says the thing between two trees—like at a family pic-a-nic or whatever it might be, how does it make you feel?

Sarah: Well, to me it like hearkens back to the time that I made fun of him for saying hamm-ock.

John Hodgman: How did you make—? What? How did you make fun of him?

Sarah: Well, just because I was so confused as how he—

John Hodgman: No, I understand why you did. You're intolerant and judgmental.

(Laughter.)

Sarah: Yeah, I mean, some curiosity. But poking fun at the way we speak in the Midwest is—

John Hodgman: But did you give him a full Nelson “Ha-ha!” Or what did you—?

Sarah: No! Just like—

John Hodgman: “Hamm-ock!?” What do you even—?!”

Sarah: Just curiosity, like who else says that? When I finally moved to Wisconsin, I found a select few who do. *(Chuckles.)*

John Hodgman: May I ask the people of Wisconsin who are here in the hall tonight, have you heard this before? Clap sincerely if you have.

(A significant amount of clapping.)

Hamm-ock. Hamm-ock! Hamm-ock.

(Laughter.)

Let the record show that Matt is leaving the stage, which would be pretty amazing!

Matt: Thank you.

John Hodgman: He's come back. But honestly, I would've really respected it if you just walked out the back door.

(Laughter.)

Matt: It would've been a great mic drop. But Jennifer told us not to touch the mic. So.

John Hodgman: Yeah, please don't touch the mics. Absolutely not. They belong to the Majestic Theater here in Madison, Wisconsin.

Matt: Fair.

John Hodgman: That's it. But you are free to leave at any time.

(Laughter.)

The stage store is right over there, and you could go get a drink and be done with this. Maybe you could even catch some of The National. But I do wanna ask—

Jesse Thorn: Matt is turning this into one of those YouTube videos where people say, “Am I being detained?”

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: But since you very kindly sat back down, I do want to ask, Matt—and this is a real question—is the streak just vengeance? Are you trying to annoy Sarah for making you feel bad 12 years ago?

Matt: No.

John Hodgman: Is that the way you pronounce the word yes?

(Sarah laughs.)

Matt: No.

John Hodgman: Okay. Then why won't you just say what you wanna say? What is the point of the streak at this point?

Matt: So, it did start out, admittedly, coming from a place of hurt. Because it did hurt that I got judged for the way I said something.

(John affirms.)

And I had never thought that was a wrong way to say it.

John Hodgman: Yeah. And by the way, Matt, I'll go further. That was a bad thing you did, Sarah.

Sarah: Yeah! So, when he continues to do it—like, and you won't say it now, even though I've apologized since then, and we've spent 12/13 years together.

John Hodgman: Oh, well! The number keeps changing!

(Sarah laughs.)

Were you married?

Sarah: We are married.

John Hodgman: Were you married when he said the word?

Sarah: No.

John Hodgman: Okay.

Matt: And I stayed! So.

(Laughter.)

So, I did forgive her!

John Hodgman: Just so I understand the full scenario of how monstrous Sarah was at the moment, what was the situation? Were you with other people? Was it just the two of you? What was going on?

Sarah: Oh, it's so long ago.

John Hodgman: When you humiliated your future husband. Paint a word picture for me.

Jesse Thorn: Well, we were on the *Today Show* talking to Hoda.

(Laughter.)

Sarah: I think that it was more of over time, like once I heard him say it, I would ask other people that we were with, “How do you say this?” Similar to other like regionalisms.

John Hodgman: Oh, so it wasn't just one time. It would be like having brunch with friends, and saying—

Sarah: And then, yeah, once we moved back here, I asked people, “Hey, yeah, Matt says it this weird way.”

John Hodgman: *(Talking over her.)* “Hey, by the way everybody! How do you say this word?” Yeah, okay, I got you. So, you made fun of him several times.

Sarah: Probably.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Okay, gotcha. And Matt, you acknowledged that that was hurtful to you?

(Matt confirms.)

And Sarah apologized?

(Matt confirms.)

And yet the streak continues.

Matt: It does.

John Hodgman: So, why is it important to you now?

Matt: I think it—now, it's just kind of become something where I've gone so long without saying it that I don't feel like I need to anymore. And now, kind of monk-like resolve. I'm gonna see how long I can take it.

(Laughter.)

So, when I tell our kids about this thing, I can explain it to them, and they know what I'm talking about. So, I don't really need to use the word. So.

John Hodgman: How old do your kids? Do they speak?

Matt: Sam is six, and Joanna's three.

John Hodgman: And do they ever say the word?

Matt: They see them sometimes.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: *(Snickers.)* So—but they're not allowed to acknowledge that they exist?

Matt: They have to ask their mother what it is.

Sarah: I wouldn't—like, we have one in the basement, but I wouldn't put it out. Because I don't want to—ugh.

John Hodgman: You have a thing between two trees in the basement?

Sarah: Well, we have it tucked away.

John Hodgman: What other creepy houses am I going to be introduced to on this show?! But you don't have it set up in the basement?

Sarah: Yeah, I wouldn't set it up, because I don't wanna continue to hear this phrase *(chuckles)* over and over again as I set it up. Matt, can you please set up the hammock? “Oh, sure. I will go set that thing up between two trees.”

John Hodgman: I'm sorry, what? Set up the what?

Sarah: The hammock.

John Hodgman: Oh, the thing between two treats? Oh, I see. That misunderstood.

Sarah: Yes. So confusing.

John Hodgman: Matt, how will you feel if I order you in this court of fake law to say the word—however you wanna say it—to break the streak right here on stage?

[00:30:00]

Matt: I would have a hard time doing that.

John Hodgman: You would have a hard time doing that.

Matt: I would.

Audience Member: *(Distantly.)* DO IT!

John Hodgman: Easy does it, easy does it!

(Laughter.)

I'm just establishing the stakes. It's storytelling. You know, at heart I consider myself a storyteller.

Jesse Thorn: Aren't we all just storytellers? Just sharing stories around the campfire? Just a bunch of cave men sharing—*(indistinct caveman grumblings and blown raspberries)*.

John Hodgman: One of the oldest definitions of humanity. You light a campfire; you hang two things between two trees. One thing, excuse me.

Jesse Thorn: And then you say you're a storyteller to cover up the fact that actually you're a guy who works in advertising.

John Hodgman: Yeah. Sarah, why should I order him to break the streak?

Sarah: So we don't have to continue having this conversation forever. 'Cause it's not just between us. Like, I know he won't say it.

John Hodgman: Do you feel that you need to be absolved?

Sarah: Well, I have apologized sincerely multiple times.

John Hodgman: I know, but it doesn't feel like he's really accepted it.

(Laughter.)

Sarah: Yeah, there's that!

John Hodgman: I mean, have you?

Matt: I have!

John Hodgman: You have accepted it?

(Matt confirms.)

So, you're trying to tell me that you're just calling this thing “the thing between two trees” just because you want to hit some weird internal *Guinness Book of World Records*?

(A cheer from the crowd.)

It's not just to twist the knife a little bit every time it comes up whenever you're camping or going into the basement? Or camping in the basement, by the way! Fun.

Matt: I feel like if you'd ask most people in the audience, everyone might have something that they have like a bit of a streak going that they don't tell anyone else about. Or maybe they do. So, that's my thing.

John Hodgman: It's purely personal.

Matt: It is.

John Hodgman: *(Skeptically.)* Alright. Sarah, do you believe him?

Sarah: I think so. But then he knows what it looks like when we go to other places, and there's a hammock, and then—

John Hodgman: It's just you just keep saying that word. I don't know what you mean.

(Laughter.)

Matt: Because she's mispronouncing it?

Sarah: And then he will not refer to it—yeah.

Matt: Just kidding.

(Cheers and applause.)

Sarah: So, I do tell this story about how I was a jerk. I have told that story. Multiple times! And I'd like to not keep telling that story over and over again.

John Hodgman: Alright. Here's my verdict. Since it's Swift Justice, and we're running out of time. And I don't want to dip below the podium, 'cause my knee hurts. You first of all have to assure—if it's true, you have to assure Sarah that you forgive her, that you absolve her, and you don't hold this against her. And you have to do it now on stage. So, go ahead.

(Laughter.)

To the tune of now. Yeah. Using the microphone in your words. Yeah.

Matt: Sure. Okay. So, I truly have not said the word in 12 years, even if I'm by myself and I'm looking—

Jesse Thorn: He didn't ask you to brag!

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: No, no! No, no, no. I'll allow bragging if he truly has not said it even to himself.

Matt: This is part of my apology and explaining. So, even if I'm by myself looking at a camping magazine and I see one, I will not say this.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: *(Chuckling to himself.)* Camping magazine.

Sarah: And the apology part?

Matt: Sorry. And the apology part. Sorry.

John Hodgman: No, I understand. Probably people in Wisconsin do read camping magazines.

Matt: Yeah. You can ask longtime friends. You can ask new friends. And they'll tell you, I just don't use the word. But I recognize that your podcast is one of my wife's favorite things to listen to. She has a lot of value in it. She appreciates it. So—

Jesse Thorn: And you also like it?

(Laughter.)

Matt: I've heard it in the car sometimes.

Jesse Thorn: I'll take that.

John Hodgman: And I want to commend you for your honesty.

Matt: Thank you. Yes. But I feel like here's the only appropriate place to say that I have not not said the word because I'm upset with you; it just became something of the street for me. So, I am sorry, and I will try in the future to more often use the word hamm-ock.

(Cheers and applause.)

John Hodgman: *(Gasps.)* Matt! Matt, I wasn't gonna ask you to break the streak!

Matt: It hurt.

John Hodgman: I was gonna tell you to keep the streak going!

Matt: I know, I know.

John Hodgman: I wanted—I was gonna bring this gavel down on 20 years!

Matt: I know.

John Hodgman: Now you have to start all over again!

(Laughter.)

That's beautiful what you did. But don't say the word again for 20 years. Unless, Sarah, you sleep in a hamm-ock in your basement. *(Bangs his gavel three times.)*

Jesse Thorn: Thank you Sarah and Matt!

John Hodgman: Wow! Wow!

Transition: Three gavel bangs.

Promo:

Music: Exciting, rhythmic synth.

John-Luke Roberts: If you like too many podcasts, you'll love *Sound Heap with John-Luke Roberts*. It's got clips from all your favorite podcasts, such as *Diary of a Tiny CEO*—

Tiny CEO: Leonard Sprague, tell me how you make your money!

Leonard Sprague: I go to the beach, and I steal people's towels.

John-Luke Roberts: *Rememberama.*

Speaker: Remember the trend of everyone whacking themselves in their head with hammers and mallets when they wanted to lose weight?

[00:35:00]

John-Luke Roberts: And *Elty Jom's Lobly Sonds*.

Elty Jom: I'm here today with Kiki Dee! Hello, Kiki Dee!

Kiki Dee: Hello, Eltonnn.

John-Luke Roberts: There's dozens of episodes to catch up on and brand-new episodes going out right now! So, if you want far, far, far too many podcasts, then look for *Sound Heap* on Maximum Fun. Boop-boop!

(Music ends.)

Promo:

Ella Hubber: Alright, we're over 70 episodes into our show, *Let's Learn Everything*. So, let's do a quick progress check. Have we learned about quantum physics?

Tom Lum: Yes, episode 59.

(Pencil scratching.)

Ella: We haven't learned about the history of gossip yet, have we?

Caroline Roper: Yes, we have! Same episode, actually.

Ella: Have we talked to Tom Scott about his love of roller coasters?

Caroline & Tom: *(In unison.)* Episode 64.

Ella: So, how close are we to learning everything?

Caroline: Bad news. We still haven't learned everything yet.

Ella: Awww!

Tom: WE'RE RUINED!

Music: Playful synth fades in.

Ella: No, no, no! It's good news as well. There is still a lot to learn!

(They cheer.)

I'm Dr. Ella Hubber.

Tom: I'm Regular Tom Lum.

Caroline: I'm Caroline Roper, and on *Let's Learn Everything*, we learn about science and a bit of everything else, too.

Ella: And although we haven't learned everything yet, I've got a pretty good feeling about this next episode.

Tom: Join us every other Thursday on Maximum Fun.

(Music ends.)

Transition: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Judge Hodgman, we're taking a quick break. I wanna mention a couple of awesome people that are on my public radio interview program, *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*. This week I interviewed Tony Gilroy, who is the showrunner of the amazing television program *Andor*.

John Hodgman: Oh wow.

Jesse Thorn: The *Star Wars* show, which is one of my favorite—if not my favorite—TV show on right now.

John Hodgman: Incredible. You got Gilroy?!

Jesse Thorn: I got Gilroy. He also wrote and directed *Michael Clayton*, among other things. He said to me—he's like, “That was a great interview.” He's like, “Please tell fancy people to watch our show! They don't know about it. I think it's good!” I agree.

(John laughs.)

I agree. It's reeeally good. So, you should check out the show, but you should also check out my interview with Tony Gilroy—which you don't have to watch the show to enjoy. Last week on the program, an amazing interview with Fat Joe—the legendary rapper, Fat Joe of the Terror Squad—who is one of the most fascinating, hilarious, and charming human beings on Earth.

And next week, a profoundly fabulous pairing on *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*: legendary costume designer, Bob Mackie, who is 85 years old and is sharp and charming and brilliant as he has ever been in his life. Just an absolute joy to talk to. You know him, of course, for designing clothes for the *Carol Burnett Show* for more than a decade, all of the unbelievable

things that Elton John wore in the '70s. All of the amazing clothes that Cher has worn over the decades. One of the most extraordinary costume designers of all time. And of course, our friend here on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast, Jean Grae, who came on *Bullseye* to talk to me about her book, *In My Remaining Years*. You can listen to that next week on *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*.

So, if you're not already subscribed, please go subscribe to the program. I think you will love listening to it. You will learn something. You will get to know an artist you didn't know well. You will get to know better an artist that you thought you knew everything about, on *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*.

John Hodgman: That's amazing, Jesse. And I would just second to everyone out there, please listen to *Bullseye*! I have gotten so many lines on so many great creators and artists that I didn't know about from listening to Jesse talk to these people so smartly and so thoughtfully. And I just think it's appointment listening that makes your life more interesting and better. So, go listen to *Bullseye*. And speaking of some of those incredibly talented people, you mentioned Jean Grae and Jean's new book, *In My Remaining Years*. It's out there. I'm gonna mention a couple of other people.

We're in Wisconsin this week performing at the Majestic Theater. I wanna give a shout out to the Tornado Steakhouse that always remembers my drink order, even after five years.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, shout out to that place.

John Hodgman: And give a shout out to the incredible cartoonist and Madison resident, though not Madison native, John Kovalic, who is the cartoonist and creator of the very, very funny and long-running nerdy cartoon strip called *Dork Tower*. He's the one who introduced me to the Tornado Room to begin with, and he is just been such a huge fan of the show for so many years and such a great guy. So, go please check out John's work at DorkTower.com. It's really, really funny.

Coming up later, if you are in New York City and anywhere near the Nitehawk Prospect Park, which is my local movie theater, *Shouting at the Screen* is returning to the Nitehawk on May 22nd. This is the incredible, fun, and incredibly occasional movie night that is hosted by our old friend, Wyatt Cenac, from *The Daily Show*, and *Problem Areas*, and so many other things.

[00:40:00]

And our mutual friend Donwill, who is one half of the incredible rap band, Tanya Morgan.

(Jesse echoes the name.)

And Donwill is an incredible DJ and artist in his own right. They host a reeeally fun night. They watch Black exploitation movies and make fun of them and appreciate them and talk about them. And they're a lot of fun. It's a really great night.

Jesse Thorn: I'm gonna mention that the Put This On Shop has new stock every week for weeks to come, because we have finally caught up with making listings for all the crap that's in our office. So, go to PutThisOnShop.com and check out awesome, new things,

John Hodgman: But in the meantime, we gotta get back to that stage in Madison, Wisconsin. So, let's go!

Transition: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: Madison, Wisconsin, are you ready for mega justice?!

(Cheers and applause.)

Let's bring out our litigants. Please welcome to the stage: Beth and Aaron. Tonight's case, "The Meeple's Court". Aaron and Beth are avid tabletop gamers, but Beth says that Aaron is too slow and no fun. He spends too much time trying to optimize gameplay.

(Scattered cheers.)

But Aaron says figuring out the system is the fun! 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: "It is an uneasy lot at best to be what we call highly taught, and yet not to enjoy; to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small, hungry, shivering self; never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold; never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardor of a passion, the energy of an action; but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted."

Bailiff Jesse Thorn, please swear the litigants in.

Jesse Thorn: Beth and Aaron, 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 one of those maniacs who's memorized all the two-letter *Scrabble* words?

(Laughter. They swear.)

Judge Hodgman, you may proceed.

John Hodgman: Hm. Beth and Aaron, you may be seated. For an immediate summary judgment in one of your favors, can neither of you identify the piece of culture that I quoted as I entered the courtroom? Aaron, why don't you guess first?

Aaron: That was from *Star Wars Episode V*.

(Shocked laughter from the audience.)

John Hodgman: Such confidence from the White man!

(Laughter.)

Alright, I'll put that confidently into the guest book. *Star Wars Episode V: Return—uh, The Empire Strikes Back*.

Aaron: Probably.

(Laughter.)

Jesse Thorn: The façade crumbles.

John Hodgman: What kind of nerd are you? We'll find out in a moment. Alright, Beth. You must know the answer.

Beth: Well, since it was not Tom Waits, I'm gonna go with George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

John Hodgman: Ohhh, great guess! But in fact, it was Tom Waits from *Swordfishtrombones*.

(Laughter.)

And in fact, I would've given—I didn't want to give it away, but it's normally pronounced *(in a Tom Waits impersonation, singing)* “It's an uneeeeasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoyyy.”

Jesse Thorn: I genuinely don't like it.

John Hodgman: “Tooo be present at this great spectacle of liiiiife!”

Jesse Thorn: It's a bit, but it's also not a bit. *(Laughs.)*

John Hodgman: “And never to be liiiberated! From a small, hungry, shivering self—”

Jesse Thorn: I think it's impressive! I just—

John Hodgman: “Never to be fully possessed! By the gloryyy—”

Jesse Thorn: Like, I'm bothered by real Tom Waits! You know what I mean?

(Laughter.)

Beth: I'm sorry, Jesse.

Jesse Thorn: It's okay.

John Hodgman: That was me reading a passage in the style of “Bad Liver and a Broken Heart” by Tom Waits. A passage from *Middlemarch* by George Eliot. You are correct!

(Excited cheers and applause.)

Immediate summary judgment in your favor. First time in history.

(Laughter and cheers.)

And only because it's *Middlemarch*. It's only because I happen to know that you have a first edition of *Middlemarch* in your home.

Beth: I do. It is not a first edition of the entire book. It's a first edition—

John Hodgman: Well, no, because there is no first edition of the entire book.

[00:45:00]

That's right! You don't have a first edition, and that's why you're wrong! There I found a loophole.

(Laughter.)

But tell me. Explain why.

Beth: It is a first edition of book one, *Miss Brooke*. And it was owned—

John Hodgman: Yes. Because it was published in multiple volumes between 1871 and 1872. Eight volumes.

Beth: I did take pictures on my phone of all of the advertisements that are in there, and there is a lot of stationary—particularly for mourning.

John Hodgman: *(Chuckling.)* Really?

Beth: It was an exciting time, the Victorian era.

John Hodgman: And I was so excited when I learned that you had a first edition of *Middlemarch* and you like *Middlemarch*, because *Middlemarch* was my great project of the first half of this calendar year. Because my wife, who's a whole human being in her own right, and especially my daughter—who is also a whole human being in her own right—my daughter wrote her college thesis on *Middlemarch*, my wife loves the book, and I'm like, “Well, I better read this thing.” And thanks to the help of our friend Christopher Frizzell and his *Middlemarch* book group online. Check it out, Friz Lit. He does great book groups online.

I read the book, and I loved it so much. And I was like, “I gotta do a *Middlemarch* quote to open this thing.” And let me tell you something. When you go looking for *Middlemarch* quotes on Goodreads, all you get are bangers. They're incredible. Listen to this. “A prig is a fellow who is always making you a gift of his opinions.”

(Laughter.)

Boom!

Jesse Thorn: That could literally be the obscure cultural reference for any *Judge John Hodgeman* case.

John Hodgman: Alright, alright! I don't— By the way, this is a brand-new t-shirt for *Judge John Hodgeman*. I'm announcing it now. “I don't make myself disagreeable. It is you who find me so. Disagreeable is a word that describes your feelings, not my actions!”

(Laughter and applause.)

1871, George Eliot! Pew-pew-pew-pew! Anyway, we are gonna hear the case in any case, because that's what we're here for, and I don't wanna waste the good people of Madison's time. So, let's hear it. Beth, this is a dispute about a game that you play together. Is that right?

Beth: It's not one particular game. We've been friends for about—well, Aaron says we've known each other for about 22 years, but we've only been friends for about 19 of those. We've played a lot of boardgames. It wasn't just one. And Aaron is really good at boardgames. I mean, like—and not just boardgames. Card games, online games, every game. He's so good!

John Hodgman: Mind games.

Beth: He's so good at boardgames that he broke one of our favorite games, because he figured out a way to win it without using any of the cards.

John Hodgman: Whi-which?

Beth: Well, with using a very minuscule percentage of the cards in the game.

John Hodgman: Which game was this?

Beth: This game was called *Dominion*.

John Hodgman: *Dominion*.

Beth: I mean, it's still called *Dominion*.

John Hodgman: I believe we have a set of *Dominion* here. Let's put it here, so that I can refer to it later. Thank you very much. This is a card game. It's the original deck building game, is what I read on Wikipedia. I know nothing else besides that. But when it comes—so, you play games, tabletop games, together in a group of friends. And Aaron has his own style of playing. You call it breaking the game.

Aaron, let me ask you this question. Beth accuses you of playing too slowly, of taking the fun outta the game, that you're trying to figure out the mechanics of the game rather than just have fun with your friends. Is it true that you're too obsessed with the rules and, as George Eliot says, that you are unable to enjoy the game, because you are too highly taught, too scrupulous, too dim-sighted about the rules, and thus unable to be liberated from your small, hungry, shivering self? Yes or no?

(Laughter.)

Aaron: I can't argue with George Eliot. I'm sorry.

John Hodgman: Yes or no?!

Aaron: No.

John Hodgman: How do you defend yourself? You've heard the accusation.

Aaron: I plead guilty to being good at games.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Alright, second summary judgment. *(Bangs his gavel three times.)* But explain how you play your game differently from Beth.

Aaron: To me, a lot of the fun of playing a boardgame is learning the system. You know, learning the rules, figuring out how they work, and trying to figure out how to play it well, play it optimally.

John Hodgman: Are you looking for loopholes?

Aaron: No, I'm looking for ways to play the game skillfully and play by the rules to win the game.

John Hodgman: This dispute is about *Dominion*. As I say, I've never played it. I'm going to open this up. I'm going to look at a card. This is a village card. Plus one, plus two actions. What the hell is this?

(Laughter.)

Aaron: That's an example of a card that doesn't help you win the game.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: This is not what you would term an optimal card.

Aaron: It is suboptimal.

John Hodgman: Not optimizing. Let me see if I can find an optimal card. Are these at random here?

Jesse Thorn: Just for folks at home, Aaron's look could be described as steely self-satisfaction.

(Laughter.)

[00:50:00]

John Hodgman: This card (*chuckles*)—this card is a bureaucrat card. This seems like a fun game.

(Laughter.)

Seems like a lot of fun, just a great way to escape everyday life.

Jesse Thorn: I block your bureaucrat with my middle manager. Go!

John Hodgman: “Gain silver card. Put it on top of your deck. Each other player reveals a victory card from his hand and puts it on his deck or reveals a hand with no victory—” (*Runs out of steam and devolves into blithering.*)

Jesse Thorn: Only neutralized by rental car counter clerk.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: I don't mean to make fun of this game. I'm sure it's great once you understand the rules. But how do you optimize gameplay in order to enjoy it? What is the basic way that you play the game? And what are you doing that's different than, say, Beth?

Aaron: Well, this is a game where you start with some very basic cards, and you can buy new cards to add to your deck. And they do fun things, I guess.

John Hodgman: Like bureaucrat stuff? Filing? Fun filing?

Aaron: Exactly, yeah. They let you draw more cards. They let you play more cards. But the thing is, you just end up clogging your deck up with things that don't help you win the game. You win the game by getting victory point cards. So, the best thing you can do is get rid of all the cards and buy victory point cards.

John Hodgman: That seems a pretty reasonable strategy. Beth, why is this so wrong?

Beth: Well, there are about 24 action cards, and then there are three types of coins that you can just use to buy victory cards. And once Aaron figured out, "Oh, if all I do is use coins and buy victory cards," we just never played with the other 24 cards. So, it basically—it wasn't really a game anymore at that point.

John Hodgman: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I've just been pulling cards at random from this deck, and I've gotten four thieves in a row. Thief, thief, thief, thief.

Aaron: They're sorted.

Beth: They're alphabetical.

Aaron: Each little packet. Each little packet is a different set of cards.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: I was waiting till I pulled the Black Swan card, 'cause it seemed impossible. Okay. Oh, thief again! Very good.

Beth: Have you gotten to the witch card? That's a favorite one. You can curse other players.

John Hodgman: Okay. So, I'll try to find it. But in the meantime—

Jesse Thorn: I have a question. When this game was named, there was a gasp from the audience. Now, it's likely that any boardgame would elicit a gasp from a *Judge John Hodgman* audience.

(John agrees.)

I will admit. We could say *Hungry, Hungry Hippos*, and people would've super strong—

(John gasps. Scattered cheering from the crowd.)

Ohhh.

However, is part of the problem here that this is simply a poorly designed game that trying to win is not fun?

(Mixed reactions from the crowd.)

John Hodgman: What is this heel turn that you're doing?

Jesse Thorn: No, I mean—I genuinely am like wondering if there is a way to break this game and the fun way is to not try and win. Like, is it just a poorly constructed game?

(Scattered applause.)

Now, it's well established on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast that I do not play boardgames. Because if I win, I feel like a jerk; and if I lose, I feel like a jerk. But is that the case with this game?

Aaron: I would say in my defense that I do play an action card, which is the card that lets you take other cards out of your deck. So, is that a bad thing? I don't know. But—

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, no one—I don't know! I've never played this!

John Hodgman: I'm sorry, I got a little scared by the four thief cards that I pulled. So, I got a little distracted. Beth, can you—can we reset for a moment, and you explain to me in what we call the English language why it's no fun to play with Aaron?

Beth: Well.

John Hodgman: What is Aaron doing, Beth?

Beth: Are we talking about *Dominion* or just let's just games in general? Because we stopped—

John Hodgman: *(Stammering.)* Let's stay out of the specific rules of a particular game, 'cause I can't understand them.

Beth: We stopped playing this game about a decade ago after Aaron broke it. But Aaron, well—

John Hodgman: He broke it because he found a system to win it. Consistently.

Beth: Yes.

John Hodgman: Right. And how did the other players in your group feel about this? Are you the only one who was upset with it, or were the rest like, (*poshly*) “Well done, sir.”

Beth: I think what happened was we all wanted to win, so then we all started playing Aaron's way. And then we realized this game is really boring if you don't use any of the action cards.

John Hodgman: Got it. Okay. So, you got bored. And was it—did the pace slow, or was it actually over too soon, because everyone knew exactly what to do, 'cause they were using the Aaron system?

Beth: Yeah, I think it was that. It just kinda—there was not really a point anymore.

John Hodgman: And how does this apply to other games that you've played?

Beth: Well, Aaron is so good at different games.

[00:55:00]

Sometimes when I'm playing a game—for example, a trick taking game—and Aaron's my partner across the table—

John Hodgman: Like, *Bridge* for example.

Beth: He assumes that I'm like—

Well, we're not that sophisticated. I mean, that's like a thinking game. I don't know.

Aaron: She only owns the first edition of *Middlemarch*. We're not *Bridge* players.

(*Laughter.*)

Beth: I don't know. Like, we play one called *Take Two*, but—

Jesse Thorn: This isn't in 1955. This is 1872!

John Hodgman: When you're snobby about the first edition, are you under the impression that George Eliot improved it in later editions?

(*Laughter.*)

It's not like, “Oh yeah, sure. It's the first edition, *Middlemarch*, but then there's *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Middlemarch*, a whole new system for wooing a cold widow who is afraid to express her feelings. Sorry, go on.

Beth: Well, he—Aaron assumes that, say, I'm counting the cards, for example. And he'll say very politely, "Oh, I thought you might play this card, because all of the aces have already been played."

And I'm like, "Oh, was I supposed to be keeping track of that?" Because I want to feel like I'm smart and good at games, but I don't wanna put in the effort to actually count the cards!

(Scattered cheers of agreement.)

John Hodgman: Well, I mean, I think a lot of people play games without counting the cards. Go to any casino. They're called losers, of course. But I mean, it takes a high level of concentration and strangeness to be counting cards when some people just wanna play a card game. And it's a different style of play. Maybe you shouldn't be partners across the table in these kinds of card games.

Aaron: I love being partners with Beth. She's the best to play with.

John Hodgman: Well, why?

Aaron: Well, except for my wife.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Let the record show that Aaron pointed into the darkness. To a wife.

Jesse Thorn: He pointed at Canada to indicate his girlfriend.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Yeah. Why do you enjoy playing with her if she obviously doesn't enjoy playing with you?

Aaron: In card terms, she's a wild card.

(John "whoa"s.)

We're all usually a little bit inebriated. And it's a lot—

John Hodgman: Uh-huh. Oh, so you're playing *Drunk Dominion*.

Aaron: Is there another way?

(Laughter.)

Jesse Thorn: There's *Advanced Drunk Dominion*.

Aaron: That's not legal in Wisconsin.

I enjoy the unpredictability that Beth brings to a thinking game as my partner.

Jesse Thorn: Aaron, is it like those poker players who know the most rational move to make, but they also know that the other players will anticipate the most rational move, and so they like look up at the clock to see where the second hand is to use it as a random number generator, so that they can computer themselves into irrationality?

Aaron: No, but I think I know how I'm gonna play this game next time.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: I don't mean—I'm sorry. I've been a little snarky about you. And you know—tell me what you enjoy about playing games.

Aaron: I like looking at a game as a system. And a system that has like a closed set of rules. And figuring out how to use those rules to play the game optimally. I think it's just fun to put yourself into a system and figure out how to work it and do your best at that.

John Hodgman: And I would presume that you often win as a result.

Aaron: I would ask Beth who won the last game that we played.

John Hodgman: Here we go.

Beth: *(Sighs.)* I did.

John Hodgman: Yeah, Beth! Would it be fair to say that, based on what you said, that your enjoyment of the game has a social component that Aaron does not respect, because he is laser focused on the rules and optimizing? Is that what's happening?

Beth: That could be fair.

John Hodgman: Aaron, when you go— When Aaron goes to this cabin, and a child climbs in his lap, does he robotically sweep it aside?

(Laughter.)

Beth: No, actually Aaron is very sweet with the children. I even included evidence of that. Erin has a special bond with my somewhat robotic 9-year-old.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Very nice. Aaron, do you have children of your own?

(Aaron confirms.)

How do you optimize parenthood?

Aaron: Still working on that, but they're here, so I have to plead the fifth.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Okay. Fair enough. Fair enough. So, you know, Beth, you want me to order Aaron to relax and have more fun. That was what is in my notes here. Is that accurate?

Beth: Well, I told Jennifer Marmor that I would like that, but I didn't know if that was something you could order someone to do. So, I'm conflicted.

John Hodgman: Well, I have a question for Aaron. Do you have fun?

Aaron: In boardgames or in life?

John Hodgman: Alright, let me revise my input.

(Laughter.)

Aaron: Lawyered.

John Hodgman: Computer, do you have fun in boardgames?

[01:00:00]

Jesse Thorn: John, you have to pick up the mouse and talk into it.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: *(Referencing Scotty in Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home.)* Computer! Do you have fun in boardgames and query?

Aaron: Very much so.

John Hodgman: Computer! Do you have fun in life? End query.

Aaron: Very much so.

John Hodgman: Computer. Are you relaxed? End query.

Aaron: Yes. End answer.

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Thank you, Computer. Beth, you won that game of *Azul*.

(Beth confirms.)

But for the most part, Aaron wins everything, right?

(Beth confirms.)

Okay, so that's what this is really about. You're tired of losing. When you say you want—'Cause he says he has fun. Don't you think he has fun winning? Winners often do have fun. It's often fun for winners. Hate to say it. You say that—you know, he says that he's relaxed. Do you disagree? He seems very calm now. Almost like emotionlessss.

(Laughter.)

Beth: I don't know that relaxed is the word I would choose.

John Hodgman: You want me to rule him to lose more?

Beth: Oh, I don't know. I think I'd like to—I wanna bring *Dominion* back, now that we both have kids, and we bring them to the cabin. And I wanna play it together and use the action cards and not take the shortcut way of just winning quickly.

John Hodgman: But it's a flaw in the game! It's built— Is it against the rules?

Beth: *(Regretfully.)* No.

Jesse Thorn: Could you just play better designed games, or—? Or! For example, play games with a greater element of randomness, so that the best player less frequently wins? I mean, that's a thing in designing boardgames, right? Some are games where anyone might win, and some are games where the best player almost always wins.

Aaron: Those are children's games.

(Laughter erupts. John “wow”s.)

Shutes and Ladders is a great game with a three-year-old,

Jesse Thorn: I order you to play *Hungry, Hungry Hippos*!

(Laughter and scattered applause.)

John Hodgman: Is there a game that— I mean, well, you want to play— You wanna bring *Dominion* back and play with the kids. What—? I really dislike the argument that sometimes people bring to the court, which is, “Think of the children.” Do you know what I mean? It's like, “My husband constantly says that a hotdog is a sandwich. H-how is my child going to develop believing that a hotdog is a—?!” It's like, no, your problem is with your husband. Don't bring your kids into it.

But in this case, you are modeling something for your kids. Strategies for analyzing the world, strategies for analyzing these games. Like, what is it that you want your kids to take away from these times together at the cabin when you're playing games?

Beth: Well, to be fair, there are other games we play that are fun. And they do have a great time.

John Hodgman: Like what games?

Beth: We had our first *Dungeons and Dragons* game. It was my first *Dungeons and Dragons* game and my children's first *Dungeons and Dragons* game. And it was probably the most terrible game ever. I mean, it was—it took us hours, and we didn't do anything.

John Hodgman: Oh, so you're talking about *Dungeons and Dragons* then.

(Laughter.)

Beth: But I did laugh until I cried. I mean—so, that was fun. But Aaron actually didn't play in that game.

John Hodgman: Yeah. Aaron, how do you feel about *Dungeons and Dragons*? Open-ended imagination games.

Aaron: My oldest kid ran that game and had a great time running it, and I had a great time watching them do it.

John Hodgman: But you didn't play?

Aaron: No, I did not.

John Hodgman: Why not?

Aaron: It's not my thing.

John Hodgman: Right. Tell me why. I mean, it's a different kind of game, isn't it?

Aaron: I played it in college, but it's too time consuming for me now.

John Hodgman: Right. Okay. Aaron, Beth said that she wants you to have more fun. To quote the Tom Tom Club and Stop Making Sense, what do you consider fun, fun, nasty fun?

(Laughter.)

Aaron: I really do enjoy the social aspect of playing games with my friends, especially at the cabin every year. We've been doing this for now 15 years, minus 2020. And it's a really delightful time for me. And it's not winning that I find fun, but what I find fun is learning how to play a game as well as I can.

John Hodgman: But do you understand that that might be in conflict with the social aspect of having fun with friends? I mean, the game is *Dominion*. You are dominating. That is fun for you. You like figuring out the system. But I mean, don't you want your friends to have fun too?

(Beat. Laughter.)

Longer pause than I would've expected!

Aaron: Well, the answer is obviously yes. But I also want to enjoy playing a game the way I enjoy playing a game.

John Hodgman: Okay. What would you have me order if I were to order in your favor?

[01:05:00]

Aaron: That I not be required to play a game in a style that I don't find enjoyable.

John Hodgman: Okay. Beth, what would you have me order? Bring *Dominion* back, and then make Aaron wear a blindfold or something, so that everyone else can have fun and get their participation trophy?

Beth: I would like to try it again after all these years and just see how it goes with no particular rule—

John Hodgman: Do you know how many games there are?! Can't you find another game?!

Beth: *(Begrudgingly.)* Well, yeah...

John Hodgman: Is *Dominion* the best game?

(Dissent from the audience.)

Well, there goes that sponsorship opportunity.

(Laughter.)

So, what would you have me order then?

Beth: Well, maybe we need to find a new game that would have the kind of fun imagination element and the strategy element together.

John Hodgman: Do you have—

Jesse Thorn: Like a game—like maybe a game where you imagine that what hippos eat is marbles?

(Laughter.)

John Hodgman: Or where robots both rock 'em and sock 'em? Alright, I think I've heard everything I need to in order to make my decision. I'm going to go back into my chambers. I'll be back in a moment with my verdict.

Jesse Thorn: Please rise as Judge John Hodgman exits the court room. Aaron, how are you feeling about your chances right now?

Aaron: Not great.

Jesse Thorn: Why is that?

Aaron: Because people like fun, and I'm not fun.

(Laughter.)

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

Beth: I don't know. I couldn't quite articulate what I want from Aaron except— Yeah, so. Not great. *(Laughs.)*

Jesse Thorn: Well, we'll see what Judge Hodgman has to say about it. All rise as Judge John Hodgman reenters the courtroom and presents his verdict.

(Raucous cheers and applause.)

John Hodgman: There was a time when I was young. I was born at the age of 42, but that was a youthful 42 when I was 11 or 12, when all of my little friends were getting into what was then only the basic set of *Dungeons and Dragons*. I also was attracted to the idea of *Dungeons and Dragons*, the idea of sitting around in a circle in someone's house in a profoundly sexually uncharged situation.

(Laughter.)

To imagine myself escaping from this world into a world of fantasy where I would be engaged in great battles with dragons, and I would get some gold coins and get to go into a basement. It was a wonderful idea. And of course, because I am an only child and therefore obsessed with control of every aspect of my life around me, I could not merely be a player. No, I had to be a dungeon master! And thus—and I had to, therefore, learn the rules of the game. So, I literally instructed my mother and father to not bother me for several days.

(Laughter.)

Do not knock at the door at my garret, because I am studying intensely. I am pouring over page over page of this fiend folio to learn everything that I can about how to run a game of *Dungeons and Dragons*. And do you know what I discovered as I dug deeper and deeper into the lore? I learned: it's all fucking math.

(Laughter.)

There's so much math in that game! Like, the whole game is escapism through times tables. And I was like wait a minute! I can escape into a fantasy world just with my head! I don't need to sit here and roll all these dice and do all these calculations for these dumb-dumbs. Why am I doing this?

And I never played *Dungeons and Dragons* again. Because one thing that I don't like is systems. I don't like studying them. I don't like figuring out how they work. I mean, within certain realms I do. I do like rules. I like following them. When I play *Scrabble*, I like knowing that, in fact, it's not about the most interesting word that you make; it's about the word that will get you the most points. I understand the fun in that exactly. But I don't take an inherent love of systems the way you do. That does not bring me fun. And yet I cannot deny, Aaron, that it brings you fun! And more than that, it brings you victory. Again and again. Once you see how the matrix works, you are able to navigate the matrix and leave your so-called human flesh friends behind as you transcend into a higher realm of understanding and victory.

[01:10:00]

And that's you. And that's something that I don't think is fair for me to tamp down, no matter how much Beth would like you to do it. This game, *Dominion*, I'm sure has its pros and its cons, its features and its flaws. You've found them all. This thing is now dead to your group forever. You cannot play this anymore, Beth. You cannot bring it back and ask him to play the same game a different way. He's always gonna find the way that he wants to play the game, just as you're always gonna find the way that you want to play the game. And that's part of the enjoyment of playing games. Because in truth, you're both assessing a puzzle in a different way. And the different ways that you assess your puzzle is the way that you come to understand your respective humanities.

And by the way, Aaron, you are a human. I acknowledge that.

(Laughter.)

Aaron: Thank you.

John Hodgman: Yeah. You're a very special human. So, you know, if you are asking me to order, Beth, that he have more fun, I don't think he can have more fun than he's having right now, winning this case!

(Laughter and applause.)

I mean, I don't know whether he was doing some advanced study of the system or whether he just saw through me the minute he sat down. I bet he probably wants to be at The National too.

Aaron: I had tickets.

John Hodgman: You had tickets?

Aaron: Yeah.

John Hodgman: Well, thank you!

(Laughter.)

I would say that even though you have obviously lost this evening by having to come here instead of going to see The National, you have won this case. Because the truth is you have to—people like what they like; they enjoy games the way they enjoy them. And Beth? Find another game. This is the sound of a gavel. *(Bangs his gavel three times.)* Judge John Hodgman rules. That is all.

(Cheers and applause.)

Jesse Thorn: Beth, Aaron, before you go. I'm just gonna hit record here on my phone. You guys had tickets to The National?

(They confirm.)

And you decided to come here?

(They confirm.)

Okay, great. I'm just gonna send that to Matt Berninger real quick.

(Laughter and applause.)

(Giggling.) Thank you so much, Beth and Aaron!

John Hodgman: Thank you for being here.

(Cheers and applause.)

He just plays the game the way he plays the game!

Transition: Three gavel bangs.

Jesse Thorn: That's it for this episode of the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast. Thanks to Reddit user u/YouKnow4Kids for naming this case. Make sure to follow us on Instagram at [@JudgeJohnHodgman](#). We're also on YouTube and TikTok at [@JudgeJohnHodgmanPod](#). Go to those places, subscribe, follow us, watch all the episodes of *Judge John Hodgman*. Well, not the live episodes. We don't have cameras there. But you know, all the studio episodes of *Judge John Hodgman* you can watch on YouTube in full.

The *Judge John Hodgman* podcast was created by John Hodgman and Jesse Thorn. By the way, John, the YouTube? Great way to watch the show.

(John agrees.)

The best way to share the show.

Different people use different software for their podcasts, whatever, whatever. Some people only watch them, et cetera, et cetera.

(John affirms.)

If you wanna share an episode of *Judge John Hodgman*, go share that YouTube. 'Cause if they're a watcher, they can watch it; otherwise they can just listen to it and close—you know, minimize the window or whatever. And they're gonna be able to enjoy it on their phone if they wanna listen to it on their phone, whatever, whatever. It's a great way to share a favorite episode of *Judge John Hodgman*. So, this week, I'm just gonna say: you got a favorite episode? Go to the YouTube. Share it with somebody.

John Hodgman: Just click that little arrow button, and it'll pop right up there, and you can share it right away!

Jesse Thorn: The *Judge John Hodgman* podcast, created by John Hodgman and Jesse Thorn. This episode, recorded by Matthew Barnhart. Dan Telfer is our social media manager. AJ McKeon, our podcast editor. Daniel Speer, our video editor. Our producer, Jennifer Marmor. And we will talk to you next time on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

Transition: Three gavel bangs.

Transition: Cheerful ukulele chord.

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