

## Sawbones 531: Kleptomania

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

[theme music plays]

**Justin:** Hello everybody, and welcome to *Sawbones*, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your cohost, Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:** And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:** Um... I'm... You really kinda stole my thunder there Syd, 'cause I was gonna do a whole bit, but you kinda stole my thunder.

**Sydnee:** How did I steal your thunder by saying my name?

**Justin:** You just kinda stole the show with how great you are, and I feel like you kinda.

**Sydnee:** I said my name.

**Justin:** Yeah, and you really stole the—

**Sydnee:** Greatly.

**Justin:** You really stole the show.

**Sydnee:** Ohhhh, oh.

**Justin:** Yeah, so like.

**Sydnee:** I stole the show.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Well Justin, I couldn't help it.

[chair rattling]

[pause]

[light kissing sound]

**Sydnee:** Did you come all the way over here just to kiss me?

**Justin:** To steal a kiss.

**Sydnee:** Eyyyy.

**Justin:** That's right, folks. It's the kleptomania episode.

**Sydnee:** We are gonna talk abo kleptomania, Justin, that was all so good, I didn't even pick up— It was such a subtle intro, I didn't even—

**Justin:** It was like a whole skit. [wheezes]

**Sydnee:** Can I—

**Justin:** I wrote a whole skit about it.

**Sydnee:** Before we get into kleptomania, I do wanna very briefly talk about the measles outbreak that's happening in Texas because I've gotten a couple email asking some questions about vaccine, about boosters for adults, and then in my actual— in my IRL... That's what they say, right, IRL.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** People have asked me this question, multiple in the last few days. So I felt like keeping with current things, just very briefly, before we get into kleptomania, there is of course— It's been widely publicized, there is a measles outbreak happening in Texas.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** And so far there are I believe about 124 people that, as of when I researched for this episode. At the time that you listen to this, that number almost certainly will have gone up, who have contracted measles.

There has been, at this moment, unfortunately one death from measles. That is the, it is important to note, the first death from measles we've had in the United States in a decade, so that is— Even though the HHS secretary has said that this is not uncommon, this is absolutely uncommon. Yes of course there are still measles cases in the US—

**Justin:** So wait a minute, why would the HHS secretary say it's not uncommon?

**Sydnee:** Because he's a vaccine denier, and should not be listened to.

**Justin:** Okay, so we wanna be super clear about that, that the— that you should not be listening to the Department of Health and Human Services right now.

**Sydnee:** To—

**Justin:** Were vaccine is concerned.

**Sydnee:** Anything that comes— Well, oh man, that's a big—

**Justin:** Ooo, it is, yeah.

**Sydnee:** There are a lot of good people who work within these agencies, right?

**Justin:** Ooo, yeah.

**Sydnee:** Like we know that.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** We know that there are smart, hardworking, evidence-based people within these agencies, but the problem is that those people are being weeded out.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** And so I mean they're still there at the moment, but like there's still good information.

**Justin:** Yeah, but you just have to—

**Sydnee:** But it's going to be overtaken

**Justin:** [chuckles] You just have to bring to it the rigor and skepticism you would bring to like a Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** A Ripley's *Believe It or Not* style [chuckles] circus production.

**Sydnee:** A med school buddy of mine sent me that he had downloaded all of the CDC website. [chuckles] And sent it to me in a file, so that I had access to it prior to it being... prior to information being purged from it.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** So.

**Justin:** We—

**Sydnee:** So think about that, by the way, if that.

**Justin:** But hey, folks.

**Sydnee:** But measles.

**Justin:** Can I tell you something real quick about that? Just to... The dark— It's a good reminder about that, that kinda thinking, 'cause the— Like *Sawbones* has taught us nothing else, the Dark Ages is temporary, every single time we get into another one, and then we get back out of it. So let's like keep the information.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** [chuckles] Let's like button— batten down the hatches, okay? Let's just like keep it tight, okay?

**Sydnee:** You know what you know, and the truth is the truth, whether it's on a website or not.

**Justin:** And— And folks, the truth's gonna be the truth in 10, 15, 20 years, that's the good thing is the truth don't need no— As we're seeing in Texas. The truth does not need advocates. The truth is the truth!

**Sydnee:** So here's what you need to know about measles.

**Justin:** I'm not sure why Jerry Seinfeld—

**Sydnee:** This is— I wanna—

**Justin:** — bringing [chuckles] this line, like dire warning.

**Sydnee:** We've gotta talk about kleptomania, I promise this is gonna be a lighter episode after we get through, but I do wanna give you this information. So measles of course is highly, highly contagious. It's got and are not— How many people would a person with measles be expected to infect?

**Justin:** The "are not" you mean?

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** Three.

**Sydnee:** No.

**Justin:** Four. Eight.

**Sydnee:** I'm just gonna tell you.

**Justin:** Seven. Two? One.

**Sydnee:** It's as high as 18, 12 to 18, 25 average. Anyway, it's a very contagious—

**Justin:** So you don't even know. Why are you asking me?

**Sydnee:** It's a very contagious disease. You get two vaccines as a kid, you should. One between the ages of 12 to 15 months, one between the ages of four to six years.

That is when it's most effective is if you get both boosters in childhood, those people who have gotten that series of vaccines are most likely protected, very, very high rate of protection if you've gotten both shots. Adults who were born prior to 1957 have been assumed to have immunity because they probably got it, right?

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** Because that was before vaccines. If you were born between '57 and '68, so you got a vaccine somewhere in that timeframe, '57 to '68, they are recommending that you get a booster. Because the vaccine that was used in that timeframe, for some people, was an inactivated form that was not as effective.

You may have gotten the good one, you may not have, you probably don't know for sure, a lot of people don't have those records still at this point in their life. So you— if you fall into that category you may indeed need a booster. I've already advised my parents to get boosters. Adults who were vaccinated between '68 and '89, Justin.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** That's us.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Welcome to the conversation. You may—

**Justin:** I was listening before.

**Sydnee:** You may have only gotten one. If you have access to your vaccine records, it'd be great to check and see.

**Justin:** I mean in what—

**Sydnee:** I know, this is— I—

**Justin:** You know my dad.

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** In what world do I have access to my vaccine records.

**Sydnee:** If you only got one MMR, that's the vaccine we're talking about, it would say, "MMR," you may indeed need a booster—

**Justin:** Okay, but like—

**Sydnee:** — and there have been multiple public health officials how have said it wouldn't be the worst idea in the world to get one. Now, you may have gotten both, the only way is if you have access to your records, that's the only way you know for sure.

**Justin:** Okay, but like what's— what should I do? Let's pretend like my dad didn't keep that in a safety deposit box?

**Sydnee:** The— We are not saying get a booster, currently the public health position is consider getting a booster, or if you wanna know for sure, you can have something drawn called "titers." Titers are amounts of the antibodies to these viruses that exist in your system.

You can go get blood drawn and they will tell you are you immune to measles, mumps, rubella, each individual. If you are immune, you don't need a booster. If your titers are below a certain level, they will tell you that you are not immune, in which case you do need a booster.

All this being said, we know that in the US this stuff costs money, and it may be cheaper and more cost effective and efficient, if you aren't sure, to just go get a booster.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** That would not be harmful, even if you did have the original series. So anyway, check your records, talk to your own healthcare provider. It's important to remember one in five unvaccinated people who get measles will need hospitalized, on average.

Last year during measles cases, 40% of people in the US who were unvaccinated and contracted measles were hospitalized. What I mean is that it's serious, measles is serious, it's a big deal and people in areas of outbreaks may need a booster anyway.

If your kids are due for their vaccines, we highly recommend get them vaccinated, talk to your healthcare provider if you have questions. The MMR vaccine is safe and effective, and not in any way linked to autism.

**Justin:** Just super clear. Now.

**Sydnee:** Kleptomania.

**Justin:** Alright, you stole eight minutes from kleptomania.

**Sydnee:** I stole eight minutes, I know. I— You know Justin, we kinda skim over things like kleptomania in med school.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm. Yes.

**Sydnee:** Now listen, I didn't do a psychiatry residency, and I'm certain if I had pursued psychiatry as a field of study I would know a lot more about it. In family med, we do a ton of behavioral health, shout out to all my primary care physicians who have to know everything every day all the time. [chuckles]

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** But we— generally a lot of what I manage is a lot of the more common stuff, like depression and anxiety.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** And then even in my field where I do a lot more behavioral health, PTSD is very common, psychotic disorders. I don't personally manage a lot of kleptomania.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** And obviously I don't do any of the— I don't do therapy, and so any of the— those sorts of modalities, you know, I don't know how to do.



But of course if you did a psych residence you probably know a lot more. All I knew is that it has to do with stealing.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm. Right.

**Sydnee:** I think that's what most people would know, and if you know the Greek words for kleptomania, they're both from the Greek for "to steal" and "a mad desire or compulsion," so kleptomania literally means "you have a made desire to steal."

**Justin:** So this is something It was kind an idea that we've been talking about, how... these sorts of like medical issues or disease or disorders or however you wanna put it, that are popularly understood to be a certain thing. And like I feel like kleptomania— Or has been portrayed in the media to be a certain thing or not.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** I feel like kleptomania is not as much of like the media presen— like portrayals, but like it is absolutely one of those things that it feels like in school, when you were a kid and you found out about the idea of kleptomania, it would come up a lot. [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** It was something that was like, "Well, it could be that I did hi— they're not someone who steals, they're just like maybe a kleptomaniac and they're forced to steal." Like this idea of a... psychosi— like a diagnosis of— like crime being a diagnosis was a very big thing for us as kids.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** In the '90s. This idea that like you would eat a Twinkie and your blood sugar would make you do crime is something that was like discussed a lot as a kid.

**Sydnee:** Which is interesting Justin 'cause we're gonna get into the history of kleptomania because our— obviously our understanding of it has evolved quite a bit since we first described it.

But there is a lot of research that we understand now that— the underpinnings of what we understand about kleptomania now, that was done in the '90s. There was a lot of evidence published that kinda furthered our understanding in the '90s. So I wonder if it was part of this idea you have is because it was in the popular conversation at the time.

**Justin:** Probably, yeah.

**Sydnee:** It would've been— And I imagine at— Well you know I don't remember this happening, but if you know a big study was published about kleptomania back in like '91, '92, I could see that catching the attention of popular medicine media, right?

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** The stuff— Popular medicine meaning the stuff that we do in medicine that people find interesting enough that they would make like a human-interest news segment about it.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** Not everything does, and honestly sometimes the really important stuff can't rise to that level of popularity 'cause it's kinda boring, but it also might be really important. Kleptomania is very interesting to people. So what the diagnosis means, so if you have cri— if you meet criteria, it's in the DSM.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** There are criteria that was used to diagnose these disorders. It's an impulse control disorder, that makes sense.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** You have an impulse, can't control it. And it is the recurrent failure to resist impulses to steal objects that are not needed for personal use, or for their monetary value. I think that's important to distinguish.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** Because if... if you're stealing... medicine when you're sick.

**Justin:** Or—

**Sydnee:** That's not— You know what I mean?

**Justin:** If you're stealing like a silver candlestick from a priest that has very kindly taken you in, and while on the run from the law—

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** — he brings you a second candlestick, because you're trying to start a new life.

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** Then that's not necessarily kleptomania.

**Sydnee:** No, and if you're stealing a loaf of bread because you're hungry.

**Justin:** Hungry.

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** Your family's—

**Sydnee:** Yes, okay.

**Justin:** Not kleptomania.

**Sydnee:** No, and it is— you have to have the criteria of you have a sense of tension before you commit the theft. This is true of a lot of impulses, right?

**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** "I have that sense that I have to do this, I have to do this," and you feel that tension building. "I— Like I must do this thing." And then you have relief or pleasure after you do it, there is a sense of "[sighs] Okay, I did the thing that I had to do."

It's not out of vengeance or something else, it's not in response to something, you're not stealing 'cause you're mad at somebody so you're stealing from them, right.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** It's not like that. And you then of course— With all of these, it's not been accounted for by something else. Because things can co in package.

**Justin:** Sure.

**Sydnee:** You can have a stealing behavior as part of another diagnoses, and you wouldn't necessarily have kleptomania, this would be... just this impulse, right?

**Justin:** So you could be like— You're saying it could be part of a constellation of things?

**Sydnee:** Yes, because you can often depression run concurrently with kleptomania, sometimes anxiety disorders can, so there are other— There have been cases of certain eating disorders being associated with kleptomania. So like there can be co-occurring things. And it—

**Justin:** I'm so— I'm so tempted to start like armchair psychologizing on why it would give people a release, but I wanna hear what the— the medical community says though. [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** 'Cause I bet they're probably a little bit more.. well acquainted.

**Sydnee:** Yes, yes.

**Justin:** [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** They're— I will say it's pretty rare, the estimate is about 0.6% of the population.

**Justin:** Where it's like clinical, like you can actually clinically diagnose it.

**Sydnee:** Yes, and it's tough— Now, I will say, it's tough because, as you may imagine, most people don't... admit... that they steal things.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** Because it is illegal, and so usually people are diagnosed when they are caught stealing.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** And then arrested, or face some sort of legal consequence, and then the diagnosis comes out as a result of that legal interference.

**Justin:** It's— Yeah, or like you're examining a pattern, right?

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** It's not like a one-off.

**Sydnee:** No no.

**Justin:** It's like you have to have a history that you're looking at.

**Sydnee:** It's— Because it is something that you would be worried you would get in trouble for, a lot of people, even to their therapists or psychia— If they have an established relationship with somebody that they could tell, they're not necessarily coming to them and saying "Hey, I steal stuff all the time."

**Justin:** Sure.

**Sydnee:** Right? Because you'd be scared, and so it is not something that is—

**Justin:** And you're ashamed.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** And I think that's a lot of compulsions too, that shame is all a part of the package.

**Sydnee:** And unfortunately, a lot of people don't get treatment, they get punishment.

**Justin:** Mmm.

**Sydnee:** Especially— So it's interesting, the gender breakdown, it is a three to one female to male diagnosis.

**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** More common in women. That being said, men who are diagnosed with kleptomania are more often to just— they don't receive treatment, they receive some sort of legal ramification, jail time or something like that.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** They very often don't get treated for it, unfortunately. But as you may have guessed, this has been a really contentious diagnosis over time because it feels, I think that it's one of those things where if somebody says, "Well I only stole because I had to, and I— Like I had to, I couldn't control it, had to," how do you— It would be hard for people to believe that, right?

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** And I am not saying you should question it, but obviously a lot of people did question it. And so over time our understanding of kleptomania, why do people do it? Is it something you really can't control? And then in each individual case, because it's gonna be used as a defense in some sort of trial in many cases.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** How can you distinguish are they just saying this—

**Justin:** Saying that.

**Sydnee:** — so that they can get away with a crime? Or are they really experiencing this impulse control disorder, right?

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** So it ha— there's a lot that's been written about it, and of course the— you know there was a time period where the psychoanalysts had to get in on it. So there's a lot of odd history behind kleptomania, beyond what you would already imagine.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** So I wanna tell you about that, where I'm gonna take us back to 1816, but before we do that, we do have to go to the Billing Department.

**Justin:** Let's go.

[transition music plays]

[ad break]

**Justin:** Alright, let's get back in the Wayback Machine, Sydnee.

**Sydnee:** The first name that I found for kleptomania back in 1816 from a Swiss physician named Massey was "klopomania." Which also just means "stealing madness," "stealing insanity."

**Justin:** Stealing madness. [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** Yeah, I mean it's the same root, it's the same Greek roots, they just— he just used the word differently. And then the French psychiatrist Marc wrote about it in 1840, and was like, "kleptomania," and everybody was like, "Oh that sounds so much better, we're gonna stick with that."

**Justin:** Good call.

**Sydnee:** Same root, same words. [chuckles] Kleptomania's the one that stuck, Marc gets more credit, 'cause... I guess we like— It just rolls off the tongue, we just like kleptomania better.

**Justin:** Kleptomania.

**Sydnee:** Kleptomania.

**Justin:** It is good to say.

**Sydnee:** Uh-huh. The way that both of the doctors describe it is pretty much the same, and it's pretty much the criteria we use today, people who say, "I stole something and I could not stop myself."

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** "I had to do it, and I felt so much better after I did it, and yes I knew it was wrong," obviously this isn't someone who doesn't understand— You wouldn't fit criteria is you didn't know that it was stealing. If you thought it was okay to walk into a store, pick something off a shelf, and walk out, that's not stealing.

**Justin:** So it's like— It's not that you don't know it's wrong, you do know it's wrong.

**Sydnee:** Yes, like—

**Justin:** But you know you're not supposed to do it, that's part of the thing.

**Sydnee:** But you cannot stop yourself, yes. And they also noted at the time that it seemed to be something that mainly women experienced.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** They both studied under a very prominent French alienist, this was in the time of alienist, which was the term for therapists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** That, the precursor to that. And Etienne Esquirol was his name, and his was the one who sort of wrote a lot and took this sort of early research on kleptomania and listed it and defined it as—

He believed there were a whole series of monomanias, and that means a singular... fixation. "Mania" at the time was being used for like any sort of... what they would've called "madness" or "insanity," you know.



**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** These are not the way we use these terms today. When we say, “mania” we mean something very different. But what the monomania meant that in most ways, you behave exactly like...

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Everybody else, but in this one specific behavior, you cannot control yourself, and there’s a whole list of things he said that you could have a monomania in, kleptomania being one of them. In every other way, you behave like everyone else in society, but when you’re in a department store, you just can’t stop yourself. [chuckles]

**Justin:** [sighs]

**Sydnee:** You gotta steal something. And monomanias were eventually called into question, like is this a real thing? Are there really a whole series of singular behaviors? We know now that some are, some aren’t, and also it’s probably more complex, right? It’s probably underneath it there is an impulse control problem, and it can manifest in variety of ways.

**Justin:** Uh-huh.

**Sydnee:** Does that make sense?

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** As opposed to there’s just this one place in your brain where you cannot stop yourself from doing this one specific thing.

**Justin:** Yeah, yeah. I— Yeah, that makes sense.

**Sydnee:** So he called it “a lesion of the will.” Basically the idea is that, and I think this is kind of a fascinating concept of humanity, we all want to steal all the time.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** But we all have willpower that stops us from doing it, except occasionally someone doesn't in that on specific way. So we all— I mean this— I mean if you apply this to human behavior, we all want to do all the things we're not supposed to do all the time.

We all want to kill all the time, we all want to steal all the time, but we have will that prevents us from doing it, except occasionally that part of the brain isn't working the way it's supposed to, and so then we do.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** This is pretty much the way it works.

**Sydnee:** No.

**Justin:** No. [laughs]

**Sydnee:** But that's—

**Justin:** But that was his idea.

**Sydnee:** That was his idea.

**Justin:** [in a French accent] Etienne Esquirol.

**Sydnee:** There are great descriptions [chuckles] from— they would interview women and ask them about like, "Why did you steal something?" and one woman said, "I have a crazed envy that drives me to take possession of all that I see, such that if I had been in a church, I would not have been able to resist stealing from the altar."

**Justin:** I gotta say, I do wonder... if this is also an illness that is evolved now that we have... so many things. Like you know we're clogging— these department stores, like the costs of these goods through industrialization and modern production techniques, I feel like there's so many more things.

And I don't think that I— Like even if I had a compulsion, the idea that I would like— That would really bum me out if I wanted to bring more things into the house, because I just can't.

**Sydnee:** So—

**Justin:** Back then they didn't have as many things is what I'm saying. Like I don't want any of the things at church.

**Sydnee:** The—

**Justin:** Like my stuff is so much better than the stuff at church is what I'm saying.

**Sydnee:** Okay. This is really interesting that you're saying this because you're exactly in the mind of the French psychiatrists that followed.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** As to their idea as to why kleptomania existed. This is— It's really interesting that this would be your conclusion, because that is exactly what a number of psychiatrist in the late 1800s and early 1900s began to believe.

So initially it was thought... "This is largely—" First of all, it was blamed on all the stuff that anything wrong with women was blamed on at the time first, right?

**Justin:** Right

**Sydnee:** They were like, "Well, it's probably hysteria. It has something to do with your period." Menstruation was blamed, menopause was a very frequent like, "Well it's 'cause of menopause, it made you steal stuff, you know how menopause makes you steal stuff."

That was— A lot of the other things that like— They thought it was some sort of constellation of what they would've called at the time like... cerebral defect, meaning you don't understand, you fundamentally don't understand that it's wrong to steal and so you can't stop yourself. And then all the women stuff. "It's your uterus, probably."

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** But then there was this rising idea in the early— late 1800s early 1900s that it wasn't actually a problem with you, woman, it was a problem with the department stores. They're becoming so incredible now.

**Justin:** Yeah, this is—

**Sydnee:** At the turn of the century.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** Department stores were becoming so luxurious.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** And that was literally what it was blamed on, department store atmospherics.

**Justin:** Yes!

**Sydnee:** Was thought to be the underlying cause of kleptomania.

**Justin:** 'Cause you go in there and you just wanna steal. [chuckles]  
'Cause it's all great! You want all this stuff, they just invented all this stuff, you can't have any of it 'cause your husband's a... owns...

**Sydnee:** [chuckles]

**Justin:** Some sort of, you know, till, or he owns the sort of textile factory or somethin', but he won't— He makes you work there and he won't— You know there's like Faberge eggs everywhere, they got gas lights, it's incredible! You know, and you can't— you just go in there and you wanna steal it.

**Sydnee:** That's exactly what they thought was happening.

**Justin:** I get it!

**Sydnee:** They thought that women— And that was why— Not only was it largely women, it was women who did have money. So they weren't

blaming women who perhaps, in this description, their husbands couldn't give them enough money to buy the things they wanted.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** They were saying "No, these women probably do have some money."

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** "Like not necessarily the richest, but women of some means, who could buy something." And maybe they couldn't buy everything they wanted, but they could buy something.

But they come into these department stores, and they're so overwhelmed by the amount of beautiful things that they could acquire if they had endless means, that they can't help themselves and they just begin stealing things, and they— that this would be used in their defense a lot.

So there were trials, very high-profile trials at the time. A lot of these happened in Paris, and I can only imagine the— just the circus the courtroom must've been because there were these— I don't know if they were beautiful.

In my mind, they're these beautiful, high society, Parisian women, who were tearfully describing how overcome they were by these beautiful department stores. And then these psychiatrists like Esquirol would go defend them. They would go to trial—

**Justin:** [in a French accent] "It is true."

**Sydnee:** [chuckles] And—

**Justin:** [in a French accent] "Take it from me, eating a squirrel. It is true, these department stores are beautiful." [laughs] "You want to steal, steal, steal, steal. I went through one to take pictures for you, I steal three things."

**Sydnee:** [chuckles] They would come to high prominence these psychiatrists by going to trial and defending, you know, very chivalrous, these poor women.

**Justin:** Psychiatrists, like for example—

**Sydnee:** Who were at the mercy of these gorgeous Paris department stores.

**Justin:** Psychiatrists, like for example, [in a French accent] eating a squirrel?

**Sydnee:** [chuckles] I don't think that's— I'm probably saying it wrong.

**Justin:** How would you say his name?

**Sydnee:** Esquirol?

**Justin:** No, say his full name together.

**Sydnee:** Es— Etienne.

**Justin:** Etienne.

**Sydnee:** Esquirol.

**Justin:** [in a French accent] Eating a squirrel.

**Sydnee:** Oh no, okay okay.

**Justin:** Yes, that's exactly what I said.

**Sydnee:** There was one department store, as they were writing about one of these trials, they wrote about department store in Paris where they said— They were talking about a display where there was a bunch of lace, and they said, "The temptation was acute. It gave rise to an insane wave of desire that unhinged every woman."

**Justin:** [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** I've— Lace is pretty, I have never once seen a display of lace that ha... unhinged me, I don't think.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** I don't think.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** But anyway. So the— this was really believed at the time, that it was the problem with the department stores, and it was— This was one I really enjoyed, it was a description of one of the kinda like court reporting things.

So there was a woman, she'd been arrested on September 3<sup>rd</sup> at 7pm in Printips, that was a department store, having concealed under her garments a silk garment. A search of her home revealed large quantity of other stolen goods, all unused and with their price tags still on.

The list, which is rather long, included five pairs of boots, 22 pieces of wool and silk, two dozen handkerchiefs, 50 pairs of black stocking, 33 pairs of collared stockings, and it goes on and on. Now 49, she had stolen early in life, by the way, but was virtually incarcerated by her husband for 15 years.

**Justin:** Whoa.

**Sydnee:** For stealing. So basically she stole some stuff, her husband found out, locked her in the house for 15 years, wouldn't let her get out. And then this latest burst of thieving, "When he loosened the bounds she went to Printips that day and shoplifted." As soon as he let her out of the house, she shoplifted.

**Justin:** Whoa.

**Sydnee:** And she said, "This tho— This theft for her was the beginning of a new existence. She was transformed. Her household, her husband took second priority and she had but one overriding thought; to return to the department store to shoplift."

**Justin:** [sighs]

**Sydnee:** She couldn't help herself. I have to imagine that being locked in the house for 15 years.

**Justin:** It can make you a little—

**Sydnee:** Would make you wanna go steal stuff.

**Justin:** Yeah, you'd wanna go steal stuff.

**Sydnee:** At the very least, at the very least. So anyway, there were all these high-profile cases, everybody thought it was "Oh how— Women can't help themselves, women being the weak things we are can't help ourselves in these beautiful department stores."

But the problem in the early 1900s, as this came into fashion, as soon as it did there was criticism because a lot of people stole stuff... that wasn't expensive. They were stealing cheap things.

**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** They weren't stealing fancy things.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** And so then those explanations started to fall apart. So it— almost as soon as you saw this movement in the early 1900s that it's because of department stores, you started to see competing ideas.

"No no no no no, that doesn't make any sense, look at the stuff they stole. If they were just tryin' to— They would steal the lace. They didn't steal the lace, they stole like a... you know, a pair of cheap cotton socks or something. And so like why— how does that make sense? We can't square it."

So then you started to see all of these other ideas come into play, and a lot of this was led by this time period we're in is the time of psychoanalysis. So a lot of Freud's disciples, Freud, Freudian thought and people who followed Freudian thought are kind of taking over our concept of kleptomania, and a lot of other obviously psychiatric diagnoses at this point.

**Justin:** Yeah, they were steering that conversation.



**Sydnee:** So what do they think it has to do with? What did they think everything has to do with?

**Justin:** Your moms.

**Sydnee:** Your mom and sex.

**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** That's always— When you get to the psychoanalysts, sexual repression has gotta come into the conversation, and then we're gonna talk about your parents. So let's— Justin, I wanna play a game with you.

**Justin:** Okay, I'm ready.

**Sydnee:** So the psychoanalysts thought that stealing things had to do with sexual repression.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** And that the objects you stole could give them a lot of insight into what was causing you to steal.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Because the objects were symbolism.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** So Justin, if you steal a pencil, what does that symbolize?

**Justin:** Penis envy.

**Sydnee:** It's a penis, very good, the pencil's a penis. If you steal an umbrella, what does that symbolize?

**Justin:** Penis envy.

**Sydnee:** Specifically it's an erect penis.

**Justin:** Okay, got it.

**Sydnee:** But yes, it is a penis.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** If you stole a glove, what does that glove symbolize?

**Justin:** Oh, the glove symbolizes...

**Sydnee:** What thing?

**Justin:** What thing?

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** Like—

**Sydnee:** The umbrella's a penis, the pencil's a penis. What's a glove?

**Justin:** Oh, it's a hand.

**Sydnee:** It's a condom.

**Justin:** Okay, for the penis?

**Sydnee:** For the penis, yeah.

**Justin:** Okay. [wheezes]

**Sydnee:** Now if you steal a music box.

**Justin:** [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** This is a trick.

**Justin:** Is that a vagina?

**Sydnee:** That's right, it's a vagina.

**Justin:** That's what I always call them.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, a music box.

**Justin:** Music boxes.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** [wheezes]

**Sydnee:** So there you go, and every object represents something, usually sexual. And everything was related to some sort of trauma from birth, from exiting your mother's body.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** And then trauma from that.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** There's a lot of Oedipal desires wrapped up in that. It's either, depending on if you have a penis or not, you're either stealing because of penis envy.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** So like I might steal a pencil, and since I do not have a penis, I would steal one because I wish I had one. Now why would you steal a penis? Or [chuckles] why would you steal a pencil?

**Justin:** Why would I steal a penis?

**Sydnee:** Why—

**Justin:** [in a creepy voice] Because I'm Dr Penis Thief, the Penis Stealer.

**Sydnee:** Why would— [chuckles]

**Justin:** [in a creepy voice] Bring that wiener over here, I'm going to steal it and take it back to my cave.

**Sydnee:** Why would—

**Justin:** [in a creepy voice] That's why I steal a penis.

**Sydnee:** Why would you steal a pencil?

**Justin:** [chuckles]

**Sydnee:** You don't steal a pencil—

**Justin:** 'Cause I need a pencil, 'cause I didn't bring one.

**Sydnee:** No, you don't steal a pencil because of penis envy.

**Justin:** Oh, 'cause I'm mad at my penis.

**Sydnee:** You're afraid of castration.

**Justin:** I'm afraid of my penis. Oh.

**Sydnee:** No.

**Justin:** Oh. Afraid of cast—

**Sydnee:** You're afraid of losing it.

**Justin:** Oh, okay. Protective. [wheezes]

**Sydnee:** So everybody without a penis steals things 'cause they want one, everybody who does have a penis steals things because they're afraid of losing theirs. There's also a lot that has to do with a drive to either obtain milk or feces, or the contents of your mother. I mean really, if you read into these ideas about kleptomania, it all comes back to...

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Sex and your parents. And then and a lot, a lot about penises. So all of this psychoanalytic thought about why people stole, and there's lots of writings about like, "Well, we talked to this person who said they had kleptomania and we understood it was because they were trying to steal their father's penis."

**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** "And that was why they did the thing they did." At the same time that psychoanalysis in general was falling out of favor, I mean 'cause this was sort of like all of this rose and then everybody went "What? That sounds kinda silly."

**Justin:** "I'm not sure." Yeah.

**Sydnee:** And then it fell out of favor. So what happened is kleptomania itself started to get called into question.

**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** Because it got tied to all of the sexual repression, penis envy theories, and people were like, "Well this isn't even a real thing anymore." When of course it was a real thing.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** It just had nothing to do with penises.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** So it wasn't until the DSM 3 was published in 1980 that we see kleptomania listed again among the impulse control disorders, using the criteria that basically we still use today, which I've already cited in this episode. So it really took that long for us to get back to "Can we talk about why sometimes people can't stop themselves from stealing?"

**Justin:** Hmm.

**Sydnee:** And now we recognize it as an impulse control issue, there's actually— So as I mentioned Justin, there was a lot of research done on this in the '90s.

So 1980 we see it mentioned as an impulse control disorder again, and the leading— It was funny as I was looking through the more recent research on it, the leading researcher, they were all listed as "McElroy et al."

**Justin:** Oh.

**Sydnee:** So I had to know. There's a Susan McElroy who works out of Cincinnati, who works out of the University of Cincinnati, who has done a ton of research on kleptomania, to understand it in a modern context.

As an impulse control disorder, as something related to like if you think of obsessive compulsive disorders, and that kind of, you know, "I can't—" People who can't control themselves from washing their hands again, or from checking to see if the door's locked again, or from, you know, saying a word out loud. Same idea, they can't control themselves when it comes to stealing.

And so when we talk about treatments for it, it's the same sort of treatments that we pursue for other impulse control disorders. They're looking into obviously things like cognitive behavioral therapy, some desensitization training even. I've found some like you go into a store and... want to steal something but don't.

**Justin:** Don't steal, yeah.

**Sydnee:** Right? Like the idea of like that, and then also medication therapies, similar to things we would try for other impulse control disorders. So they've tried SSRIs and SNRIs, those are kind of the most common antidepressants, like if I named a list of them, you've probably heard of a lot of them—

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** — that you could try for any impulse control disorder. They've studied things like naltrexone, which is actually an opiate antagonist, we can use it for substance abuse disorder in some cases. They've tried naltrexone and seen some evidence it might help with it.

Because again, this impulse idea, trying to stop yourself from an impulse that you feel like you can't stop yourself from doing. Topiramate is another medication, it's an old anticonvulsant seizure med that we're now studying for some impulse control, and also addiction like behaviors.

So anyway, there are ways that we can address it and treat it. It is pretty rare, but it is a real impulse control disorder, and nowadays we don't think it has anything to do with anyone's penis.

**Justin:** Uh... I noticed you didn't talk about kleptomania in relation to Winona Ryder, and I'm curious if Winona Ryder just kinda shoplifted, or if she tried to say that was a kleptomania related incident.

**Sydnee:** Justin, I don't know, I didn't even think— I mean I— Now that you say that, I do remember—

**Justin:** To me—

**Sydnee:** — that that was a well-publicized thing.

**Justin:** I'm looking, I've been looking, it doesn't look like she has ever said it is kleptomania, she hasn't actually talked about it a lot because why would you? [chuckles] I get it, but like.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, I probably wouldn't.

**Justin:** I think—

**Sydnee:** I would talk about *Stranger Things* a lot more than that if I were her.

**Justin:** I would be more focused on *Stranger Things*. I will say this though, if it was manifesting— a manifestation of kleptomania, that is what I think a lot of people's assumption was at the time because she had been in all these movies and made a lot of money, so she wouldn't need to steal.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** And I don't know if she did need to or not, but I would argue, even though that was probably very embarrassing for her at the time, I do think that in context of what we're saying, it probably was like some much needed like legitimacy and visibility for this. Because if you have someone like her doing that, I think that helps to reinforce that it isn't a choice.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** That it isn't motivated by like personal gain. You know, that there is a— There's obviously like a place where people are just trying to, you know, come up with fake defenses, but there's a real thing behind it.

**Sydnee:** And it's really something that people who have described, who have experienced it— Certainly if you're listening and you've experienced any sort of impulse control disorder.

You know, if you have any— Not necessarily kleptomania, but any of the things where you feel that compulsion to do something, and it is very much a physical thing that they describe that is happening, that becomes so overwhelmingly—

I mean I don't even know if "uncomfortable," I've had patients use the word "painful" to describe the need to do the thing, that eventually they just— they can't stop themselves, they must do.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** That is what people are experiencing and I think it's helpful to hear those descriptions and understand that people with kleptomania are experiencing that same thing... when they steal things, and so it makes total sense. Obviously there are people who just steal things too.

**Justin:** Mm.

**Sydnee:** I'm not saying that. And as always, if you see somebody stealing food, no you didn't. [chuckles]

**Justin:** Hey, thanks so much for listening to our podcast, thanks to the Taxpayers for the use of our song "Medicines." Our song, I just claimed it.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** The use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. Thanks to you for listening. That's gonna do it for us.

Oh, I did wanna mention something real quick. We— There's lots of stuff for sale at [mcelroymerch.com](http://mcelroymerch.com), and if you head on over there, this month 10% of all proceeds are gonna go to Harmony House, which is a place



that's very near and dear to our hearts, for people— support the people experiencing homelessness here in our area.

There's lots of great new stickers, we've got a "Dare to care" sticker, there's some *Sawbones* stuff on there, but 10% of all proceeds go to Harmony House. So if you don't mind going over there and buying some stuff, that'd be very cool of you.

**Sydnee:** Yes, thank you.

**Justin:** Or just donate directly to Harmony House, I guess, but hey.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, we really appreciate it. I know all over the country, it is— things are tough with people losing their jobs, and more and more people experiencing homelessness, and definitely our area's getting hit hard as well.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** So any help you can give, it means so much to us.

[theme music fades in]

**Justin:** Yeah. 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.

[outro theme music plays]

[ukulele chord]

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