

Still Buffering 424: Mother Night

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Sydnee: Hello, and welcome to Still Buffering: a cross-generational guide to the culture that made us. I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: And I'm Taylor Smirl.

Sydnee: We've exchanged sniffing for whatever this is now. I feel like my voice has been gone most of this year.

Taylor: [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] Is that possible?

Taylor: I mean, it's only—it's still February, so that's not that long, I guess, to—to be... that's... well, you're the doctor. [laughs]

Sydnee: I don't know. I usually don't get sick. You know what it is? It's that I don't acknowledge I'm sick when I'm sick, and this has been hard to not acknowledge. Because you can hear it. You know?

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like, I normally don't tell people if I'm sick. I don't mean, like, I'm hiding it so I can, like, can be conta—that sounds like... [laughs quietly] like if I'm on the phone, if I'm—

Taylor: You don't allow yourself to recognize that you're sick.

Sydnee: Yes. And if I'm on the phone with somebody I would never say, like—if they're like, "How are you feeling?" And I was sick, I would never say, like, "Oh, actually, I've been sick." I'm like, "Oh, I'm good. How are you?"

Like, I never talk about being sick. But this is... I can't hide it. And so I've had so many phone conversations in the last week where people are like, "Oh, are you okay?" And I like, "Yeah, why?" They're like, "Well, you sound sick."

"Oh. Yeah. But that's not... I'm not really engaging with that right now."
[laughs quietly]

Taylor: I'm not engaging with my sickness. My sickness is not part of my reality. Right now.

Sydnee: I'm choosing not to acknowledge that actually, so if we could just move on.

Taylor: I'm editing my experience, and it does not include sickness.

Sydnee: Mm-mm. No. Not for me.

Taylor: Well, uh—

Sydnee: My catchphrase has been, "I sound worse than I feel."

Taylor: I guess that's good?

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: Well, you don't sound that bad. I mean, you know. You sound a little... like, I could believe you're sick. I could also believe you're just really sleepy, or like, you had a really fun night last night. You could always just say, "I did some karaoke last night."

Sydnee: That's true.

Taylor: If you're trying to actively deceive somebody. [laughs]

Sydnee: It would be—it would be, uh... it would be nice if it was from a really fun night. But it was a Sunday night, and I have small children, so I can—it was probably predictable how fun it was.

Taylor: I don't know. You know. Doesn't mean you can't [unintelligible] karaoke at home with your kids.

Sydnee: No, that's true.

Taylor: That sounds like something that you all would do. Like, that—that sounds logical.

Sydnee: No, that's fair.

Taylor: [laughs quietly] There's a lot of singing in that household.

Sydnee: That is fair. We were building a Casita from Encanto out of Legos yesterday.

Taylor: Oh, fun.

Sydnee: It's a huge project. It's gonna take us quite a while. I think the dining room table is done for for a while. But, um, we were playing Encanto while we were building the house. And I—my voice—I could not—I was trying so hard to sing along. [laughs quietly] And squeaking along with them. So I probably made it worse.

So yes, that is what our house does. That was fair. That was fair.

Taylor: [unintelligible] Can't ever rule singing out in any number of that, of your... your part of the family.

Sydnee: Did I tell you about, uh, Cooper's birthday present that... that we got her?

Taylor: No.

Sydnee: We—she asked this year, uh, for a fish. For her birthday.

Taylor: Oh yeah. It was in that video that you sent me.

Sydnee: Oh, that's right. Yes. So she had had fish before. The little neon ones, tetras.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And I don't know if I shared the saga of the tetras on this... podcast. Maybe not. It was awful.

So, we did a ton of research. Justin, mainly. Like, Justin took the lead on this. Before we got the tetras last year.

And exactly, like, water temperature, and PH, and we got the strips, and the right food, and like, did the thing where, like, you get the fish, and we had the tank all set up and, like, you put the bag in the... you know, fish tank to, like, make sure the water temperatures are the same. Like, we did all the things. Right? Like, we followed all the instructions. Got the little test strips out. Water said it was perfect. Whatever.

What proceeded to happen over the next 24 hours is every one of the fish died.

Taylor: Oh no.

Sydnee: Just one by one. It was awful. And she had, like, named them after, like, family and friends. [laughs quietly] So it was terrible. So we tried again the next day. Got more. And repeated the same process.

Taylor: Oh! Oh no!

Sydnee: Like, the longest any of these fish lasted was, like, 48 hours. And we could not—we were, like, calling people with fish. Like, "Help us troubleshoot. What is happening here?"

Looking up YouTube videos. Like, I'm reading, like, subreddits about tetras. Like, we cannot understand what we're doing wrong. Everything seems to be appropriate. And it was just devastating. And finally, like, it was too emotionally wrought for us to continue. And Cooper was like, "Never mind. I don't want fish."

And we were like, "Thank god. We don't want to do this anymore."

Like, we all feel awful, right? Like, we are all mourning... [laughs quietly] these fish.

Taylor: [crosstalk]

Sydnee: And feeling...

Taylor: Go ahead, sorry.

Sydnee: I was just saying, we were all feeling really guilty because, like, we were, you know, really trying to do it right, and obviously we didn't.

Taylor: I would just be worried about your water. Like... did you ever figure out the thing that killed—'cause, I mean, I'm assuming you're filling the tank from, like, your sink, right?

Sydnee: Yes. Like our tap water. But like, it comes with little strips for fish tanks where you dip it, and then you look at all the different—it's like a pool thing, but it's obviously got different things on it, right? Like, you're looking for—some of it's pretty similar. Like, you know, the PH of the water and the chlorine content and stuff like that. But like, it's specific. And it tells you, like, very clearly on the strips, like, safe or unsafe.

So... the water kept reading as safe on every little square. Like, every tab it was safe. So it was so weird.

Taylor: Sorry you went through that. That's traumatizing.

Sydnee: Anyway. It was! I mean, there was a moment where all four of us were sitting in the living room holding each other, crying over fish. And I was like, I don't know. This is obviously—Justin and I looked at each other and we were like, this is obviously about more than fish. [laughs quietly] Clearly, like—maybe it was just about the fish for Charlie and Cooper. For Justin and I, there was—we were tapping into something much deeper than the fish at that point.

So we gave up on fish for a long time. And then as we led up to Cooper's birthday this year she was like, "I want a fish again. But I don't... I don't want those neon ones. I want a mean fish. I want one mean fish."

And I thought she meant, like—I was like, "A mean one? Like a piranha?! Like... "

Taylor: Don't give Cooper piranhas.

Sydnee: Well, that's all I could think, was like, Wednesday.

Taylor: Exactly.

Sydnee: I was like, "What do you mean, a mean fish?" And she said, "No, you know, the mean ones. You can only get one 'cause they're mean." And what I finally realized is she meant bettas.

Taylor: Yeah, yeah.

Sydnee: Okay. So it took us a while. Okay, she wants a betta. Okay. They are, I guess, mean. Like, they do fight each other or whatever. We got her—so we got a new tank. We set up the whole thing. We got her a betta. [laughs quietly] She named it Stovetop Stuffing.

It was fine. And then 48 hours later...

Taylor: Oh no!

Sydnee: I know! But here's the—

Taylor: Well, you know...

Sydnee: Here's the thing. And this is a secret between us and the internet now. Here's the secret.

We went out and got Stovetop 2. Stovetop 2 looks exactly like Stovetop 1. This happened while school was in session. Stovetop 2 is thriving. Stovetop 2 is doing great. And as far as Cooper knows, we are still on Stovetop 1.

Taylor: That video you sent me, though. Was that Stovetop 1 or 2? Because...

Sydnee: Two.

Taylor: Okay. Alright. I was looking at it and it wasn't moving. And I thought, "Wait. Am I supposed to comment on the fact that the fish isn't moving?" [laughs]

Sydnee: No. So, okay.

Taylor: But I'm not going to.

Sydnee: Bettas don't like bright light. So when the lights are on, it tends to be very still.

Taylor: Okay.

Sydnee: So I—I have freaked out many times, and one time I was right, 'cause like, yes. Sadly, Stovetop 1 had perished.

But Stovetop 2 is doing fine. He's very active. He's all over the tank. Especially when it's dark. Like, when we turn most of the lights off, and you go in and, like, there's a little, like, neon light on the top that you can turn on that I guess bettas like. And he's all over the place. He's a very pretty fish.

Anyway. Stovetop 2 is doing great. I don't know. I have no explanation.

Taylor: [crosstalk]

Sydnee: Hmm?

Taylor: I said, knock on wood. [crosstalk]

Sydnee: This is the saga of Stovetop Stuffing.

Taylor: That's a hard week for marine animals. We just, you know, had Howie the Crab of TikTok fame passed away.

Sydnee: Oh, I didn't know!

Taylor: Yeah. I've sent you videos—

Sydnee: That's too bad.

Taylor: The crab that eats cheese and wears hats.

Sydnee: Yeah!

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: I didn't know it passed away.

Taylor: TikTok has a funny way of when there's an animal that you follow that passes, it will feed you a new animal. You know?

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: Like, I feel like there have been several kittens that I've followed that then they're like, "Oops!" And then they give you a new one. Because Howie passed away, and that's very sad. Those were very sweet videos.

Um, but now I'm getting videos of this mantis shrimp that... this lady has.

Sydnee: Hmm!

Taylor: Which I don't know, you know—if Cooper wants to expand her collection of mean marine animals, mantis shrimp, their whole thing is they punch really hard.

Sydnee: Really?

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: They punch?

Taylor: Like, they have their little, like, claw that they can flick out real fast. And they can, like... I mean, some of them have been able to, if you put them in the wrong kind of aquarium, they'll break the aquarium. [laughs]

Sydnee: That's wild!

Taylor: They're not real big. They're really beautiful. Like, they're rainbow colored. There are all these great videos of this mantis shrimp that shares—shares a habitat with... I think it's a little crab? And he just beats the crap out of this crab. He just flicks it all around the tank. [laughs] It's just...

Sydnee: She would like that. If something happens to Stovetop, maybe we'll go that direction instead of another mean fish.

Taylor: Might be a little more hardy. I don't know.

Sydnee: Have you seen the lady who dresses her cat up in beautiful little dresses? Like, it's all traditional Indian dresses that she makes for her cat?

Taylor: Oh yes!

Sydnee: Her very decent cat.

Taylor: Very decent cat who's looking for a suitor, yes.

Sydnee: Yes. Those are my new obsession.

Taylor: Those are good. Those are good.

Sydnee: Yeah. She is very decent. The word "decent" means—like, we're using the word decent in different ways, I feel like.

Taylor: Yes, yeah. I don't—decent not as, like, just good enough, but decent as just like, proper.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: Very proper cat.

Sydnee: Yeah. I got that sense. Like, I think the American usage of the word "decent" must be different. 'Cause I don't—I feel like I've heard that in, like... somebody from, like, England or Australia. Another English-speaking country that uses the word "decent." Do you know what I mean? But they use decent with a different connotation.

Taylor: I wonder how that happened, that permutation? Because yes, it definitely—I understand both meanings, but the one we—decent usually isn't a compliment.

Sydnee: No. Decent means, like, barely passable.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like, that's fine.

Taylor: It's decent.

Sydnee: Decent enough. Yeah. But yeah, obviously that's a very different... anyway, she is a very decent cat. And I cannot imagine trying to dress my cat up in a dress.

Taylor: Uh, no. I have tried to put costumes on Jack. He's very docile, but he will not... he will not—

Sydnee: Mm-mm.

Taylor: He is naked all day, every day, forever. No clothes for—

Sydnee: Yeah. No. Olive would be just a ball of claws if I tried to hold her down and put her into a dress.

Taylor: No. The one time I put a hat on Jack, he just... drooped his head all the way to the ground and just kept it there. Like, forehead to the ground.

Sydnee: Aww.

Taylor: It wasn't—I don't think it was very heavy. It was meant for a cat. But he was just like, "No."

Sydnee: "No."

Taylor: So I took it off of him. [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] Yeah, no. Olive would just fight me until I took it back off. But then she'd feel very bad and ride my shoulders around the house for a while.

Taylor: Well, that's nice.

Sydnee: Yeah. Uh, but we're not talking about cats. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: No. We, uh... we went back to high school English class for this one, I feel like.

Sydnee: Yeah, that's true. Although I don't... I definitely—so we're talking about Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*. Now, this was not one that was assigned to me, though. I feel like—is *Slaughterhouse Five* just the classic for everybody?

Taylor: Yeah. Maybe. I mean, *Slaughterhouse Five* may be the big one. *Sirens of Titan*, um... what is the other one I'm thinking of?

Sydnee: The—

Taylor: I've read a lot of Vonnegut, but I feel like there's, like, three that you actually get...

Sydnee: *Breakfast of Champions*.

Taylor: Yeah, that's—yeah.

Sydnee: Was pretty—yeah. Um, for me, Cat's Cradle was my favorite.

Taylor: Oh, absolutely Cat's Cradle. I was trying to think what—it all runs together, 'cause there is, like, an overlapping universe. And I'm like, where's the ice-nine? The ice-nine is Cat's Cradle.

Sydnee: Yeah. That was the one that really hooked me. Um, I read all those other ones, and I enjoyed them all. I'm not saying, like, that's the only one I liked. Cat's Cradle was by far my favorite. But I don't know how I missed this one.

Taylor: Well, I think it's... it has some of the—I said last week that it's one of the less Vonnegut Vonnegut books. Definitely not in the humor or the—or, like, the context. But I think just in the style, it's a... it's along the way to his more recognizable style. But maybe that's why. It's just not... if you want, like, distilled Vonnegut, this one is a little bit... longer and, like, wordier? Does that make sense? He's so good at the quick, immediate sentences that just kind of... hit you like a sucker punch sometimes. And this book is a little bit more of a story.

Sydnee: Yes. Yes. No, I know what you're saying. It is more of a story. It's a very clear narrative to follow. Um, there aren't those almost, like... I don't know what you call—I know what you're saying. Like, there are these little... like, "So it goes." Like, phrases that just sort of pop up as—in a lot of Vonnegut books. And then... it's almost like a refrain. They're written almost like a song with refrains in chapters at times.

Taylor: Absolutely.

Sydnee: As opposed to a story. You know what I mean?

Taylor: Yeah. Everything wraps in on itself a lot.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: It's a lot more there's some experimental sections in this book. But he gets a lot more experimental, too. With, like, the willingness to include, you know, like, sketches as part of the narrative. Or, you know, sort of weird offshoots. There's a lot more kind of psychological, sci-fi stuff. [laughs] I don't know.

Sydnee: Right. And this is very, like, um... I mean, it's straightforward. There's no fantastic elements, really. Although it's interesting, because the story... the plot itself is somewhat fantastic. Like, I mean, I think that's a central theme. Do you believe—like, you're questioning, do you believe what this character is saying? And then you're supposed to believe what he's saying. Like, was he really a spy? Was he really put up to this? Did he really—was he heartfelt? No, he must've been a spy, but the story sounds fantastic. It's not. We're supposed to be with the narrative and believe that no, he really was a spy.

I don't—but you know what I mean? There's an element of it that's like, it almost sounds—there's no way this is true.

Taylor: Well, and it—that goes through everything. Like, every interaction that's spoken about, there's a constant element of like, you know... who—like, is that actually Helga? Is—your best friend is actually also a spy, you know. This... like, there's lots of, like... what is the nature of truth? And, like, how much does truth matter to you? Versus, you know, just what you want reality to be.

Sydnee: Do you wanna summarize, like, very, you know, generally what the plot is of the book?

Taylor: Uh, yeah. So the story is set during World War II, and it basically comprises the confessions of Howard W. Campbell Jr. Who was, um, a man who was, uh, both a propagandist for the Nazi Party, like he had a radio show where he said horrible things about the enemies of Nazis and espoused all of this Nazi bullcrap. But he was also, according to him, operating as a double agent for the Allies. Pre-war he'd been contacted by an American agent to send these coded messages through the broadcast. He wouldn't know what he was saying. He would only know that he's saying heinous

things. But those heinous things would tip off the Allied Forces for important information and help them win the war.

Uh, and he's very good at both jobs. Uh, and then after the war, he is... snuck out, or he escapes Germany, and sort of restarts his life in America. Um, then his past catches up with him.

Sydnee: And it really, like... you—you—I think you're supposed to wonder all the way through, this story he has of this—of this American agent who approached him and asked him to do this... it sounds plausible. But then also his only proof is "I'm still alive. And... you know, and that's because of the, you know, operations of the American military getting in there and saving me periodically. But, like, that's the only proof I have."

It sounds very... unbelievable. And then you also hear many, like, attestations of how, um... how effective he was as a propagandist. Like, how many people were inspired to do terrible things by his words, and were also—I think they really reinforce—rational men found ways to justify their irrational actions, because of his propaganda.

I feel like that's a really powerful point they keep making. Characters who are like, "This seemed crazy to me. But then I would hear you talk about it, and you would give me the sort of... like, understanding. Like, you made the ground fertile for me to continue with these things."

Taylor: Well, and it, you know. He starts off the book with that sort of simple, like—what he says—this book, he has a very clear moral, and it's that we are the things we pretend to be.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Be careful who you pretend to be. And that kind of goes to that. Like, what... why did he do this, and was it more harm than good? Was, you know, I mean, there's one—one of the characters towards the end says to him, like, "You were a Nazi, effectively. You were because that's what you did. Your actions... are who you are."

Sydnee: And you don't get a sense—I mean... there is a real, like... they ask the question, "If the Nazis had won, and you had received awards from the Nazis for doing all you had done, what would you have done next?"

Like, he—I mean, and obviously he wouldn't have revealed himself. He would have just continued on.

Taylor: Well, and he says, like, "I—yeah, I would've either done that or gone mad, but it's a tossup." [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, and I think it's because the justification—I think it's a really important—there's a lot of it that I think is important to talk about now. But the justification is that he was artist. He was a playwright. Right? Like, he engaged with the artistic side of life. His wife was a beautiful actress, and he would write parts for her in these beautiful love stories that then would play out onstage, and that's a very romantic existence. And he had—he wanted nothing to do with politics. He wanted nothing to do with all this nastiness, and, you know, whatever.

He was an artist. And I think that it's—there's always this inclination to, when things get really dark and when things are really hard, pull away from it and say, "But that's not the part of life that I want to focus on."

But the thing is, like, it will—it will happen to you, and around you, and despite your engaging with it or not. You know what I mean?

Taylor: Yeah. Well, and even, I mean... I... the play that he—that is explained, one of his plays that's playing later on, the... the sort of Holy Grail play that he wrote, like, pre—pre-becoming a propagandist, he wrote a play about, like, you know, this noble knight and this—this, you know, holy maiden who were both protecting the Grail. But, like, because of their love for each other, it would've made them impure. And then... they—well, they fall for their impurities anyway, and then the Grail, like, forgives them and says, "That's fine. That's, you know, divine love."

And in a way it's kind of propaganda.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: If art is supposed to be truth, well, that's not art. That's, you know, that's excuse—that's a magical way of excusing his actions, right? 'Cause that's sort of at the same time, he talks about, you know, living with his wife during that time period, and how they just sort of escaped to the bedroom every day. Like, they just lived their life, a nation of two, as he keeps saying. And that's his way of justifying... staying out of everything.

Sydnee: Which I think, you know, it's hard, because I—the... that inclination to pull away when things seem so, like, dark and overwhelming and, like, beyond your power to change, I think is very human, and understandable, and I think we need to make space for, like... there is—it is okay to occasionally engage with joy, even in the midst of despair. Right? You don't have to feel sad and angry 24/7.

But the flip side of that is that if you completely disengage and become a nation of two, or whatever your version of that is for you, you know, then you've stopped... you've surrendered any ability to affect change, or do good, or provide mutual aid, you know?

Taylor: That's... I think that's why—I mean, like you said, it's very timely, because we always ask ourselves this question. Like, how could a whole nation allow that? You know, and everybody likes to think—especially Americans, we love to think we would've been part of the resistance. We would've been fightin' back. We wouldn't have let that happen.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: But it's... this book has been pegged as—some people have criticized it for being sympathetic to a Nazi. But I think it's just—it's showing you, like, all of the logical pathways that you could be... part of... you'd be a Nazi by default, because you didn't fight back. Like, maybe that's it. Maybe those are your only choices. [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, yeah. No, I think that the—but I think as uncomfortable as that might make somebody to hear, I think it's important to hear that. And I think the other thing that's important is... the concept of truth gets real

murky in this book, right? We don't know... I mean, it's a fictional story so, like, the idea of objective truth is already—it's just the book.

But, like, what is the objective truth? Did an agent really approach him? Was he really working for the Americans? Was his—what did he believe in his heart?

All that truth, we don't really know. We don't know—you know, his wife shows back up and it's not his wife, it's his wife's sister. And that—you know, what is the truth? She looks like his wife. She loves him as much as his wife loved him, she says. She wants to be with him. What's the truth, here? And it begins to turn into, like, what does the truth matter if this is real—if this is your perception? Where does the truth come into play anymore? Who cares?

And he finds—he even finds, like, a safe place among white supremacists who supposedly he shouldn't agree with, because he was actually working for the other side the whole time, right? Except for those are the only people where he can find, like, friendship and comfort. So this lie that he has told his whole life is the basis for a relationship with other humans. The only one he trusts—that—that sort of milieu where truth no longer exists is exactly how fascism happens.

And you see it in the book. You see the character kind of moving through truth as this, like, vague concept that is ever changing. And that's how you let—that's how people get to a place where they let terrible things happen, or participate in terrible things.

Because truth becomes something that is unknowable. And so then the truth can be told by anyone.

Taylor: Well, it's that illusion that—I don't—the first—this is my third time reading this book, and I don't know why the passage has never stood out to me before as so impactful as it did this time. But when he's talking about the cuckoo clock, the broken cuckoo clock in... heck? [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: And you know how it has its teeth that it's chosen to lose to grind down. That those things in our minds that let us just go, "It's fine. What I did is fine."

You know, he doesn't have those things. And again, it's his perception. I think you could argue that, you know, he's... he might be missing some teeth. [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: He does, yeah.

Taylor: But that—yeah, that we have... we all like the idea inside of us that we're a good person. But when we start being able to just—I mean, when you can just say and not have to ever act on it, when your actions don't have to align to it, when you just can find those gaps in reasoning to go, "So it's fine what I did. I'm a good person, so it's fine what I did. I'm a good person, so my choices are good."

That's, you know. Uh... it's a... it's a very way to descend straight—straight down, with your actions.

Sydnee: Exactly. Well, it also, like, I would say in this current moment, what we're doing is tying right and wrong to the actions of a person, of a single person. So if what the President... does, is always right, then any actions—you know what I mean? That's where we are. Which again, that's totalitarianism, is... good and bad is defined by the actions of a single human. So if Trump does it it's right, and if he won't do it, it's wrong.

And so if that is what you believe, then every other value and morality you've ever clung to is—I mean, it just goes up in smoke. It's gone. Like, it's an illusion. Because now your only morality is Donald Trump.

Taylor: Well, and this is—our main character is a—I think... towards the end he describes himself as, like, needing to be moved. Like, he doesn't have any propulsion to go in any one direction. He's just waiting for somebody to move him. Which I think is, you know, the end state of what you'd want for a populace, to be submissive, to be entirely just driven by what they're told to do. And losing that sort of... I don't know, that true

north of truth is what causes that. Like, if you control truth, you control power. You become, like you said, right or wrong... based on your decisions.

Sydnee: Yeah. Well, I mean, he's been emptied of self. And just filled up with whatever is most... useful to the state. Um... which is, I mean—the thing that's so frustrating about this is that it's not like this is a book that was written last year.

Taylor: And it could be, is the wild thing. Like... it's—how current a lot of the details are, I was like, "Man." [laughs]

Sydnee: But, I mean, that's the most disturbing thing, right?

Taylor: [crosstalk] Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. That's the most disturbing thing is like, if this was written in the wake of Trump presidency number one, then at least it would be like, "Oh man. Look, this is—we need to pay attention to this, 'cause these are lessons we need to learn."

How long have we had to learn these lessons?

Taylor: Well, and it's not like—I mean, it's not like Vonnegut was a little lost author to time.

Sydnee: Mm-mm.

Taylor: [laughs] It's been around for a while.

Sydnee: Right.

Taylor: I mean... and, you know, like, the whole—the subscription of the youth. And, like, the pipeline that he created with the one guy with his newsletter to indoctrinate youth. Like, that's just... that's now just our podcast bros and our, you know, our YouTube channels. It's all the same DNA of— [crosstalk]

Sydnee: When they talked about who puts the patches on, their mothers sew them on for them.

Taylor: Oh, yeah.

Sydnee: I mean, it's just—it is. It's like, it's the same. It's the same problem now. And we—I don't know. I mean, it can—I don't want to feel hopeless about it, because if we've been talking about it that long, why haven't we done a better job of recognizing it and stopping it before it grows into where we are right now?

Taylor: Well, I mean, I don't... it's an odd comparison, but some of the—this argument of like, why caring about—you know, putting your own needs over the needs of, like, what you believe is true and right. You'll find ways to justify it. It made me think of the ending of Casablanca. You know, when Rick says we're really just small people and this is, you know, big.

Like, we don't matter in the grand scheme of things. We need to do what's right. What's right is you getting on that plane. What's right is me not.

And, like, I always loved that, because I felt like that was actually... that was a noble position. It was Rick recognizing, like, "I'm just one tiny piece in a massive puzzle in this massive war that's going on, and I don't really matter that much."

Sydnee: Right.

Taylor: And it's interesting because, you know, you mentioned that Campbell kind of is—he's devoid of self at the end.

Sydnee: Right.

Taylor: So by prioritizing your own needs, you still end up empty. It's like, the war machine is gonna sacrifice you one way or the other. It can be a noble sacrifice or not. Maybe it's never noble, but... recognizing your smallness and doing the right thing, or end up small anyway.

Sydnee: Well, and I think... I mean, I think the problem is, too, as much as I agree, like, that sort of altruism and seeing the bigger picture and understanding that other people matter and not just yourself is—there's nobility there, and we should aspire to it.

But the problem is that we have... we have also used that to manipulate people, right? Like, we have used—certainly many times, like, "Give yourself up for the greater good" has been as a tool of manipulation as well. And so... I understand why there is an instinct in humans to bristle against that and say, "Mm, no, I matter."

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: And that's—god, that's the—that's America, right? Individualism. I matter. My wants matter. My needs matter. I need more. And the balance of those two, we just can't strike. We've never found a way to acknowledge, like, you as an individual do have value. You have worth. You matter enough that you deserve, you know, safety, and housing, and healthcare and, you know, a stable income, and food, and freedom from oppression and violence.

You deserve all those things as an individual. But your... your want does not supersede someone else also deserving those things.

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: And that is where we just can't... we just go from one extreme to the other, and we just can't hit that balance.

Taylor: Well, because it's not—I think that, you know, that... that desire to be, like... [laughs quietly] it's not to make a noble sacrifice or... it's that obsession with heroicism that I think is part of the problem.

And the book kind of goes into that, too. Like, when he's—when the major's questioning, like, what—like, why did you do it? Like, why—why do we do these things?

And it's kind of implied, like, you know, it's ego, it's—it's pride, it's... he calls himself a ham, like, the main character.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: But it's also about wanting to be the big, bad hero. And there's this... this gap in understanding, one of those missing teeth, which is "If I go and do the noble thing, I'll be properly rewarded for it. I'll be recognized for it. And... you know, I'll get the glory."

And there's rarely glory on the other side of those things. It's just, you know...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Well, and I mean, I think it's the same—those same teeth are missing when you think about, like, the concept of the American Dream. "If I do these things I will be a billionaire."

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: 'Cause that's what it is now. It's not "I'll have a house and... two and a half kids and a dog." [laughs quietly] It's "I'll... I'll be a billionaire, and I'll fly around in a private jet, and I'll drive a Cybertruck."

Taylor: Well, and "Anyone who's not a billionaire isn't doing those things, so they're not on my level. They're not... "

Sydnee: Right.

Taylor: "Their personhood doesn't matter as much as mine does," which like you were saying, like, you gotta—you matter, but just as much as everybody else. [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, and as soon as you start saying that, like, you've got people who will call you a socialist. Which I am, that's fair. [laughs quietly] But that's a bad word in this country, so you can't say that.

Taylor: Well... I don't know. It's interesting. I mean... it's a—it's a bigger... a bigger set of problems than I think we can discern on our—[laughs] our podcast. But, like, you know, it's the ideas... versus truth. And that those are two different things, you know. [crosstalk]

Sydnee: I think that if you take, like... I mean, and I am no scholar of Vonnegut's work. I've read a lot of it but, like, I don't have a degree in this stuff, so I'm not gonna sit here and say, like, "I understand how to, you know... " I don't know. This is just my—having read these books, this is my thought.

There's a lot you can, like... this book made me think about a lot of stuff. I wouldn't say that it made me feel very hopeful. [laughs quietly] You know? I didn't walk away from it thinking, like, "I have answers and tools," as much as, like, a good description of a problem and an uncomfortable situation that we continue to find ourselves in as humanity.

I think if you take, like, Vonnegut's body of work as a whole, though, you find hope and answers, which I think is why, like, I was always so drawn to Cat's Cradle. Is because there's a lot about, like—there's a lot about humanity. About, like, the hope, the answer, the comfort is in each other.

That's where we find, you know, conne—it gave me a lot of language for, like, connecting with other people, and feeling that draw towards another human to say, like, "We're part of the same thing here, you and me. We're on the same team. I feel that connection with you."

And you don't always with every human in your life. But occasionally there's that spark of, like... "Okay. I see you, and you see me, and we both matter."

And when you have enough of that... you begin to value humanity more. I think that's where the answer lies.

Taylor: Well... that's interesting, because I feel like—I understand what you're saying, but it's not as simple as, like, in this book—'cause I feel like he is condemning the idea of the nation of two.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: Like, you can't just say, "This is what I care about. Screw the rest of it." That you have to recognize—it has to start with that. Like, people are important, people matter, and I need to extend that outwards.

I know that this book literally ends with the narrator—I mean, however much you can trust the narrator. [laughs] Like... submitting to ending his life. Like, that is—you know. Last minute, does his mysterious, you know, American... sp—fellow spy sends him a letter that will get him out of his trial, so he will be finally recognized as an important American operative, and no longer guilty of his sins. But he decides he's guilty. He decides that what he has done is ultimately bad, that that is the truth of the situation.

And it just... is it weird that it felt vaguely hopeful?

Sydnee: Um... I don't know. I mean, I think...

Taylor: You can say yes. [laughs]

Sydnee: No, I don't think it's weird. Because I do think, like, the thing that we are all—one of the things that we are all suffering from right now is the lack of control over our own futures. The feeling that... you know—[sighs]. Democracy gives you this idea that you have a voice. Which is some semblance of control. And right now we're losing that, right?

And so, like, at the end the narrator takes control. He makes the choice. I... I don't know how good I feel about a choice that is death. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: No. Well—

Sydnee: But you're right in that he makes a choice.

Taylor: He makes a choice to condemn himself for what he's done, you know.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: It could just be words. Like, "I think who I was deserves the punishment I get." But... you know. He chose the truth of his situation. That what he did, the evils he did, were not for some great concern for the people of the world, but were probably selfishly motivated by ego and, you know,

excitement. And that... even if he did good, he never recog—he was not actively doing good.

Sydnee: It's interesting, the idea that, like... he didn't really believe anything, as far as we know, right? Like, what were his beliefs? I don't think we're supposed—

Taylor: [crosstalk]

Sydnee: Right? And there is... it's interesting to see how, like, evil that—like, in my mind, that comes across very evil. The idea that you don't really have any—like, "Well, no, of course I don't really hate anybody. But I also don't not hate anybody. I just don't—you know, I don't think about anybody."

There is something that really, like, ugh. Like, there's a... there's something that's almost... it's not worse. But it's still bad, I guess.

Taylor: Well, I mean, it's just—it is—it is a helpful building block to understanding how things can go so deeply evil. And that, you know, he talks about going to lavish dinner parties with the Nazis and, you know, the Nazis coming to his plays. It's like, these are definitely the bad guys in this situation. But I don't know, they've only ever been nice to me.

I mean, I think that, you know... that's a situation that happens in the workplace, you know. Where you have people that go "Oh, well, that—that guy was inappropriate with that girl? I don't know. He's always been nice to me."

It's like...

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] "He never seemed racist to me!" Yeah.

Taylor: [crosstalk] Exactly.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: It's... it is—it's... it's under—I don't want to say it's understandable, but I think honestly it is. It's just also awful. [laughs]

Sydnee: [sighs] It was—I will say that I thought it was a very, um... it was good to read right now. I don't know. I don't know if it's comforting to see, like, history repeating itself, or more defeating. Or if on some level you think, "Well, we worked our way out of that before. We can do it again."

Maybe there's the hope?

Taylor: Yeah? And I think also just hearing a voice from our past speak so poignantly and clearly about things that we're grappling with now kind of makes you feel not crazy. Like...

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: This is, you know. These have been problems baked in to the human DNA. I think, you know, like you said earlier, if Vonnegut is one thing, he is a great, uh... translator of the human experience to words.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And I think that this is not... it's a very clear primer on the various things you might feel in a state where truth is questionable, and fascism is on the rise. And it urges you to ultimately seek truth before all else. And I think that... is a good feeling to get from a book.

Sydnee: And understanding is not excusing or forgiving. Maybe that's why people confuse it with, like, sympathizing. Understanding how something happens is how you stop it from happening again. You can understand it and still not excuse it or empathize with it.

Taylor: Well, that's why even, like, talking about today's political situation, I don't—I always kind of bristle when people use words like "evil," or "monsters." 'Cause I think it's always important to remember, no, these are people. These are people that are making these choices.

And I'm not saying they're good people. But we can't conflate them to some mystical force that just comes out of nowhere and, like... has no emotions, or empathy, or care, or love. They're people just like us. Just... deeply, deeply misled.

Sydnee: Yeah. Well, and it's—I mean...

Taylor: [crosstalk] [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: Yeah, no. I think you're right, because it's like when people equate mass shootings to natural disasters.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: I mean, it's the same thing. It makes it feel like there's nothing we can do.

Taylor: Right. It's interesting, I think, the title of the book... which comes from, what is it? Goethe? Uh...its reference—it's a poem that's about, like, Mother Night as in the darkness of which we all arose. That there was darkness first, and then there was light. And that, you know, a kind of yearning for everything to return to darkness. But that the mother of all of us is the darkness.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Which, I don't know. Maybe that's... maybe that's important to the—the central themes.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Maybe none of our—maybe all of our nature is a little base and a little selfish, and a little... trying to excuse our actions and pretend that we're the good guy, and that's important to remember.

Sydnee: And then aspire to be more.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Well, Tey, I was really glad that you suggested it. I don't know how I had never read this one. But I really enjoyed it. I mean, it's a heavy read. I would say if—I would say make sure you're ready for, like, engaging with those kinds of heavier themes before you delve into it. But it is also a very, I think, important thing to engage with, and worth the time.

Taylor: And it does have a lot of odd moments of humor in it.

Sydnee: It does.

Taylor: I found myself laughing quite a few times. [laughs]

Sydnee: That's Vonnegut, right?

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: I mean, he always finds a way to make you laugh, even as it's, like, absolutely horrible, whatever you're reading about.

But I really enjoyed it. Thank you, Tey. Um, so for next week... [laughs quietly] I have not seen *The Substance* yet. I know you have.

Taylor: Oh! Alright.

Sydnee: And everybody's talking about it, or has been for quite a while, so I'd like to watch it.

Taylor: Alright. I'm looking forward to that.

Sydnee: I always wait till long after things are out of theaters so that I can watch them at home when my children are asleep. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: No, that's fair. I don't—I don't even have kids as an excuse. I just like to sit on the couch, so I wait till they're streaming.

Sydnee: I understand. Alright. Well, that's what we'll do for next week. In the meantime, listeners, if you've never read *Mother Night*, if you've never

read any Vonnegut—I mean, the classic book that I think is the intro is Slaughterhouse Five, which is still great. I mean, I know it's... it sounds cliché, but it's an excellent—it's cliché for a reason, right? It's excellent.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, but this is, I think, a very—Mother Night is very timely, and would be worth the time.

Um, but thank you. Thank you to Maximum Fun. You should you go Maximumfun.org, check out all the great shows there you would enjoy. And thank you to The Nouvellas for our theme song, Baby You Change Your Mind.

Taylor: This has been Still Buffering: a cross-generational guide to the culture that made us.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: And I'm Taylor Smirl.

Sydnee: I am still buffering.

Taylor: And I am too.

[theme music plays]

Sydnee: I'm assuming that this movie will not be one to watch with the kids. I'll wait till she's older.

[chord]

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