

Still Buffering 458: Camp Damascus (2023)

Published November 10th, 2025

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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 Teylor Smirl.

Sydnee: Well, Tey, we have finally left spooky season. But...

Taylor: Ahh. RIP.

Sydnee: I know. I feel like we wrung every drop of Halloween joy and terror out of it that we could.

Taylor: At least on this podcast. We did do that.

Sydnee: We finished up—our final Hallow-weekend was, first of all, we had the school's... no, the night before was trick or treat. Our trick or treat here in Huntington was on Thursday night, not on Halloween.

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: I don't know why. It had been on Halloween forever, and it got moved to Thursday. And to give you some context, here in Huntington, the weather on Thursday night was cold and rainy. The weather on Friday night, the actual Halloween night, was not quite as cold—cool, but not quite as cold—and not rainy. So there was a lot of anger. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: Well, they do that to try to stop the—try to stop the shenanigans, right? Like, if it's on a non-school night, it's a very—it feels like a very 1950s idea. Like, "The kids'll stay out later, and they'll egg the houses!"

Sydnee: It's only 6 to 8. Nobody's out later than 8. The porch lights all go off at 8. And the other reason that they moved it is that there's Friday night football, high school football.

Taylor: Oh! No...

Sydnee: And they didn't want it to interfere, yeah, with high school football. Um, which I don't know. When I tell you that there were neighborhoods in Huntington that were seceding from the city, or attempting to, in order to stage their own Halloween coup, I am not—like, literally, the Facebook pages for the city of Huntington, for—there's a variety of fun pages. All the neighborhood associations have their own pages. It's great.

Anyway... there was a real movement in the south side of Huntington to secede and stage their own trick or treat, actually on Halloween. And in east Pea Ridge to secede, 'cause it's not technically in Huntington. It's in the county, but the county also followed the city and made Halloween on Thursday. But they're closer to the village of Barboursville, which had trick or treat on Halloween. And so they wanted to, like, "Barboursville, take us over. And we want to be part of Barboursville now."

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: It got so nasty. [laughs]

Taylor: Just a... a Halloween civil war.

Sydnee: It really was.

Taylor: Right there in your... [laughs]

Sydnee: Yeah. Whole neighborhoods arguing, like, "We're not gonna do trick or treat this night."

And then somebody was like, "Well, but some of the kids aren't gonna know. They're not in the groups and, like, the families won't know."

"Well, let's do trick or treat two nights!"

And then all these parents were like, "Screw that! I am not doing this two nights!" [laughs quietly]

Taylor: Yeah. I don't know. Do you think that it was just the kids on the message boards like, "Ha, ha, ha. This is how we get two Halloweens!"

That sounds like a Hannah Montana plot or something.

Sydnee: I don't know. I would love to know if this is true in other communities. The anger that is generated over whether or not trick or treat is going to be on Halloween proper every year is so intense. The fights that break out.

It is one of the biggest—I mean, I have friends who work for the city, and they were inundated for weeks ahead of time with angry calls from constituents about when trick or treat would be.

Taylor: I mean... you're gonna have to deal with this for two more years, though, yeah?

Sydnee: What do you mean?

Taylor: Well, I mean, Halloween's on Friday this year. It's gonna be on Saturday next year. It's gonna be on Sunday the year after that.

Sydnee: I guess that's true. Yeah.

Taylor: You're gonna have to fight the battle of Halloween versus the Lord's day.

Sydnee: Well, and that has already been brought up. So, among the Facebook arguments, there were several who said "Trick or treat should always be on Halloween, unless... it falls on the Lord's day, in which case we must move it. 'Cause it is—it is—" which I love the idea, like, "I am fine with—" in this moment, I am one of the Facebook commenters. A Karen, if you will, who believes that Halloween is somehow demonic. So, you have to understand.

Taylor: [crosstalk] Yes, alright.

Sydnee: That's where I'm coming from. Okay. "I am fine with you celebrating the demonic holiday of Halloween by sending your children into the streets to beg for candy on any day... except for Sunday."

Taylor: [laughs quietly] It's the Lord's day. But then what do you do? Do you move it forward onto a Monday or do you push it back on a Saturday, which is one of those devilish no-school-the-next-day nights?

Sydnee: I mean, I don't understand why we don't just do it—it's just 6 to 8. It's not that late. Just do it on...

Taylor: It's just Halloween. Let it be on Halloween.

Sydnee: Just do it on Halloween.

Taylor: It always—I mean, that went on when we were kids, and it was always a bummer when trick or treat wasn't on Halloween.

Sydnee: Yeah! Yeah. That was at some point somebody decided that we need to keep it off of Halloween, because on Halloween, people get up to... I don't—I mean, it must be tied to a belief that on Halloween, people are doing dangerous spiritual things that will hurt children, right? Like, why else would it...

Taylor: Well, but it was—I mean, is it off Halloween, even if Halloween's on a weekday night? 'Cause I remember from a kid it was just if Halloween fell on a Friday or a Saturday. If Halloween was on a weekend night, then you had to do Halloween on a weekday.

Sydnee: Prior to...

Taylor: 'Cause they didn't want it to overlap with the weekend.

Sydnee: A couple years ago in Huntington, the mayor at the time declared that trick or treat would always be on Halloween. Before that, it was very

specifically not on Halloween. Whether or not it had to do with the weekend weekday thing, 'cause that is part of it, too. I agree.

Part of it was "We don't want it to be on a weekend, 'cause then kids'll be out later," or something. Which, like, why wouldn't... I mean, if they're gonna be out later, wouldn't you want it on a weekend? But whatever.

Um, but then the idea was, it can't be on Halloween 'cause then there'll be too much... I don't even know what to say. Tomfoolery? Like, I don't know what their...

Taylor: [laughs] Tomfoolery!

Sydnee: [laughs] I don't know what they're worried about!

Taylor: It's funny, 'cause it's like, I feel like the kind of people that would want to—that... want to rage against Halloween are being in direct opposition to the, like, capitalist forces that are like, "Halloween makes a lot of money."

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: "Halloween has to happen." That's the only reason why we still have Halloween, right? Because... [wheeze-laughs]

Sydnee: That's true. Well, and... then it devolved—man, in these conversations, there were people who were like, "I am tired of people pretending Halloween isn't a religious holiday. It is, for some people."

But the people who were making the case that Halloween is a religious holiday were not people for whom it is a religious holiday. [laughs]

Taylor: Oh! So they were just like...

Sydnee: There are—

Taylor: Were they arguing for the respect?

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: Or were they saying, "It's a religious holiday, but for heathens."

Sydnee: But for someone else.

Taylor: Ah.

Sydnee: "I don't know much about it, but I'm pretty sure it is." I mean, like, which is not...

Taylor: It's a religious holiday for the ghouls, and the goblins. The witches, of course. The pumpkin men. The zombies.

Sydnee: It is, like... I don't know. It's funny, 'cause we—it was All Saints' Day. Obviously All Saints' Day is November 1st, which is celebrated in the Catholic church. And at the kids' school, they did it on Wednesday, so we went to All Saints' Day celebration Mass.

Which does, like... I mean, it is like Halloween, right? Like, the kids are all walking around in costumes. They're all dressed as saints. And they're singing songs. I mean, I guess we don't get candy. They get the Eucharist.

Taylor: [wheeze-laughs] The worst candy ever. Sorry, Jesus. It's very bland.

Sydnee: But spiritually...

Taylor: Have you considered a candy coating?

Sydnee: I was thinking about it, though. I was like, you can see... you know, we know it is commonly understood, this is not me making some sort of statement about any sort of faith or religion. It is commonly understood that Christianity took elements of paganism in order to spread Christianity further, right?

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: And it goes both ways. And you see that when you watch an All—especially an All Saints' Day Mass. Like, it goes both ways. [laughs] They're... we took some elements. They took—ehh, you know. It's all here. There's a little bit. It feels like magic. The whole thing feels magical, in a very literal way. It feels like magic is happening.

Taylor: When you're at the base—when the base is the Catholic Church, they never really fully let go of that, so that makes sense.

Sydnee: Yeah. But we had—so we had trick or treat, the debacle of trick or treat. I will say, it was a... I don't know. There are all these people who are like, "Back in my day, it didn't matter if it was raining! We would trick or treat whenever!"

Which, like, obviously the kids are gonna trick or treat even though it's raining. Yes, there's candy involved. But, I mean... why do we want the kids to have to trick or treat in the rain? [laughs quietly] Why are we saying it's good for them to trick or treat in the rain?!

Taylor: Well, especially when it's not on actual Halloween. I was thinking about that, 'cause up here in New York, like, Thursday night we had a flash flood. We had so much rain dump on us on Thursday that...

Sydnee: I saw that, yeah.

Taylor: ... Brooklyn was partially underwater. I didn't realize it. I was leaving for work and, like, I guess the street I live on kind of goes up. Like, up a hill. As I looked towards the other way—and, you know like when you just see the ripple of water in the distance? I was like, "That's weird. Huh. I guess there's a lot of—I guess my corner must be flooded."

And then I saw the videos of my—like, the other street that I live off of! With, like, water up to the windows of cars. But that would've been—if we would have trick or treated on Thursday, that would've been what the kids were dealing with. I don't think the—the kids would've had to swim! They could not do that!

Sydnee: No. No.

Taylor: And, like...

Sydnee: You should move trick or treat, in that case.

Taylor: Well, but like, then Friday, which is actual trick or treat—so obviously in New York, people don't go door to door as much. Some people will sit out on their stoops. But what's really popular is kids all go to, like, streets with a lot of businesses on them. And all the businesses put out candy.

Which I think is, you know, like... it's still just as many houses. I mean, honestly it's probably more. Because you get one after another, versus if you live in the suburbs, you gotta walk between houses. Like...

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: You go business, business, business. Like, I live off of Knickerbocker, and Knickerbocker has just lots of restaurants and bars and shops just, you know, like, 20 blocks long. You could get a lot of candy.

Sydnee: It's a really fascinating difference in how—'cause I've heard other people who live in the city talk about how they just stay in their building. 'Cause there's so many apartments in their building, they just go—

Taylor: Oh, I'm sure, yeah.

Sydnee: You know, apartment to apartment, and they never leave the building, and that's plenty of candy for the kids. And then you kind of contrast that with, like, we live in the suburbs. Out where we live, like, nobody comes to our house, just 'cause we're kind of on a steep hill. But you go down to the bottom of the hill and there's tons of people. It looks like something from, I don't know, the beginning of Halloween. [laughs]

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: That's what the street always kind of looks like. I always think about that. Like, there's tons of families, 'cause there's a ton of houses close

together. And then, in the more rural areas, it would be impossible to trick or treat. I mean, you don't have houses for miles around you.

So they tend to drive their kids into our neighborhoods, like the one we live in, because these are the places where, like, park your car here, and then you can... you've got a concentration of houses, and you can go house to house. It's interesting how... I don't know. The point is, who cares? Kids are just getting free candy. Like...

Taylor: [laughs quietly] See...

Sydnee: I don't know when it became a political battle.

Taylor: No, no. And I feel like I... to speak of kids driving to different neighborhoods, like, to get more candy, I experienced that in the adult form living in Bushwick on Halloween. And realizing that everybody from everywhere else—I guess if you had to figure out, like, where's the messiest, spookiest place to go out and drink in New York? Everybody came to Bushwick. [laughs]

Sydnee: Oh no.

Taylor: I worked that night and I was like—I got off fairly early. Like, I was home by midnight and I was still in my costume. Just, like, I'll go out and get a drink somewhere. I'll go to one of my local bars. I kind of live out. Like, I'm not at the cool thoroughfare. The train there was completely packed. People were, like, you know, done up for that. But I was like, no, I live a few stops away from that. I'm probably safe.

So, I—on my way back from the train, I already walked by most of my locals, and they had people spilling out the doors. I was like, oh, darn, okay. I can go further out.

So I, like, stop at my house, fed my cat, had a sandwich, went back out. And I went to a specific bar that I was like, this bar's never—it's a good bar, but it's never that busy. And people were—it was just out on the street.

I didn't learn till the next day that the reason for that is that specific bar was Mood Ring. And Zohran Mamdani was there!

Sydnee: Oh no!

Taylor: [wheezes-laughs] He showed up at midnight to give a speech!

Sydnee: I saw that—I saw TikToks of that.

Taylor: Yeah. It's kind of a queer bar, and he showed up, like, after midnight, right around the time I would've been zooming by there. I'm like, "Why are there so many people here?"

Sydnee: Oh, that's hilarious.

Taylor: "This bar's not that great!" It's a great bar, but it's never that busy.

Sydnee: I wondered. I saw that he was in a Brooklyn gay bar, is what the TikTok said. So I wondered.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: It's about eight minutes from my front door.

Sydnee: That's wild.

Taylor: And I walked right by it. I was like, "I'm not gonna fight that crowd. I'm gonna keep walking." I ended up just doing a circle. Like, I'm gonna see everybody's costumes and then go home. [laughs]

Sydnee: It was—I mean, you know, there were a lot—we did the trick or treat thing. We had, like, the trunk or treat thing at the school, which the trunk or—we don't do trunks. They're just tables set up around the perimeter of the gym. And you just wander around the gym.

We did bring our ten foot Mothman to the gym.

Taylor: Love that.

Sydnee: We did a whole Mothman-themed table. The parents are responsible for theming each of their own tables. So, ours was Mothman-themed this year. Um, the ten foot Mothman did scare the preschoolers, I think. The preschoolers were pretty freaked out.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: Um... I did feel bad about that. Most—

Taylor: Didn't think that one through?

Sydnee: No. Most of the kids were delighted. There were two kids dressed as Mothman, so those two kids were having the time of their life.

Taylor: Aww!

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: I bet!

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Were they just worshiping, like, just—

Sydnee: They were like—and then they wanted to hug him. Which, like, he... I didn't want anybody to—I didn't want him to fall on anyone. He's ten feet tall, and it moves. "Aghh!" It moves it's arms. But, uh, we did that, and then we had Rocky Horror. I was part of a shadow cast of Rocky Horror on Friday night.

Taylor: Nice.

Sydnee: Which was fun, except it was 40 degrees, and we were in an amphitheater.

Taylor: Oh no!

Sydnee: And it was sprinkling rain on and off. So, like... and, I mean, if you're not familiar with Rocky Horror...

Taylor: Everybody's naked.

Sydnee: Everybody's... yes. Everybody's at least partially naked. It was—man. Whew! It was a cold—it was one of our best, I will say. It was really good. Um, followed up by finally we had our Halloween party Saturday. So it was just, like, nonstop... nonstop Halloween—we wrung every drop of the season out.

Taylor: I mean, I'm not... I'm not done, 'cause I'm spooky year-round. But, uh, I'm glad you normies got to enjoy it. [wheeze-laughs] Got a little taste of my life! [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: I—

Taylor: [dramatically] Walking among the darkness and the pumpkin men!

Sydnee: I was sad. The only thing—Sunday, you know, 'cause it was like it was all over. It was November 2nd. 'Cause November 1st, like, you can still say, like, well, this is, you know, All Saints' Day, Dia de los Muertos.

Taylor: Dia de los Muertos, yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. You can say, like, this is still part of it all. November 2nd you start to feel like, I think it's kind of fading. Um, but we spent the entire day with our friends making spaghetti for people who are losing their SNAP benefits, so there you go.

Taylor: Nice. That's not—I mean, that's not really in the Halloween spirit. Although, you know what? The world's a little upside down. I saw that, like, the Satanic Temple was doing more to feed their neighborhoods than most, so maybe that is in the Halloween spirit.

Sydnee: It felt like in a—like, I mean... From a pagan perspective, I mean, you know, I'm feeding my neighbors. I don't know. This felt very... I don't know. It felt spiritual to me, in the right way. You know. In the positive way.

Taylor: I love that.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Well, and when you look at things through that lens—that was my comfort. It's like, I mean, the solstice is still coming up. Like, that's the—the darkest night is the spookiest night.

Sydnee: That's true.

Taylor: Halloween's nothin'. [laughs]

Sydnee: And we're, what? Two days away from the Beaver Moon?

Taylor: Yeah, yeah?

Sydnee: [laughs] So there's that.

Taylor: Alright. [laughs] Not the spookiest moon ever, but...

Sydnee: Not the spookiest moon. It's an unfortunate-named moon, there.

Taylor: Uh, it's fine. There's meaning there. I don't know it, but...

Sydnee: I don't know. I just keep track of the full moons to replenish my moon water. And to use up my old—I have this gigantic barrel that was for, like, pretzel rods that I now use for my moon water.

Taylor: Okay.

Sydnee: And it's, like, my official moon water jug. So as I get towards the full moon, I have to use up my old moon water to make space.

Taylor: Have you found, like, unique ways of using it?

Sydnee: Uh, I mainly do simmer pot. I will use it to water plants, if they're not doing well. The girls like to put it in spray bottles and spritz a little bit of it over their pillows before they sleep. Um, those are probably—well, and then we make various tinctures. Like, they've really been getting into making herb extractions.

And so, like, boiling water, and then putting herbs and things in it, or, I don't know, spices, and making these little bottles that smell like the thing.
[laughs quietly]

Taylor: Alright.

Sydnee: I have, like, lots of them. I have lots of these potion bottles in my house now. So many. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: You can always—I love using moon water in a simple syrup, or some sort of infused syrup for a cocktail. 'Cause then the sugar keeps it more stable. It'll last longer. You can put it in your fridge. And you can have a magical cocktail whenever you want.

Sydnee: That is a good idea. That's a good idea. I need to start finding some new uses for it, because other than—the girls really got into using a mortar and pestle, and so that's been the...

Taylor: Oh, that's—that's fair.

Sydnee: That was—all of my moon water was going to these concoctions. It was like, what else can we grind in this mortar and pestle? I'm like, "I guess anything that can be ground. I don't know." [laughs]

Taylor: Your kids are just making any type of spell, just leaving them around your house. And you're like, "Sure. That's fine."

Sydnee: We had to talk about it for a while, though. Because they started, um... what did they start putting in? Citronella. I have a citronella plant outside that I use to repel mosquitoes, and it's sitting out on my deck. And

they were putting that in everything, and that is a strong smell once you, like, start extracting it.

Taylor: You're never gonna have bugs in your house.

Sydnee: I know. [laughs quietly] But, like, there's just—everything reeked of citronella, and all of their things had citronella and, like, the cat was around. I was like, "I don't think a cat can eat this. I gotta..." [laughs] I don't know. Anyway. We have a lot of citronella tinctures.

Taylor: Those are very useful. Those are obviously useful.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: So that's nice.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Raising little chaos witches.

Sydnee: But, uh, even though our spooky season is over, our book that we're gonna talk about this week is a little spooky.

Taylor: It is! I think it's still—It's a good bookend...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: ... to spooky season.

Sydnee: That's right. I had read *Camp Damascus* by Chuck Tingle, and I had sent Tey a copy, because I liked it so much, and it just seemed like the kind of book you would enjoy.

Taylor: Uh, I absolutely loved it. It was a quick read. It was a great read.

Sydnee: I felt bad, 'cause I knew reading it... like, I—man. I sent you a copy of it before I had finished it, 'cause I just knew.

Taylor: Oh, really?

Sydnee: Yeah. I knew, reading it, that it was the kind of book you would enjoy. And even after finishing it I knew, like, "Oh, yeah. Tey's gonna love this book."

I didn't realize, like, how hard it leaned into horror. 'Cause, like, early in, you don't realize, right? And so I recommended it to several other people that I then had to go back and say, "This is too scary for you." [laughs] "You will not—"

Taylor: Oh, I was gonna say, I thought you were gonna say that for me. And I'm like, uh, excuse me?

Sydnee: No, no. I felt good about my decision to send you a copy. There were other friends I had who, like, I thought they would like sort of the queer storyline and, like, the allegory and all that. But then when it got, like, really heavy, kind of like horror, grotesque, all that, I was like, "Oh, no, no, no. They will hate this. They will not like any of this." [laughs]

Taylor: That is fair. From my perspective I was like, it could've gone harder. I'm like, it could've...

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: That was a very light read. But, uh, no, I loved it.

Sydnee: Well, good, good. No, I just—I didn't know—I was familiar with Chuck Tingle primarily because of his works... [laughs] I don't even know... uh...

Taylor: Well, the...

Sydnee: His more—

Taylor: ... romance novels.

Sydnee: Romance?! Is that what you would—[laughs]

Taylor: Romance novels.

Sydnee: Uh-huh. A lot of them had to do with Tide Pods, for a while, there.

Taylor: Yeah. They were all, like, the goofy—I mean, I don't—and maybe I should've... you probably know. Are they real books, or are they just funny covers that he makes? Does he write these books?

Sydnee: No, these books exist. I know that these books exist because Justin—I don't even remember what it was for, once. He read one of them. He, like, did the audio recording for one of them. I don't remember why.

Taylor: Oh, that's amazing.

Sydnee: And he needed—I know he did—he had asked me, like, "When I have to read this, I need—will you come down with my while I'm reading it in our studio and help me get through it? Like, I need an audience to make this work, because it's so wild. Like, the... the plot. [laughs quietly] The plot of this book."

Uh, and it was the Tide Pod one. That's why I remember he did a Tide Pod one. It was about having, uh... relations with a sentient Tide Pod.

Taylor: That seems to be—it's usually, like, there's a thing that is not—is not... human, involved in some sort of spicy situation.

Sydnee: Yes, that is the thing.

Taylor: I guess. And he apparently writes these really fast, 'cause is this a new one? The Federal Government Shuts Down My Butt?

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: It must be! It must be. He, uh... where is the one about the, um—the skeleton? Who's also—it's—hold on. He got—

Taylor: Well, while you're looking for—go ahead.

Sydnee: [simultaneously] Go ahead.

Taylor: I was gonna say, while you're looking for that, here's another one. Absolutely No Thoughts Of Pounding During My Fun Day With This Kind T-Rex Because I'm Aromantic And Asexual And That's A Wonderfully Valid Way To Prove Love Is Real. See? It's all—across all barriers, Chuck Tingle.

Sydnee: [laughs] There was one that was about one of those giant skeletons.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: That you can have in your yard. You know what I'm talking about?

Taylor: Oh yeah. We have one in the bar right now.

Sydnee: And he took a big stand on AI, because there had been, like, a reprinted—like, when he made the—he had used, like, a, um... he had found, like, a clip art or whatever. Like, he found—not clip art, but you know what I mean. He found a picture for free use of a giant skeleton that he used for the book cover. And then it had been, like, reprinted with an AI cover.

And he, like, got very upset and made a big public statement about, like, "This is not what I intended. This is AI. This is not right." [laughs] He made a big—which I appreciate. A big statement against AI-generated art.

Taylor: I was gonna say, his covers seem to be, like, a big part of the joy. [laughs]

Sydnee: Yes. Well, it is. I mean, that's—yes. My Neighbor's Twelve-Foot-Tall Decorative Halloween Skeleton Gets Me Off, Also She Is A Lesbian.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Taylor: Just doing the Lord's work out there. It's very important.

Sydnee: So, knowing that, can I say that when Justin said "I think you would like this book by Chuck Tingle," I was like, "Honey... " [laughs quietly] "Honey." Like, I...

Taylor: No, uh—when it showed up, I was like, "Okay. I only know this guy from one genre of work. But I trust Syd."

Sydnee: Well, and to be fair, when it was suggested to me, and similarly when I suggested it to you, I have now gotten into, like, ACOTAR romantasy stuff. And so I was like, "Well, now, honey, I... Justin, I like that. But this is not... I mean, this is not exactly my... that's fine if it's somebody else's thing. If it's your thing! It's just not... my thing." [laughs quietly] That is not what Camp Damascus is about.

Taylor: No.

Sydnee: No. It is definitely a queer story set among a horror story. Which, as we've talked about on this show, a very apt, like, allegory, I think, for the queer experience.

Um, specifically around the idea of, like, conversion camps that you could send your kid to if you are a terrible person and discover that your child is not straight and you, you know—I shouldn't say terrible person. Maybe you meant well. But it wasn't a good idea. Maybe you didn't know what you were doing. I shouldn't assign motive. I shouldn't assume motive.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: It's a terrible thing to do, and you should never do it, and these camps shouldn't exist, and conversion therapy should be banned everywhere 'cause it's not real. All of that being said, I don't want to sit here and lay that at the feet of the parents. But the... [laughs quietly] well, I just want to be very clear. Like, I think there are...

Taylor: Alright. Alright.

Sydnee: There are probably parents who realize their fault and later, like, wish they could go back and change their actions. You know what I mean?

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: In this book, Camp Damascus is one of these camps. And what you discover through reading the book, which we are of course going to spoil, is that they prevent you from being gay, so to speak, by tethering you to a demon whose job is to torture you, or the people you have gay crushes on.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: They also erase your memory of your gay behavior.

Taylor: Yeah. Well, that was one thing that I really liked. 'Cause I... even before you sent it to me, I had heard of the book, so I kind of knew the premise. And just from, like, reading it, I was like, "Oh, okay."

Like, I was expecting a more, uh... like, traditional storytelling. I liked the structure of the narrative a lot. 'Cause you're introduced to your main character after she's already been at the camp, but she has no memory of it.

Sydnee: Right.

Taylor: So for the first few chapters, you don't really understand that the character who you're seeing the world through, your narrator, has gone through this conversation therapy, and she's just trying to be a good... a good Christian, a good follower of her beliefs. And all of these strange supernatural things seem to keep happening to her.

That is the programming that was put into her, but she doesn't fully understand that. That structure was really unique to me. I was ready to be introduced to the threat of the camp, and then at the camp, and then the aftereffects, and that was not what we got.

Sydnee: Yeah. No, I have to—I really liked that, too. And I think it's a really powerful sort of analogy for what it must—and I don't know, because, I

mean... our religious upbringing was not particularly—I mean, it was not anti-gay. That was not, like, a big talking point. And so it would be interesting to know if that is what it feels like in the brain of someone who has been indoctrinated against, you know, being LGBTQ+ by their religious upbringing, but also maybe is themselves part of that community. And, like, how does that feel inside? Because you must have—you cannot recognize these thoughts and feelings. You can't. 'Cause if you do, you're gonna go to hell.

But at the same time, they're there, and you have all these voices of, you know, your pastor, your friends in church, whatever, your parents, who are, like, yelling at you in your own head to not be that thing. You know what I mean? I wonder if this is a good analogy for that sort of experience. Like, these—'cause you would almost have this kind of, like, triggered answer if you started to look at somebody of the same sex and think, like, "They're attractive." You probably do have pre-programmed responses in your brain to try to stop you. You know what I'm saying?

Taylor: Well, yeah. Well, and there are—I mean, there's evidence of conversation therapy that utilizes psychological training to get bad responses to, you know, excitement at the same sex. Like, they use full-on mental, like, manipulation. Like, with shock mechanisms and stuff.

Sydnee: Oh, yeah.

Taylor: Like, oh, if you're excited by these pictures—you're a young man and you're excited by these pictures of other young men. You receive a negative response, a negative physical response, so that that gets ingrained into your brain. That, like, every time you feel that, your memory will be associated with pain. So this is not a far cry from real stuff we've done.

Sydnee: No, certainly, you're right. If you go back further in history, like, I think they portrayed that on that one American Horror Story, right? Asylum?

Taylor: Oh, they did do that, yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. They make you violently ill while showing you pictures of members of the same sex naked, so that you would have this negative

association of, like, "I'm a woman. Every time I look at a naked woman, I become sick to my stomach and, you know, I'm in pain, and I'm vomiting, and I feel awful," and blah, blah, blah, and... in hopes of you feeling that way in the future when you see a naked woman. Yeah, they definitely did things like that.

Taylor: Well, and I think even if—you know, I agree that, like, our... we went to Catholic school. We went to Catholic church. But not heavily enough that it was, like—it wasn't a part of our—a big part of our life.

Sydnee: Well, and it certainly wasn't the—I mean, I remember their being—not even when we were young. As I got older, I remember, like, the Catholic church starting to engage more with the abortion debate. But I do not remember, at least in the circles we were in, that the queer community was as big a part of the conversation. You know?

Taylor: I mean, I remember it attached to religion, but more by, like—I mean, I remember more of, like, a thing in school. Like, you know, it was such a presence. There was so much religiosity in the community we grew up in.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: That I was—I remember what it felt like to—I fully had the belief that there was something demonic inside of me because, you know, I had crushes on girls in my class. Like, that's not—it's not a crush. It's something gross and bad that will hurt them if I get too close to them, so I can't be close to anybody, because there's something gross and bad in me.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And I think because of the Catholic upbringing, my brain said, "Oh, it's a demon. I'm definitely possessed. I can't tell anybody, but I definitely am."

And that, you know... [laughs] is...

Sydnee: Yeah. No, I mean, I—

Taylor: I think...

Sydnee: You're right, in that even though it wasn't necessarily part of our church experience, like, this part of the country is such a stronghold for Evangelical beliefs. And some of the, I don't know, some of the Christian faiths that are way more vocal about that specific issue. Like, that is... the religion and the politics are all intertwined, and so the Church was all about "Don't be gay." That was definitely around us.

Taylor: Yeah. Well, it's a—I think that this is a very on the nose interpretation of those feelings. Like, I don't know—I know Chuck Tingle—I mean, I don't... he grew up in the Midwest, I believe?

Sydnee: Oh yeah.

Taylor: So I don't know his personal experience. But it seems like someone that at least understands what it feels like. Like, because you're queer, you're evil. That's how it works.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: Um, and the lengths that parents would—like, did and still go to to try to suppress that, prevent that... you know. Um, like, "We are going to have you possessed by a demon in order to save you from being gay." [laughs quietly] That sounds like an exaggeration, but it's not. If you consider the trauma that people go through at those camps, like, that's not that far fetched, really.

Taylor: Yeah. They're going to create a psychological demon that will possess you instead of a real one.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. And it also, like, in a very, um—you know, the demon, when you first begin to, like, step out of line, so to speak, and have thoughts or feelings or same sex attraction or whatever, the demon will scare you, or threaten the person that you might be attracted to. So that's, like, the first

act. And then eventually move on to self-harm. The demon will make sure that you are harmed.

And, like, I mean, I think what is implied is the demon will kill you.

Taylor: Right. If you get too gay.

Sydnee: Yeah. If you get so gay that you can't be saved. [laughs]

Taylor: Although I don't know if that could actually—I don't know if you get that gay. Because also, if you are close to someone you're attracted to, you might just start vomiting up bugs.

Sydnee: Yes. Yes. Vomiting up bugs.

Taylor: That is the other thing. Yeah. I didn't know it was, like—I thought that was, like, a psychological thing that the demon made happen. But the book explains, like, "No. We fill you with bugs so that you vomit up bugs." [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] It got—

Taylor: It's like, oh! I would've gone with it just being a weird thing. Like, a phenomena. But no, we gotta have a scientific reason for this. I appreciated that.

Sydnee: It got very literal at some point. I know. I thought the same thing. I was like, "Oh, this—" you know, like, I mean, that happens in a lot of, like, possession sort of narratives. The idea that you're, like, vomiting up the darkness. You know, that the darkness is inside you, and it comes out and is expelled that way.

Well, heck, that's a common narrative in, like—if you see religious organizations that still do exorcisms, like, vomiting is part of that. I have never experienced this firsthand. This is not something—

Taylor: You've never been through an exorcism? [laughs]

Sydnee: I've never been through an exorcism. I have never—in the Catholic churches we have attended in our lives, they have never...

Taylor: No, no.

Sydnee: ... done...

Taylor: No, we never—no. Yeah.

Sydnee: I don't think the Catholic Church likes to talk about that very much. [laughs quietly] "We just don't wanna—we don't wanna dwell on this. Can we not? We're moving in a new direction. Feeding the hungry. Helping the poor."

Taylor: That's good, but they do kind of keep this weird, like, "Shh. We don't talk about it." That just adds to the mystery. Like, "Hmm. We approve some, but we won't tell you what." But what exorcisms are you approving in the year 2025? [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, and it's—what's interesting is that, like, other faiths have taken it and run with it. And, like, you do, you see these—I mean, I've only seen it in, like, documentaries. Of, like, more denominational Christian churches, like fundamentalist and evangelical churches, where people are, like, rolling around on the ground, and everybody's, like, chanting over them and singing, and the preacher's yelling at 'em, and then they're puking on the floor and, like, the evil's being expelled, so... [laughs quietly] That's how you know it worked. When they vomit, you know it worked.

Taylor: I think you just wanted to—you wanted an excuse to roll around on the floor and vomit. And... that's alright.

Sydnee: That's fine.

Taylor: That was partying on a Friday night in my 20s. That's what that—you get that! No demons involved. I do like—so, our main character has one great weapon against the mental programming. And that weapon, and I guess this is why we're trying to crack down on Tylenol in this country, that weapon is she's autistic.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: That is... and I think arguably all of our main resisters you could say are somewhere on a neurodivergent spectrum, and that's why they were able to break the programming. Which, I love that message! [laughs]

Sydnee: It's—no, I think it is really compelling. Because it also, like—there's a lot of conversation in medical circles about the overlap between people who are somewhere on the gender spectrum, people who are gender nonconforming, if we want to, you know, paint with a broad brush—broad brush—and people on the autism spectrum.

Like, there's a huge overlap between neurodivergence and gender fluidity. And it probably has to do with the idea that neurodivergent brains don't necessarily accept the heuristics that we have created. Like, the boxes we put stuff in, so the speak.

Because, you know, an autistic brain works differently. And so, the boxes are different, and they look different, and they don't conform to our ideas. And so of course they would not necessarily experience gender in the same way that a neurotypical person would experience gender. That makes total sense. But I think that's really fascinating to then apply that to this narrative.

Like, so, "I can't accept your religious programming because my brain doesn't work that way." Which is really powerful.

Taylor: Yeah. Well, that's like, you know, she vomits up flies and she's like, "No, I'm not just gonna roll with that. I'm gonna figure out why."

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: "Why would I not want to figure out why? Oh, I'm seeing a demon. I'm sure there's a reason for this, and I'm gonna figure out why." And that... that is something that all the other people that were a product of the camp haven't been able to free themselves, but she did. Because of her... [laughs] 'cause of her analytical brain.

Sydnee: Yeah. No, I think that's a really powerful narrative. Turning that into her greatest strength. I think that her then turning around and, like, kind of writing her own Bible verses... like, "I will use the things—" I think it is really powerful to be able to take things from that experience that was overarchingly negative, right?

Her experience with religion, you have to think it was overwhelmingly negative, because of what it put her through. To take pieces of it and use them as, like, "These are the pieces that empower me, and these are the things that are good. But I'm gonna bend them to my experience. And, you know, what will benefit me."

I think is a really powerful message. And I feel like they're grappling with that in the book somewhat, especially with the character of Saul. "I don't want to throw all this away. Because there were parts of it that were good for me. But then overarchingly it was bad, and I don't know how to square that."

Taylor: Well, I think it speaks to... I mean, they've both created—"created" being the operative word—their way of moving through the world that works for them. You know, she's creating her own belief structure, not the one that she was made to swallow. And he did the same, in his own way.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And I think that that is one of the joys of being a human, is you look at the—you look at what life presents you, you look at your experiences, and you create a belief structure that is informed by reality, not by some book that was handed to you on day one and said, "This is the truth! Don't look anywhere else but here!"

Like, that is... that's a very limiting, non-creative experience.

Sydnee: It's also a really powerful healing narrative that you can—I mean, she remembers all of it. She's going—like, you know. That's part of the healing is remembering what happened, knowing the truth. Understanding it. Seeing it all. And being able to take the things that worked for you and

toss away the things that are harmful. That's a really—it's a strong healing narrative. It's not like "Burn it to the ground." It's, no, I mean, she's writing her own Bible verses because that strengthens her.

Taylor: Well, there... there's a sort of a mantra that I've come to to try to deal with my own stuff, which is "I won't be what the world made me. I'll be what I make myself."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And that is what I—I really like that I think all of these characters do it in their own way. But specifically our, I mean, Saul and—

Sydnee: Rose.

Taylor: Yeah, Saul and Rose.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. No, I think—I thought it was a really... I mean, it's funny, because it is a very—like, it's a beautiful story by the—you know, when you see all the resolution and you see her not only fighting for herself and for her girlfriend and for her friend, but also for the other campers to try to free them, and to try to stop Camp Damascus from continuing to do harm.

Like, it's not just enough to get free. We have to stop them from continuing what they do. It's all very powerful and beautiful. But then it also is really gory and [wheezes] gross, and... [laughs]

Taylor: As gory and as—there are very—I mean, there's... violent deaths via egging. Egg implantation. I don't know.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: Even at the end, I think, like, even some of the violence was a little bit pulled away. Because you mentioned the other campers. There was, like, a two sentence sequence where they mention that they're all getting torches and heading to, like, the personnel cabins. So they don't need to worry

about destroying the rest of the structure. The campers that they freed are about to go [wheezes] commit murder!

Our trio didn't commit murder, though. Other than the demons.

Sydnee: Just the demons. The only thing I was wondering—and I don't know... there was—I almost felt like the demons were gonna make a turn, which they kind of do, but not entirely, right? Like, the demons are still... I don't think the demons are—

Taylor: Well, they don't go after...

Sydnee: ... the campers.

Taylor: They don't go after the campers. They don't go after our three. They specifically go after the people that imprisoned them.

Sydnee: So I wondered if we were trying to make a case, too. Like, our concept of demon may be—but they did—I mean, like, they do murder people earlier in the book. [laughs quietly] They do bad things earlier in the book.

Taylor: Well, they murder people earlier in the book because they're in their shackles that direct their behavior.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: I don't know, 'cause that's a—there was almost like a feeling that was like... you know the movie The Fifth Element?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Where they go through the wormhole, and the wormhole goes through Hell?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Like, did this—whatever this church, this mechanism that they built that ripped a hole in spacetime into this demonic universe, did they just kidnap a bunch of—these demons were in there, minding their business. You know, torturing something, but not necessarily humans.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: But we brought them in, and shackled them, and put them in service for us. But they just want to go back to their weird demon world where everybody's slimy and tortures each other. [crosstalk]

Sydnee: That's what I was wondering, too.

Taylor: [laughs] [crosstalk] back there.

Sydnee: I mean, no. I mean, that was my kind of thought, too. Like, I don't know that any—I mean, and that's what I think you're supposed to unravel, is like, why would we believe any of this if it came from the Church?

Taylor: Well, and you know, you do get to—like, you know, you mentioned. Like, you see, like, every time these demons are around, they cause, like, audiovisual interference that sometimes will give you portals into this world they live in. And you see people being tortured. But is that, perhaps, the failed campers?

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: Like, if you stay too gay, they drag you to their world. But that's not—they're not usually coming and going from our world. We've just...

Sydnee: No, the Church made them.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. I mean, which—I mean, that's the other—I think that's the other allegory. Like, none of this was ever demonic. The Church made it demonic.

Taylor: Well, and I'm a big believer in, like—I think that there is... phew. I think that people can get a really bad hand in life and end up having, like... having a very bad belief system that allows them to cause a lot of harm. I don't believe in evil.

Sydnee: I think that's a very gracious way of looking at it.

Taylor: I mean, that doesn't mean that everybody gets away with everything they've done. But the idea that there is innate evil—it's a useful tool for controlling us. I mean, right now I think we have government in place that consistently reminds us of the things to be afraid of, that they're protecting us from. Like, there's always an enemy at the gate that they have to keep us safe from. Religion did it for years. I just think at some point government took it as a playbook and decided, "Hey, that works great. Let's do that in a secular way."

And they need a machine that continues to produce evil so that we always have some—we always have cases to be afraid of. And that's why it's very—it's good to let people grow up in poverty, or suffering, or starving. People that will result to, you know, theft, or desperate measures, just to feed their families, feed themselves. It's important to not help people that are struggling with addiction get better, because that's an easy, spooky thing to point to and say, "Look at—look! That's a thing you should be afraid of." You know?

It's great to not provide services to immigrants that just need a support structure that provide necessary labor in this country. Because as long as they're this spooky, evil thing that you don't really see, that they're not allowed to integrate into your community, you can keep saying, "Oh no! That could hurt you, too! Be afraid of the immigrants! Be afraid of the queers! Be afraid of the drug addicts!"

Because as long as they're doing that, they never have to answer to—if there wasn't something to be afraid of, we would be able to say, "Hey. Our lives suck and you're not doing enough for us."

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Our demands get pushed aside by our fear, and I think that, you know, the idea that those are largely—they're not just created by accident. They're created on purpose. The evil you see in the world is created on purpose to benefit the people that ask you surrender all of your power.

Sydnee: I think that's true. And I think until we stop fighting each other and work, you know, to overcome that central problem... I mean, that's why we're here. [pause] But...

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: I don't know. You guys in New York are maybe about to elect a democratic socialist, so there you go.

Taylor: I don't—you know... it'll be a good test.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: I just—it's not Bernie Sanders winning, but it's Bernie Sanders winning through extension. [through laughter] And that man deserves it!

Sydnee: That's what legacy is, though. And I think Bernie Sanders probably gets that. Um, I will say, he doesn't have 17 cats, so...

Taylor: I mean, that is true. That is true.

Sydnee: That is unfortunate. I do wish he had 17 cats. [laughs]

Taylor: [laughs] If only—'cause he's been so good with—he got the bodega union to endorse him. Like, he just needed to get with the bodega cats and he could've undermined that. 'Cause you know what?

Sydnee: Ooh. If he got the cat endorsement...

Taylor: Having 17 cats in your apartment is nice. Taking care of all bodega cats and enshrining the rights of a cat—of a bodega to have a cat I think would go really far.

Sydnee: That would go really far.

Taylor: 'Cause that is something that has gone back and forth in New York politics. Uh, we'll see! Again, that's a—they've run a real strong scare campaign about Mamdani, because he wants evil, spooky things like affordable groceries, and free buses, and free childcare. And... I don't know. [laughs] That's it. Nothing really—no world domination. Just help the people that hurt the most.

Sydnee: Well, and when you start giving people those wildly popular policies, when you start delivering on them and people see what life can be like, then that's what everybody wants life to be like. That's why they don't want it to happen.

Taylor: Well, and also he represents a demographic that we have been told to be afraid of for... a couple decades now.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: So if that's the good guy, then everything starts to unwind. Which it should! [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, Tey, thank you for reading that book. I knew you'd like it. I knew as I was reading it.

Taylor: [simultaneously] No, I loved it. Thank you.

Sydnee: I knew you would like it.

Taylor: I'll be honest. I'd read almost all of it but the last two chapters, and I left it work last night, and I needed to come home and finish it, so I just bought it again on an e-reader to finish it.

Sydnee: Aww.

Taylor: It was like—no, I mean, I'm supporting Chuck Tingle. I can't feel bad about that.

Sydnee: I would say if you are a fan of—I mean, it definitely is scary. Like, not scary. You know what I mean. It's got gross stuff. It's got scary parts. It's a horror novel.

Um, so I would keep that in mind. But then, it's a really, I think, beautiful story about, you know, a queer person sort of owning their identity and reclaiming who they are, and fighting for others. It's also a lovely story underneath some of the gross bug stuff.

Taylor: [laughs quietly] Yeah. And I don't—you know, maybe I'm a little too immune to the gross stuff 'Cause I was like, "Eh, it wasn't that gross." But yeah, there's some body horror. There's some death. There's...

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: That's, yeah. And obviously mentions of torture, psychological and otherwise.

Sydnee: Yeah. But, I mean, I really—I was glad, and I'm gonna read more of his books, I think. Maybe—like, the—not the—

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: Like Bury Your Gays. Like, those books. Not...

Taylor: Okay.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: You don't... I mean...

Sydnee: Not the one about the skeleton.

Taylor: Okay. This Velociraptor Is A Lesbian But Also My Hairdresser And We're Going To Have Sex.

Sydnee: But hey, look. If you like that, though, that's fine. I am not shaming anyone who enjoys that. You should read what you like.

Taylor: Absolutely.

Sydnee: I've moved from sexy fairies into sexy vampires. And, uh, I think I have a sexy werewolf book next. So, no judgment here.

Taylor: You can't rule out that you'll eventually land on sexy Tide Pods.

Sydnee: It might happen. It might happen. Well, thank you, Tey. What are we gonna do next?

Taylor: Oh. Well, uh, we've done books, movies... to go back to music, Lily Allen just made an incendiary album. But we've never talked about her oeuvre.

Sydnee: No. And I am somewhat—like, I've listened to some Lily Allen, but I'm interested just because everyone is talking about this new album. I feel like it is our duty to check it out, and some of her older stuff. And what's all the buzz about?

Taylor: Alright. Sounds good.

Sydnee: Alright. Well, thank you, listeners. If you dig this kind of book that we just described, Camp Damascus was—we both really enjoyed it. I would highly recommend it. And you should go to Maximumfun.org and check out a lot of great podcasts that you would enjoy. You can email us at stillbuffering@maximumfun.org. And thank you to The Nouvellas for our theme song, Baby You Change Your Mind.

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

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: And I'm Taylor Smirl.

Sydnee: I'm still buffering...

Taylor: And I am, too.

[theme music plays]

Sydnee: I want to [unintelligible] one of those giant skeletons. Maybe that's why [unintelligible]. I don't know if he's ever done one about a 25 foot inflatable [unintelligible].

Taylor: Or a 10-foot Mothman?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Or an eight-foot Jack Skellington.

Taylor: I can't believe you didn't get the skeleton. That's just what surprises me.

[chord]

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