

Still Buffering 489: Bury Your Gays (2024)

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[theme music plays]

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: Tey, I haven't watched much TikTok, because I was in the Big Easy. [laughs quietly] I can't even—

Taylor: The Big Easy?! What is that?

Sydnee: It's—that's what they call it, right?

Taylor: Is that... you were in NOLA?

Sydnee: In NOLA. I feel like that SNL sketch. I was in N'awlins.

Taylor: Oh, yeah? Are you gonna—that's... you're just moving a little—

Sydnee: A little slow.

Taylor: —chiller pace right now, a little slow.

Sydnee: In N'awlins, when the mosquitoes you, you don't say "Ow." You say "Ooh!"

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: That's from the SNL sketch. I didn't make that up. I don't wanna take credit unfairly.

Taylor: Just stealing jokes from SNL

Sydnee: Just stealing jokes, yeah. From the very popular I'm sure with our demographic SNL.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Uh, yeah, no. We were out of town for a little quick getaway, a romantic anniversary getaway.

Taylor: That was your 20th anniversary?

Sydnee: Yeah, 20 years.

Taylor: Wow! Congratulations!

Sydnee: Can you—I know. I know. It was good.

Taylor: You did it!

Sydnee: We did it. [laughs] We did it! We're done.

Taylor: That's the—the classic 20 year anniversary gift is the Big Easy, right?

Sydnee: Yes. I think it's technically china. As in, like, dishes.

Taylor: Like the—okay. [laughs] You went to the wrong place!

Sydnee: I don't think you're supposed to give each other China.

Taylor: No. You can't—I thought you meant go to China.

Sydnee: No. Like, you get dishes for the other...

Taylor: Oh.

Sydnee: How boring! I'm sorry. How boring, if I had gotten—if Justin had gotten me plates, I would've been so—[laughs] so disappointed.

Taylor: That would be kind of sweet, though. "Hey, I followed the rules! It's 20 years. Here's a plate!" [laughs]

Sydnee: "Here's plates?"

Taylor: 20 years for a plate, though. That seems like a lot of marriage.

Sydnee: Right? You have to be married 20 years to get plates?

Taylor: What comes—but everything before that is, right? It's like, here's some wood. Here's some cotton.

Sydnee: Yeah. Paper.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Now, here's the thing. We don't like plates that break. So we bought ourselves these, like... I don't know. They're, like, recycled...

Taylor: Plastic?

Sydnee: No. They're recycled bamboo or something. I don't know. They're some environmentally friendly pressed situation. You can drop 'em and throw 'em and they're dishwasher safe, they're microwave safe. That's the kind of plate I want. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: Okay.

Sydnee: I don't want a plate that I have to worry about breaking.

Taylor: We're using—this is symbolic of your marriage, right? You all are like a microwavable repurposed bamboo plate. [laughs]

Sydnee: Yes. That's who we are. No china here. I mean, not in a—that—that—okay, that sounded bad. I don't mean China the country.

Taylor: No, like the—like the—like the plates.

Sydnee: Like plates.

Taylor: The plates.

Sydnee: Like fine dishware.

Taylor: Fine china.

Sydnee: Fine china. I don't need that.

Taylor: Porcelain. Porcelain.

Sydnee: I won't use it. I won't use it! Why?

Taylor: I know you won't. I've been to your house. I know you won't.
[laughs]

Sydnee: I won't.

Taylor: Our family consists of people that use paper plates at all possible...
abilities to use plates. [laughs]

Sydnee: I've gotten better about that. I do—when they're—like, the cast party was here. I did use, like, disposable plates at that. 'Cause that was just too much. But they're not plastic. They're paper. That's better, right?

Taylor: That's biodegradable. You're just making a little pre-seasoned treat for the Earth.

Sydnee: I could just—

Taylor: How was New Orleans? [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: New Orleans was great. It was great. I've gotta say, like, everybody I feel like talked to me about how, "Don't get, you know, you don't have to just do Bourbon Street. You don't have to just do, like, that area. Like, it's not just parties." But I liked that whole thing. I liked the

whole French Quarter vibe. We went other places. But I liked that, too. You know?

Taylor: Well, I think—'cause you were only for what, like, three, four days?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: I think if you're going to New Orleans for a couple days, like, that's totally fine.

Sydnee: I think it was good. There was a convention going on. There were multiple conventions. I think that's a New Orleans thing, lots of conventions. The one that was happening either in the hotel near ours or just in the area near us, I don't know, but it was a Naughty N'awlins convention.

Taylor: What does that mean?

Sydnee: Well, they had a lot of upside-down pineapples.

Taylor: Oh!

Sydnee: So I'm assuming it was a swingers convention.

Taylor: Okay!

Sydnee: Yes. Uh, I don't know... we have been to a lot of conventions.
[laughs quietly] Um—

Taylor: I don't think that kind of convention, though.

Sydnee: No. 'Cause those are usually about, like, games, comics, nerd culture, right?

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Comic conventions.

Sydnee: Right. We've been to a lot of those.

Taylor: And I don't think the McElroy brothers have ever been asked to guest at a swingers convention.

Sydnee: No.

Taylor: As far as I know.

Sydnee: Not that I—I mean, Justin didn't tell me if he was. [laughs quietly]
But—

Taylor: [laughs] He goes on tour and he says, "See you later, baby!"

Sydnee: No, but like, I don't know what the structure—because at a convention that I've been to, there's, like, panels, and... like, keynotes.
[laughs] And then...

Taylor: What do you think the keynote speaker says at the swingers convention?

Sydnee: S—swing?

Taylor: Let it swing, baby!

Sydnee: Like, let it swing! I don't know. Or, like, um, the convention floor.
What kind of booths... would be...

Taylor: What's the merch situation?

Sydnee: Yeah. What do you—

Taylor: What's the... what are the artist alley selling?

Sydnee: It's just pineapples, right?

Taylor: No, I mean, maybe it's—I don't know. I'm not gonna pretend to know.

Sydnee: I don't know. This is not my culture, so I don't know. I am not—I'm not gonna appropriate swinger culture.

Taylor: You could've done some boots on the ground journalism and figured it out. You could've gotten yourself a ticket to the swingers—the Naughty New—Naughty New Orleans... Naught No—what?

Sydnee: Naughty—hold on. Naught N'awlins. Naughty N'awlins.

Taylor: Or is it like, "Hey, if you're part of this, you're participating." 'Cause I do... I know that in a lot of, like—I don't know, I'm thinking of, like, New York kink spaces. Like, you don't just go as a spectator. You go to participate. And if you don't want to participate, you're not welcome. And I respect that. Maybe it's that.

Sydnee: I think that's fair. I mean, that's the thing. Like, I wouldn't have tried—so, the only part of it that I saw, other than, like, I saw the attendees out and about 'cause they had on lanyards [laughs] that said Naught N'awlins...

Taylor: [laughs] Of course.

Sydnee: So it wasn't like I went up to people and said, "You look like a swinger." Like, they're wearing a thing around their neck that identifies them as attending the swinger convention. So I assume, but I don't know. But I saw a parade.

Taylor: I love that they had a parade.

Sydnee: Yeah. They had a love, like, protect... hold on. free love, love—love freely. Love—it was something like that. Anyway, I got a little flag with a rainbow pineapple on it. Um, they threw some beads at me, of course. I got some koozies about free love.

Taylor: Oh!

Sydnee: All thrown to me from the Naughty N'awlins parade. It was mainly—there were some floats. The floats seemed like kind of... I wonder if you can do this there. They almost look like generic parade floats. Like, the floats themselves were not specific to Naughty N'awlins. They just looked like vehicles, you know?

Taylor: It's gotta be a business there, because, like, the whole concept of, like, the second line. Like, the—you can hire a parade for not a lot of money. Like, people will do it for weddings in New Orleans. Like, they'll—it's not that much money to have a parade. And you might only get a limited amount of time but, like, it would make total sense that there would be some floats that you're like, "Hey. You paying for a second line? Do you want a couple floats? Here you go!" Like...

Sydnee: I wonder if that's it. Because—

Taylor: Hundred bucks! [laughs]

Sydnee: Yeah, because the floats did not—I mean, they were just kind of like big car floats. I mean, you know what I mean? Like, they weren't cars, but, like, they looked—they didn't look like anything related to swingers, as far as I know. They were just, like, generic parade floats. Plus a lot of people on foot, a lot of people dressed as pineapples, wearing pineapples. Um, this was not a parade where you had to, like... boobs equal beads were not a requirement in this parade.

Taylor: I wasn't gonna ask you if you flashed the swingers to get your beads.

Sydnee: Nope. Nope.

Taylor: 'Cause I thought that was inappropriate. But now that you've offered... [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, I didn't—I mean, I didn't want to... anyway. But even if I had, I was wearing a dress. And so, like, it would've required, like, a full

body flash, which feels like a whole—like, what do I get for that? Like, do I just get beads? 'Cause that's my underwear, too. So that feels...

Taylor: I think if you lifted up your whole dress over your head, you get at least two strings of beads.

Sydnee: Two beads, that's it? Like, nothing else? I need a...

Taylor: I'm not part of the commission, so I don't know.

Sydnee: I need a beignet if I'm gonna lift my dress over my head.

Taylor: [laughs] Do you wanna be pelted with a beignet?

Sydnee: Yes!

Taylor: From—from—okay.

Sydnee: Yeah. If it's—

Taylor: Alright, fair.

Sydnee: Boobs, I get it, just beads. But, like, if—I mean, if it's full frontal, I need a beignet. Maybe—not a hurricane. I learned I don't like hurricanes.

Taylor: No, no. What?!

Sydnee: I'm sorry.

Taylor: I was gonna say, if it's full frontal I need a hurricane.

Sydnee: I don't like hurricanes. I tried it. I ordered it 'cause I was there. Justin and I went into a bar and we were like, "Two hurricanes, please!" 'Cause, like, we're here.

Taylor: Are you s—but I know from being a bit of a booze nerd and going around New Orleans, hurricanes can mean different things in different places.

Sydnee: They were very red and very fruity, and not my vibe.

Taylor: Sometimes they're stronger than others. Sometimes they're more artificial than others.

Sydnee: It was like—

Taylor: I think you might still like a real hurricane.

Sydnee: —Hawaiian Punch is what it tasted like.

Taylor: Okay. Well...

Sydnee: That's not my thing.

Taylor: I...

Sydnee: Now, that—

Taylor: Well, maybe a different classic New Orleans cocktail. Maybe a Vieux Carré.

Sydnee: Oh, I didn't have that.

Taylor: How about a Vieux Carré? If you went full frontal and somebody just came out of some weird little door in the French Quarter and was like, "A Vieux Carré, ma'am." That would be... I actually believe that's how New Orleans works. I could believe that.

Sydnee: See, that'd be worth it. Not for the plastic beads.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: But I wasn't—I mean, I didn't. I didn't do any of that. I just stood there going "Woo!" and waving and clapping. 'Cause, like, you know, they were like, "Love freely." And, like, okay. Consenting adults!

Taylor: I agree with that.

Sydnee: Love freely! I'm for that. Right? If you're consenting adults, do your thing! Whatever it is. Even if it's not my thing. So, like, I'm dancing. And then they're, like, twirling beads. And it's like, well, I'm not gonna show my boobs, but they threw beads anyway, so I took 'em home and gave 'em to the girls.

Taylor: That's great.

Sydnee: So they both got beads from the swingers parade. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: That's amazing.

Sydnee: They don't know. All they know is they got a pretty set of purple beads.

Taylor: That's—I love that. I love that for the swingers, and you, and the girls. [laughs]

Sydnee: It was great. I did—I will say, classic New Orleans cocktails, I got a Pimm's cup.

Taylor: Okay. Great.

Sydnee: There was a place, Napoleon's, that I think is, like, a big deal. Where for, like, maybe brunch... ? It was brunch time. And there was a huge line out the door. And there was no way I was gonna wait in the line. But they did have a sign up that said "Skip the line, come inside for a frozen Pimm's cup."

Taylor: Oh, a frozen one. Hmm. Okay, that might be good.

Sydnee: I have to say, it was like, at this point—so, you know how they pretend like it's, like, 90 degrees, but then they'll have a secret thing on the weather app where it's like, "Secretly it feels like 102."

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. So it was, like, one of those days. It was so humid, because it hadn't rained yet that day. So it was just, like, heat bearing down on you. You know, can't sweat, so humid. And so that frozen Pimm's cup? Oh my gosh. Delicious.

Taylor: A Pimm's cup is a beautiful beverage, but it's great because, I mean, it's really just Pimm's liqueur and some ginger ale, and then really whatever fruit or herbs or whatever you want, so it's very alterable. If you like that—I mean, I love the idea of a frozen version, but you could do that at home very easily and to your liking.

Sydnee: It tasted a little vegetal.

Taylor: Hmm, yeah. Well, it's made with, like, a tea base. Like, it's got a lot of tannins in it. Yeah.

Sydnee: Ahh. It was good. It was very good. And it was good on a hot day. Like, it was a huge frozen beverage. Like, it was a giant cup of it. And I'm sure it was low alcohol, but it was okay, because it was so hot and I carried it with me for so long while we wandered around, and it was—it was very refreshing.

Taylor: Did you make your way to Erin Rose for the frozen Irish coffee that I told you about?

Sydnee: I did not. No, I didn't get there.

Taylor: Oh...

Sydnee: I know.

Taylor: [whispering] Fail.

Sydnee: There's just so much to do. And, like, I will say, the weather limited us a little, too. Like, the rain coming and going.

Taylor: No, and also it's, like, the idea of going to one place for a good drink in New Orleans when literally you can't—you can't stumble into a doorway without being handed a good cocktail. Like, that's just the nature of the city.

Sydnee: Now, we did—I will say, we went to a store, one of the vampire-themed stores, to buy some vampire-themed items. And then they were, like, "Psst. Here's a [crosstalk]."

Taylor: Vampire-themed items.

Sydnee: Yes. I got earrings that look like teeth.

Taylor: Ooh!

Sydnee: And we... [laughs quietly] so we went and got some vampire-themed items. I got lots of things like that for the girls, 'cause I know they'd like 'em. And they were like, here, psst, here's a card. Go to the secret vampire bar, but here's what you have to do. You go to this jazz bar and you go back to the back and you find the gatekeeper. And you ask—and you tell the gatekeeper the secret phrase, and then they show you to the secret bar.

So we went to the secret bar.

Taylor: Okay.

Sydnee: I mean, we did the whole thing. Which I will say, like, you had to pass through a jazz club, and then a beautiful courtyard that was full of cats, and I had to pass through it, which was kind of sad, 'Cause I was like, "Cats!" But then I had to...

Taylor: That was a test.

Sydnee: Yeah. I had to keep going. Uh, to the vampire bar, which is very vampire-y, very pretty, and had a balcony overlooking Bourbon Street. So, like, very cool. Like, and we were the only ones there, which maybe should've set off, like, "Are we gonna get killed here?" But we didn't, so it's fine. But all of the drinks on the menu pretty much had absinthe, and that was a lot for me. Like, either you like absinthe or you don't, I feel like.

Taylor: I like—absinthe as, like, a wash I'm into.

Sydnee: Yeah?

Taylor: Like a Ritz. Like a little bit of absinthe in a glass.

Sydnee: Oh no, these—

Taylor: A little spray on top.

Sydnee: These had absinthe.

Taylor: You were drinking absinthe.

Sydnee: In them. Absinthe. Like, very absinthe-y. Like, whatever—we tried three different ones and we both were like, "That's a lot of absinthe!"
[laughs]

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: "[strained] That's a lot of absinthe in there!"

Taylor: Now, I know—okay. Um, I know from TikTok that people believe that there are real vampires in New Orleans.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: I don't believe this. I'm sorry if there—if there are real vampires in New Orleans listening, to be fair, I'm espousing what you want, 'cause you don't want people to know you're there, correct?

Sydnee: Sure, yeah.

Taylor: Maybe I'm on your side. But I know people do believe that. You took a card from a mysterious vampiric figure, and you went to a secret bar where you were secluded from everybody else.

Sydnee: Yep.

Taylor: And you drank what you were given.

Sydnee: Yep.

Taylor: You know in any fictional situation, you were somebody's buffet.

Sydnee: This is—what's sad is that maybe this is proof there aren't vampires. 'Cause if they were, I mean, like, this would've been the moment, right? And so, like, it's either one, there aren't, or two, they took one look at me and Justin and went, "Nah."

Taylor: Or you made it so easy that they assumed you were whatever the fey version of feds are.

Sydnee: Oh, slayers.

Taylor: You know like when a—huh?

Sydnee: We were slayers.

Taylor: You were slayers. When, like, I know—like, I've been the bartender when a cop comes in to be like, "Hey. Don't look at my ID or anything, but I would like one beer, please."

And, like, okay, yeah. I need to see your ID. You're a cop making sure we check for IDs, so I'm gonna make sure on that.

Sydnee: They were, like, on their phones texting, like, "We've got a Buffy situation. We have a Buffy."

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: "Alert, alert, 911: there's a Buffy."

Taylor: Magical—magical feds. [laughs]

Sydnee: I mean, we did that twice. We were on the street, and this guy—we were—okay. We went to Frenchmen, which is very cool, with a lot of cool jazz clubs and cool jazz people. There were, like, so many, like, cool-looking guys in suits carrying giant basses just right down the street. I know, it was like something out of a cartoon, except it was real life, and it was so cool.

Taylor: There were multiple men carrying multiple basses.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Okay.

Sydnee: Looking way cooler than I will ever be. And so I was like, I don't belong here. What am I doing? I'm, like... like, my understanding of jazz is sort of like a La La Land understanding of jazz! [laughs] I don't belong!

Taylor: Well, I will say, Syd, 'cause I feel like this is the third time that we have talked conflictly about jazz on this podcast. And I think that you and I have different understandings of what you're allowed to do when jazz is playing. 'Cause I know that when I'm at a show where jazz is what's happening, I can, like, talk to my girlfriend, sip my cocktail, relax. But you seem to think it's like, "No, I gotta focus, and I don't wanna focus." [laughs]

Sydnee: No. It's—okay. My brain is very busy, and something happens when jazz music starts playing that makes my brain feel like a pinball machine.

Taylor: Okay, alright. I think that's fair. That's a good reason to not like jazz.

Sydnee: But—and I am sure it was all wonderful music. We were wandering down Frenchmen and we were like, "What are we gonna do? What are we gonna do?"

And then we see a sign and we're like, "Murder mystery." And in my head it said "Dinner." It didn't. It didn't say dinner.

In my head it said "Murder mystery dinner." And I was like, I'm hungry. I love murder mysteries. So we're, like, scanning the QR code like, can we get tickets to this thing that's here?

And this guy in a bowler hat comes up to us and he's like, "Well, hello there! I'm the mayor!"

And I'm thinking, "No you're not." [laughs]

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: Probably not.

Taylor: Mamdani?

Sydnee: Like, I don't know who the mayor—I'm from Huntington. I don't know who the mayor of New Orleans is, but probably not you.

Taylor: Hey, maybe he's got a side gig. What's wrong with that? Have you seen the world today?

Sydnee: [laughs] You're dressed old-timey.

Taylor: He's the old-timey mayor. If anyone has a—look, in New York we have the night mayor, and that's Curtis Sliwa. Maybe New Orleans has the old-timey mayor. [laughs]

Sydnee: He has an old—there's the old-timey mayor is like, "What do you—what do you folks looking for?"

And we tell him. We're like, well, we're too late. We realized we were seven minutes late for this murder mystery. And he's like, "No you're not! Go on upstairs and tell 'em that the mayor sent you."

So we're like, we just wander up the stairs in this bar! We wander up to the top, and this guy wearing a name tag that says Tom Spirits comes up to us and he's like, "How can I help you folks?"

And we're like, "The mayor sent us." [laughs]

Taylor: You just—you were just wandering in multiple nefarious establishments going "Hello, my name is lamb. I'm looking for the, uh, slaughter?"

Sydnee: [laughs] "Please help me. I'd like to give you money, please."

Taylor: "I will pay you for whatever is about to happen."

Sydnee: "I will pay you." Well, we did. And I [crosstalk]—

Taylor: "You want me to turn my phone off and locations? Absolutely, no problem. I want to be part of the experience!"

Sydnee: Oh yeah, I wanna be immersive. It was—it was a beautiful experience. It was very fun. And the two actors in this murder mystery were so committed. And then the patrons also, thanks to a very, like, free-flowing, easy-to-access bar, were very willing to participate. And Justin was in costume as Otto... was his name.

Taylor: What?

Sydnee: His name was Otto.

Taylor: Oh no.

Sydnee: They dressed him like—listen. They dressed him like a bad guy in Indiana Jones. And I was like, "Oh, no."

Like, he had on the little hat, the suspenders, and the big round glasses.

Taylor: Wait, that—that sounds—I mean, Syd, the bad guys in Indiana Jones are often Nazis.

Sydnee: I know!

Taylor: Did they make your husband a—an off-brand Nazi?

Sydnee: Well, he was very clearly, like, an assassin. But I think he was supposed to be, like, a red herring. 'Cause, like, obviously it wasn't the assassin who did it, right? Like, that's too obvious.

Taylor: Oh, okay. Sure. Yeah.

Sydnee: So—which I kept trying to tell people, like—I was breaking character. I was like, "Listen. I'm with Otto. I know that he's an assassin, but I think he probably didn't do it, 'cause then somebody else paid for him to do it, so then it's like a double thing we have to solve. And this is gonna wrap up in 15 minutes, so I don't feel like there's gonna be time." [laughs]

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: I don't feel like there's time for, like, a double ending. I feel like there's probably one. [laughs]

Taylor: And the vampires are raiding and they're like, "Yeah, see? Told you they were feds. Yeah."

Sydnee: [laughs] But it was good. There was no dinner, but it was great.

Taylor: [laughs] There was no dinner. No, you were the dinner! You just foiled their plans!

Sydnee: We just wandered out before the end. We were like, "Thank you so much!" It was a great—

Taylor: I just like the idea of all of these fae and vampires standing around like, "We put that whole show on for those people to just... [sighs] whatever."

Sydnee: Can I say, though, if you are on Frenchmen Street and you see this murder mystery, well worth it. It was not expensive. It was very fun. People were working very hard to make it a good time.

Taylor: They only said "Can we have your names?" And then we gave them our names. And that... [laughs] that was the cost.

Sydnee: And now we're cursed forever.

Taylor: Yeah. And that's... hmm.

Sydnee: We also—we need to talk about this great book we read. Can I say, though, as a plug for something called JAMNOLA, there was this very cool art-music exhibit that we went to on Frenchmen called JAMNOLA, which is made by, like, local artists who, like, created this immersive interactive space. I just want to throw that out there that, like, if for any reason you go to New Orleans, it was cool, and beautiful, and fun, and well worth the time.

Taylor: JAMNOLA.

Sydnee: JAMNOLA, yeah.

Taylor: Cool. Well, I'm glad that—thank you very much for continuing my commitment to doing spooky things for the next four months, 'cause this was a spooky intro that's gonna lead into a spooky book.

Sydnee: Yes. We read Bury Your Gays. Finally we finished it.

Taylor: Yes.

Sydnee: By Chuck Tingle, anonymous mystery author.

Taylor: Yes.

Sydnee: We don't know who he is, right?

Taylor: Well, I mean, I think he's Chuck Tingle, but he just doesn't show his face.

Sydnee: I don't think his name is Chuck Tingle.

Taylor: Nah, his name is Chuck Tingle.

Sydnee: That—okay. Probably not.

Taylor: I'm respecting his decisions about his identity.

Sydnee: Okay. But, uh, this was—so, we read Camp Damascus before. This was not a sequel, but, like, in the same universe.

Taylor: It does exist in the same world, yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah. Because they reference Camp Damascus in it.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And we are gonna spoil it, so let me just...

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: ... say that now.

Taylor: It's a great book, so if you want to read a great queer horror novel that's a pretty quick read, I mean, you can read this in a day.

Sydnee: It really is. And the way he writes, you move from, like, action to action so quickly, like, the plot moves forward so fast that it carries you. I mean, it is a fast read. There's no long, like, plodding descriptions of anything. He really takes you through the story at a pretty fast pace, which is good for horror, I think.

Taylor: Oh yeah. Well, and it's very effective. And it has the—it's weird to read a horror novel that has the pace of a modern horror movie, and I feel like this did.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: So, this is your last chance, if you want to read it, you should go read it. But we're gonna spoil it.

Sydnee: Now we're gonna spoil it, yeah. So, your main character, Misha, is a screenwriter, um, in Hollywood. He has done, like, queer horror films. He's out in LA, sort of, but not really out fully. Has never confirmed his sexuality, and is not out in his hometown in Montana. Um, and he is, like—it starts with him wanting to end the season of the show he's writing, which is kind of a... what would you say the inspiration for this show is? 'Cause he's clearly influenced by some sort of X-Files show when he was younger.

Taylor: Oh, I think it's...

Sydnee: But this is a... it sounds similar, X-File-y kind of show.

Taylor: It's clearly like an X-Files dupe. I think it's even kind of a bit of a nod, and early on he says that he cast David Duchovny in something.

Sydnee: Oh yeah, yeah.

Taylor: Or that David Duchovny played one of his characters. It's X-Files, but if X-Files was—we all remember—I don't know—some of you are not this old. But I remember growing up in the 90s, and the will they, won't they X-Files question mark of if the two main characters would kiss. But his background is imagine if X-Files was gay. And that's the thing that influenced a lot of his young life.

Sydnee: Kind of Xena meets X-Files.

Taylor: Hmm, yeah. That's a good cross.

Sydnee: If the whole time you're waiting for the moment. Like, Xena and Gabrielle, we know. Come on. We know. We all know.

Taylor: Yeah.

Sydnee: And it never happens.

Taylor: I... this is a total aside, and we need to discuss the book. But whatever Xena and Gabrielle had was so much gayer than kissing could ever be that it doesn't matter

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: And I will stand by that.

Sydnee: Yeah. They would kill for each other. They did kill for each other.

Taylor: Mm-hmm. Well, and they, like, had each other's weird spirit babies or whatever. Like, there was a lot. It was a very lesbian relationship. U-Hauling in the most intense degree. [laughs]

Sydnee: So they—so he's writing—his series that he's writing, this season finale, the two main characters who are both women are about to sort of, like, reveal their feelings for each other, which has been, like, simmering the whole series. And they executives are like, "Nope. Either kill 'em off or make 'em straight. We don't want gays in Hollywood," more or less.

So he's wrestling with this, and so you have this, like, metaphorical thing where he's wrestling with being out himself, not really, and his own, like, shame and guilt that he still harbors from his youth and experiences. And then actual characters he's written from past horror movies that represent aspects of his own shame and guilt. And then you have this sort of underlying theme of AI in Hollywood, where this company has come up with a way to completely make characters that look very real, and in fact we find out are, like, tangible, physical... I don't know, people? People? Things. [laughs quietly] Objects. They're made of nanobots.

Taylor: Well, it's like, imagine like the worst—like, AI can mimic so much, and then they have a physical vehicle for entering the real world, which is a swarm of nanobots that can coalesce into a person.

Sydnee: And if they own the IP, they can make it. And so it's all the movies, TV, anything they've ever made at this studio, plus all the people who've ever worked there. So the writers, and producers, and camerapeople. I don't know, everybody. Everybody is owned by them, and they can be reproduced physically in the real world out of nanobots. But their algorithmic programming only allows them to do what would be predictable based on their past... thoughts, feelings, actions. Whatever.

Taylor: And it's a—it's a fascinating reveal, because, you know, early on you're kind of waiting. As he encounters early on in the novel, like, these representations of characters he's written, you think—I mean, obviously the first thought is, is this psychological? Like, is he being haunted by something in his own mind. And then it's like, oh, is, this, like, a—a manifestation? Is it a ghost? Uh, and then even when you realize it's real, because he can interact with them, he can hit them, is there someone behind it? But it is the AI that's behind it. Like, there's not some big bad. It is the AI algorithm that has decided that... the only desire it has is to make the most money. And so it's not only that they—the thing that'll make the most money is killing off your gay characters. It's also, oh, killing off this closeted gay writer in a really extravagant way will drive up the margins on all of the things he's been a part of, so.

Sydnee: 'Cause what we realize is as he is freaking out—because at first he thinks a stalker is tricking me with all these sort of, like, characters from my past with, you know, people in costume or whatever. He's also nominated for an Oscar. So we're culminating in him at the Oscars. What the algorithm wants is him killing himself in the bathroom. And then it can be a really awful story of gay tragedy.

Taylor: And everybody will watch all of his stuff because of it.

Sydnee: Right, exactly. And what he begins to realize is that the only way to combat that is with, like, queer joy. Is with being open, and honest. And what he does is create a really compelling argument for the algorithm that it's—queer joy sells more than queer tragedy. Which is not his goal, but inadvertently—he gets up. His big moment. He gives an Oscar speech. He's, like, bleeding, because he's been attacked by these creatures. But he barely manages to give this beautiful speech about coming out, and who he is, and why he tells the stories he does. And the algorithm realizes, like, oh, this'll sell better. So now you can live.

Taylor: That was—I wanna say that I loved Camp Damascus. I loved this even more. And that was the moment that I went, "Oh. This is really good."
[laughs]

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: Because up to that point, like, the idea that the answer would be he makes a speech about queer joy, and then the algorithm learns, and then everything's happy... that felt—I was like, oh, alright. That's—but the fact that it continues. Like, that happens, and then you still got a solid, like, third of the book left. Because the algorithm spins off into this very corporate gay pride sponsor version of itself that's in no way aware of the actual stakes of queer representation. It's just like, oh, this sells. That's what we'll pander to. Which is, I think, something that we can see—there's a real world parallel to that that we've dealt with in the last couple years.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: And that's where it really was like—like, this is... it's not just... it's confronting the real truth of this concept of, like, what is queer representation if we remove it from the idea of having to sell things to make our lives valuable?

Sydnee: It's really like—that's the danger of rainbow capitalism, is that it will only be supportive of the queer community as long as it makes them money.

Taylor: Right.

Sydnee: And so what you get is this sort of, like, monkey's paw kind of moment. Because he wakes up, he is alive. Um, up to that moment, his best friend and his boyfriend were in sort of a half-dead kind of state. They'd been touched by a creature from his own creations—like, from his movies past—that shows you the end of the universe. And so it makes you so deeply hopeless that you starve to death. So you think he's lost these people, but then he wakes up and his friend and his boyfriend are back, and they're fine. And everybody loves him now. He's this huge star at the studio, and he can do any projects he wants. So he goes down for his first meeting, and he is met by this, like, very AI-generated queer-friendly studio where, like, there's a DJ playing Lady Gaga.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: Outside. And he goes up to meet with the new executive who replaced his boss who was killed by the previous AI stuff. And the new executive is like, "Hey, girl!" [laughs quietly]

And has—like, they describe—he has a couch in his office which is, like, a rainbow-sequined couch that says "Pride" across it.

Taylor: [laughs] That has to be referencing those horrible Ikea couches. Do you remember those? Like, the Pride campaign.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: My favorite was the bisexual couch that said "No one will believe you" with hands. [laughs]

Sydnee: Which, like, what—I don't know if that was supportive or just, like, argumentative.

Taylor: I just know that—you know that meme of, like, if I ever win the lottery I won't tell anyone, but there will be signs? I will own terrifying bisexual hand couch. It will be in my living room. [laughs]

Sydnee: It was just so clearly, like, if you, like, typed into ChatGPT, like, "Show me gay stuff." This is what... like, here's a guy with a rainbow couch that says "Pride," and he's like, "Hey, girl!" [laughs]

And, like, then there's a DJ, and he's like, "Why—why do you have these DJ playing Lady Gaga?"

And the executive's like, "It's Pride!"

And he's like, "It's April!" [laughs]

Taylor: [laughs] Well, and I think it's—that's one of those things that I think if you're—I don't know. If you're a queer person that lives a life, you understand that there is a version of you that is acceptable to not even all of society, but a small part of society, and it is that. Like, you can be happy,

and buoyant, and catty and, like, whatever. Like, that is okay. You can be that. There is still a part of you that you have to bury. Because it's still about the part of you that sells. It's still about the part of you that is digestible. And that is—that does feel like—it almost felt like—like that was such an obscene scene, as funny as it was. The description was like, oh, wow. It's like they skinned queer culture and laid it over furniture.

Sydnee: Which is what it feels like sometimes. I mean, if you look at... not so much recent, unfortunately, but, like, past Target and Walmart and various, like, big store Pride displays, they do feel that way, right? Like, somebody googled "What's gay?" And...

Taylor: [laughs] What's gay?

Sydnee: What's gay? And then made some stuff out of it. Like, I don't know. And it's hard, because I will you tell you that, like, our local Target had a Pride display this year.

Taylor: Yep.

Sydnee: It was one kiosk. One tiny, very beige kiosk. 'Cause I had gone looking. I had gone looking. I had heard that there was tell of a lesbian flag maxi dress that was really pretty. [laughs quietly] And that did not exist at our local target. It was like one tiny beige kiosk that was like, "Be proud of who you are." And there were tiny rainbows on it. So I don't know. Like, as much as I hate rainbow capitalism, that beige kiosk was sadder. It was sadder! So I can see the allure of, like, "Well, at least they're celebrating Queeroes." That's what the name of the show they're making is, Queeroes.

Taylor: Well, this is—this is kind of what the unfortunate endpoint in is living under a capitalist heck... scape. That's what I can say on the show. Uh, is that yes, unfortunately, like, having representation, even if it's gone through an algorithm, it actually wildly loops back to the last thing we talked about. We talked about—or not—not Below Deck, but before that, we talked about They/Them.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: Like, we both had the complaint that this feels like a corporate gay movie.

Sydnee: Yes.

Taylor: It feels like it went through an algorithm. It feels like we can't have any of the queer characters be too... problematic, or anything. They can't be violent. They just have to—they have to be perfect representations of queer culture. And the question is, is it better for somebody to see anything versus nothing? And I think it's better to see something versus nothing. But that doesn't still solve the bigger problem, which is as long as we're tied to our ability to generate capitalism, we're never free.

Sydnee: Right.

Taylor: And that goes beyond the queer movement. That's everybody.

Sydnee: No, it's true. Because what you're talking about is, like, the whole idea of "Do we—do we try to sell to the queer community?" Is based on "Can we make money off of that?"

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And then it's like, "Well, if we can't, we won't acknowledge them."

And it's a wider issue. Which is, like, we don't acknowledge queer people unless it serves our purposes. Which is where the politici—like, the politicization of the queer community is the problem. Like, that has been done to queerness. Like, just let people live. There should be no laws governing what people do in their private lives. Everyone should be allowed to marry, and love, and—you know? Like, that's the problem, is we let the argument be dictated by fascists on the right who said we have to govern this. And now we all decide, like, what sells, what matters, whose voices count, whose perspectives count, as opposed to "It's none of your frickin' business."

Taylor: But see, that sentiment exactly, and this is my—it even goes back to the AI stuff. This is my broader my opinion about—what I think this

book—I think it's saying, very intelligently, but I think it's the better conversation for us to be having. Is that it's not really about being gay, or being trans, or being whatever. It's about looking inside of yourself and honoring who you are, and living your life as the unique individual that you are. And that is the point of life. And it's also a thing that makes you a bad consumer, and a bad follower. It makes you harder to control. And that's really—why are artists the—I mean, most artists are—most artists are some way queer, right? Like, most creators are also a little bit gay, because they've just opened that door inside of themselves and said "Oh no, there's a lot of stuff inside of there!"

Sydnee: Or at least allies. I would say even if that—I don't know if statistically what you're saying is true. I know what you're saying, and I do think you're right.

Taylor: Oh no, you're right.

Sydnee: That when you open yourself up to artistic expression, I don't know how you aren't at least an ally at that point, you know?

Taylor: Well, and I guess—and this is where I really hate, like, the little boxes we put ourselves in. Because I think it's about—the difference is, do you allow yourself to live your life based on who you feel you should be? Or based on who you're afraid not to be? And I think that's the—I think artists are always living outside of that. And you're right, they... [laughs quietly] there are some really cool straight cis people that have done that work. They've looked inside themselves, like, nah, that's who I am. But I also want to, like, be free. It's not—it's not connected to our gender, our sexuality.

Sydnee: No.

Taylor: It's connected to how we allow ourselves to work through the world.

Sydnee: I think it's the—and you don't want to say, like, it's the advantage that the queer community has, 'cause that makes it sound like "See? You have one up on everybody," which is not fair.

Taylor: No. It's what puts the target on our back.

Sydnee: It is what puts the target on the queer community. But it is also, in terms of human experience, it is something that I think being part of the queer community allows you to do, which is... I'm not gonna be accepted, so I'm just gonna be myself, because I can't—you get to a point where you can't fake it anymore. So I will be me, in a way that I do think sometimes everybody outside is afraid to touch or get close to. Now, is that, like, "So we have it better." No, I'm not saying that. I am not in any—[laughs] I'm not in any way saying that.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: I'm just saying, I do think you're right that there are straight cis people who are able to tap into that, and I cannot imagine that they ever are anything but allies.

Taylor: Well, but that's—I think that's—and that's really where, I don't know. There are things that want to partition us away from each other, and I hope that at some point we can coalesce as a community. Because that's a thing that we all share, is... I think a lot of my life, be it as an artist or as a queer person, as a trans person, it doesn't matter, is defined by my ability to look and say, "I get one life, I'm gonna die one day, and I want to be happy." So I keep seeking the path. And sometimes it's so hard. And I wish it was easier. But I know that whenever my path ends I will be happier that I followed the path that was mine. And I can respect how scary that looks from the outside. And I don't think it's... I think everybody has that path. Every single person. It's not about gender, sexuality, identity. Every person has that path that is hard, but honest.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: And we all should have the ability—that leads to a good life. I have a good life, no matter how hard it's been, because I've walked that path. And I want everyone to do that. The backwards effect of that is that it—again, like, the people that want to control us—

Sydnee: Well, it shouldn't be hard.

Taylor: Well, I mean, it makes us harder consumers to sell to.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Taylor: It makes us—if we're not afraid of things, if we're not scared of whatever boogeyman they create, be it around race or gender or sexuality, then we're harder to control. Like, that is—so it is outside of queerness. Queerness are the people that most exemplify it, because I think we're the most loud presentation of it. But I think that... fighting for the, like, individuality that I think we all should be able to walk through life with is what it's all about.

Sydnee: And I think, you know, to that end, the hero of the book really is Tara.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: Who is asexual, aromantic. Your main character, Misha's, best friend. And she—the reason she is able to defeat the algorithm is because the algorithm cannot predict what she's going to do, because it cannot draw from any representation within its catalog to know what an asexual, aromantic person in her shoes would do at that moment. Which is, I mean, sad commentary. I'm not saying, like, "Isn't that funny?" I'm saying, like, the point they're making is, we don't even recognize that these individuals exist in our media, and so we can't predict what they're going to do, so she's able to undo us. Which is a very powerful moment, but also calls attention to the fact that even as our gay main character is represented, and his bisexual boyfriend is represented, we still have a character who is kind of unknown to the algorithm. But it was a very powerful, cool moment.

Taylor: No, I—well, and that's—that was... she was such a great character in the detail that was given to her. Like, her descriptions of her outfits I just loved so much. Like, it was a fully—it wasn't just a concept. It wasn't just an idea. Like, "Wouldn't this be funny?" Like, that was a fully formed character.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Taylor: That now exists. And... and even that. Like, the idea of an asexual being left out of narratives, it's like, well, I think a lot of the narratives that were told, again, to control us, center around a sexuality-based or reproductive-based society. Asexuals are kind of this anomaly that no one wants to deal with. That's... that's kind of punk rock. That's powerful.

Sydnee: So she uses that to destroy the algorithm, yeah.

Taylor: Yeah!

Sydnee: I would highly recommend this book. I thought it was so good. I mean, I ate it up. I really—I read it so quickly. Justin loved it. I loved it. I know you loved it. Um, I really would recommend it. It is a little—so, it's horror, and there are a couple—more than a couple moments of some, like, kind of gross, like, body horror type things happening. So if that is something you can't handle, that is in the book. There are some gross moments. Like Camp Damascus, it had some of that too, so.

Taylor: Yeah. I do want to recognize that even with the body horror, it was—there were moments that were kind of funny, even when it was grotesque.

Sydnee: Yes. Yes, very funny, yes.

Taylor: And I'm not used to—like, that kind of beat in horror comedy I'm used to in a film. It's rare that a book can deliver that, where there's something horrific happening in the description, but there's a funny moment. It's really beautiful writing. [laughs]

Sydnee: I hope someone is making these movies.

Taylor: Please make this movie. [laughs]

Sydnee: Because these—Camp Damascus and Bury Your Gays are such... I mean, I can't. I don't have the talent. But somebody needs to make these into movies. They're so good.

Taylor: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Please, someone, so I'll watch them.

Taylor: I can see it in my brain. Just make it.

Sydnee: Yes. 'Cause again, when I watched They/Them, all I could think was, "This is good, but Camp Damascus would be better." [laughs quietly]

Taylor: Well, and it literally felt like—They/Them felt like the movie that this studio would have generated at the end of this book.

Sydnee: Yes, yes. Mm-hmm, yes. Taylor, we're gonna stick with your—it's Halloween already. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: [laughs quietly] Are you down with doing four months of—it doesn't have to be scary. It just has to be slightly spooky.

Sydnee: Listen. Here's what I'll say. If at any point I get worn out by the spookiness or scariness, I will insert something else, okay?

Taylor: Okay.

Sydnee: But for now, we both watched Obsession, and it was so good, and I think we should talk about it.

Taylor: I think it's a very important cultural movie to talk about, too.

Sydnee: Me too! It was so good.

Taylor: Great. I love that.

Sydnee: Okay. Alright. Well, in the meantime, keep doing spooky things every day, everyone.

Taylor: I'm doing my spooky things. Syd, have you done—you almost got abducted by vampires, so you're good.

Sydnee: I did.

Taylor: That covers, like, a month.

Sydnee: I did lots of spooky things. I had my cards read.

Taylor: Oh!

Sydnee: I bought, um... charms. [laughs quietly]

Taylor: [laughs quietly] How was your reading? You don't have to, like, describe it, but was it good?

Sydnee: Uh... [laughs]

Taylor: Oh no!

Sydnee: Well... okay. There was—I guess Justin and I look maybe younger than we are.

Taylor: Hm.

Sydnee: 'Cause there was—I think there was an assumption made that we were a new couple.

Taylor: Okay.

Sydnee: So the reveal that we had been married for 20 years and were there on our anniversary was maybe a little surprising. [laughs quietly] But you know what?

Taylor: Was she trying to tell you that you weren't gonna work!?

Sydnee: Uh, no. That, like, this is all brand new and we're still figuring things out. [laughs]

Taylor: Maybe spiritually it is brand new. Who knows?

Sydnee: Well, you know what I'll say, though? She was also playing chess on her phone while she was doing my reading, and there was something about that that was [laughs] so honest that I was like, "Okay."

Taylor: Wow.

Sydnee: I let it go! I was like, you know what? If you can talk to me while playing chess on your phone... more power to you.

Taylor: Fair enough. Fair enough.

Sydnee: I'll live with this. It's fine.

Taylor: If I'm paying 30 bucks for a tarot card reading I don't want you to be playing chess on your phone.

Sydnee: There was no charge. It was just—

Taylor: Oh. Well, if it's free—

Sydnee: [simultaneously] Well, I mean, we paid. We donated.

Taylor: —then she can do whatever she wants.

Sydnee: We donated. Like, it's a—it's one of those where you just donate what you feel.

Taylor: Oh. Alright, okay. Sure.

Sydnee: Yeah. So that—I mean, that's why I went. That's why I was like, "Well, donate what you feel. That feels, like, right." Mom always said, like, you shouldn't charge for a reading. But if somebody wants to—

Taylor: That stuck in my head. Like, it's charlatan psychic, yeah.

Sydnee: No, I could've stood up and walked away without paying her, but I would not. I mean, you know me. I wouldn't do that. So, I did. But, like, it wasn't required.

Taylor: Alright, alright. Well, that's your spooky thing. You did a spooky thing.

Sydnee: Yes. I did a spooky thing. [pause] Oh! Uh, I have to do the end of our show.

Taylor: [laughs]

Sydnee: This has been Still Buffering. [laughs quietly] A cross-generational guide to the culture that made us. I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: I'm Teylor Smirl.

Sydnee: I'm still buffering...

Taylor: That's not what we say. You said my part. [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, let's try it again. Uh... sorry, I got thrown off. I thought we had already done that! Thank you to the—to Maximum Fun. You should go to Maximumfun.org.

Taylor: You didn't say that part. That's the part you need to say.

Sydnee: Check out all the great shows 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 podcast to the culture that made us.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Taylor: [through laughter] And I'm Teylor Smirl!

Sydnee: I'm still buffering...

Taylor: And I am too! And I'm gonna leave all that in. I'm gonna leave every bit of that in.

Sydnee: Perfect. Perfect!

Taylor: That's fine. Hey.

Sydnee: Excellent. Good work.

Taylor: Peace.

[theme music plays]

[chord]

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