

Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 1: The Curse of the Hope Diamond

[Intro music]

Tony Cohn: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Tony Cohn. On November 10, 1958 James Todd rolled into work a few minutes later than he might have liked. He picked up a special delivery at Washington D.C.'s main post office, next to Union Station. With just a few minutes before it had to be delivered, Todd hustled the package to his car. From the outside, the only unusual thing about the package was the eighteen postal stamps, worth nine dollars each.

Nancy Pope: Out of that, only \$2 and forty four cents was for the postage. The rest was for a million dollars worth of insurance

TC: That's Nancy Pope, curator at the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum. When Todd arrived at his destination -- the National Museum of Natural History -- reporters and TV cameras were standing by. So was the head of the Smithsonian. And the postmaster general. It could have also been the object he was carrying was long rumored to be cursed. But the package's contents were undisturbed from its journey from New York to its new home at the Smithsonian. Inside the box? The legendary Hope Diamond: a priceless historical artifact, and a huge stone that's about 45 times the size of one commonly found on a wedding ring. And things had gone smoothly in the Hope Diamond's delivery. Todd went back to work. As far as he was concerned... his 15 seconds of fame were over. I'm sure he figured that in the movie version of the Hope Diamond's story, he'd be a bit actor: unnamed mailman number 1. But then the accidents started. When his leg was crushed by a truck... just bad luck, probably. But then his wife died. In his grief, did the Hope Diamond -- and its curse -- cross his mind? Then his dog died... surely... the curse must have occurred to him. What about after the car accident? Or when his house caught fire? James Todd's life changed dramatically in the year after he delivered the diamond.

NP: Well, the next year though, Washington Post decided to do a catch up story on him saying, you know what, what is the last year been for you? With all of that the reporter had to ask him, do you believe in the curse? And Todd's response was wonderful. He said, I really don't. I really don't. They said these things that just happened. The guy was incredible.

TC: Today, the idea of a curse might feel quaint -- but that might just be because you've never been on the business end of one. In the middle of the 20th Century, the public was really worried about how the Smithsonian acquiring the Hope Diamond might hurt the entire country. The diamond had recently gone through some very high profile drama. And so there were lots of newspaper stories about the Diamond's devastating impacts on its previous owners: Gangrene! Beheading! Financial ruin! Okay, some details were true. Many others... were not. So this time on Sidedoor: we'll journey through history and learn the truth behind the Hope Diamond's curse -- so that you dear listener and museum visitor can approach this blue beauty with an open

mind and that's really important, because the Hope Diamond's curse can smell fear. No, I'm just kidding. Or am I? Stay with us... I'll be here -- I hope -- after a quick break.

[BREAK]

[MUSEUM ENTRY AMBI]

TC: To produce this story... I had to meet the Hope Diamond on the second floor of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. But I knew if I was going to get in the Hope Diamond's head, I was going to need some help. I met Jeff Post just outside the diamond's lair. Jeff knows this diamond better than anyone else.

Jeff Post: I'm a research scientist, minerologist, geologist. Been here at the Smithsonian for about 34 years. I'm also the curator of the National Gem Mineral Collection here at the Smithsonian.

TC: He escorted us past the armed security guard and into a rotunda. The diamond's display case is in the center of a small circular area, and it's surrounded by columns. It's very D.C.

TC: Would you mind physically like just describing what the diamond actually looks like?

JP: Well, the Hope Diamond is a large blue diamond. We say large. We mean in the context of diamonds. Um, it's about one inch in diameter. I think a lot of people when they come into this gallery they've heard of the Hope Diamond and they're expecting something about the size of a softball sitting there, you know, they're thinking *big diamond* and the most common misconception is it's the world's largest diamond, but in fact it's not by a long shot, as you can see.

TC: The Hope Diamond is 45 and a half carat stone; it's about the size of a walnut. The big blue diamond sits in a setting designed by Pierre Cartier, where it's ringed by 16 smaller white diamonds, attached to a necklace with 47 more diamonds. It's not subtle.

TC: You know the button we can press right now and so that I can put it around my neck. Right?

JP: Um, it's a little more complicated than that. (laugh) And partly it's just out of respect for the piece. It is one of these really special diamonds, these iconic objects, part of our Smithsonian collection, something that belongs to the people of the world, and, you know, you want it to have a little bit of a mystique, feel like it's a little bit special because you realize it is very unusual and very different than what we see on almost anywhere else in nature.

TC: I read that this was like the most visited object at the Smithsonian.

JP: I'm not sure we have any way of actually documenting that, but when you look at the crowds and know the number of people that come into this building it certainly has to be, if not the most

visited, certainly one of the most visited objects, and I think the reason gems in general are so fascinating to people because it's this interesting connection between the natural Earth -- I mean they all started out as a natural process producing a crystal somewhere in the Earth, but then you've got the people's story connected to it. And it's one of these few natural history objects we have in this building that really connects directly then with people and I think that if not for the history... this probably would not have the same status it enjoys today.

TC: And to get to that story -- the one about the people... and the curse -- we ran across the National Mall to the Smithsonian's Freer and Sackler Galleries of Art, where Smithsonian Distinguished Scholar and Ambassador at Large Richard Kurin has his office. Kurin has visited all of the places the Hope Diamond has been throughout its long history.

Richard Kurin: It's a lot of places. I did not go down 90 miles under the Earth to see where the diamond came up through a volcanic vent.

TC: Okay, fine. All of the places the diamond has been... except that one. (pause) The diamond's first encounter with people started in India, back in the 1650s, likely near a place called Kollur (KA-lore). There was a mine in Kollur -- as there were many all around that part of India at this time -- and in these mines, workers were not free to come and go as they pleased.

RK: You didn't want workers either stealing diamonds, telling other people where the diamond mines were because they were such a fabulous source of wealth. Mines were run usually controlled by the sultans of the local dynasties. So people lived in terrible conditions. And if you were lucky, you came up with maybe two handfuls of, of diamonds as a result of that.

TC: So it was in a mine like this that a French gem merchant and globe trotter named Jean Baptiste Tavernier -- what a name -- first encountered an extraordinary diamond. Grey blue and very large. It would have been held by one of the local sultan's underlings. And somehow, Tavernier acquired it. So throughout Tavernier's travels, he amassed quite a collection of diamonds. And in 1668, he sold more than a thousand diamonds -- including this large blue diamond -- to France's King Louis the 14th.

[Start Music Bed]

RK: And this is the height of Louis the 14th. He's building Versailles. Louis the 14th is called the Sun King. He, he has the best, the biggest collection of diamonds on the plan -- well, in Europe anyway. I think some of the Indian rulers actually had more.

TC: And King Louis? He was pleased with the diamonds... in particular, this unique, very large blue diamond.

RK: Tavernier, is, uh, he's richly rewarded, uh, for the diamond.

TC: Do you know how richly rewarded?

RK: Well, he ends up becoming a baron and getting land in on a nice hilltop in Switzerland. And I've been there. It's, it is old house, it still stands and it looks over Lake Geneva and it's quite beautiful.

TC: So he did all right?

RK: He did all right.

[Music notes or walking ambi to show physical journey]

TC: Back at the National Museum of Natural History, national mineral collection curator Jeff Post took us into his very secure gem vault. It's behind five layers of security, including one door that has a hand scanner on it...

[VAULT BEEPS SOUND]

JP: And this is an area that's restricted, only four of us in the building.

TC: Once we were securely in the vault -- and it literally looks like a bank vault: eight feet wide, twelve feet deep, thick walls made of what look like steel -- Post pulled out the replicas he had made to show what the diamond would have looked like at different stages of its existence. The near-perfect replicas are made of cubic zirconia -- which is a high quality fake diamond.

JP: And so I'm opening a couple boxes here that show you some of the replica is we've been able to make. Using historical information, there are some drawings that were done of the diamond back when it was sold to King Louis the 14th.

TC: When Louis the 14th bought the blue diamond from Tavernier, it was huge: 112 and three sixteenths carats... that's more than TWICE the size that it is today.

JP: And see it's kind of a flat stone, a little bit triangular shaped. But that's how King Louis the 14th would have first seen the stone.

Once this big, dusky blue diamond was in the French royal collection, the diamond was reimagined in a major way, and cut down to sixty seven and one eighth carats. This version of the Hope Diamond is known as "The French Blue". It's the same diamond -- just... we haven't gotten to that Hope chapter yet.

JP: Obviously, France, they wanted something that was more symmetric, more artsy or you know, something more, you know, pure looking. And so they cut it into a triangular shape stone. And it was a stone that was not worn, but one that was used by the king to kind of show off a bit. Um, it was kept in his cabinet of curiosities in Versailles. It was mounted with a gold back on a gold stick so that he could hold it up and show it off.

TC: So, I've gotten to hold the museum's replica of the French Blue and it's a really weird experience. Go on this ride with me for a second. Picture a bacon-wrapped date, stuck on a 3-inch toothpick. You can stand at a party talking to your friends, and it's comfortable to hold. It's easy to talk with your hands, and wave it all over the place to make a point. Now, that's how I imagine King Louis the 14th approached it... But for the Sun King, his bacon-wrapped date was a gigantic diamond, and his toothpick was made out of real gold. Okay, so back to Richard Kurin, who literally wrote the book on the history of the Hope Diamond. He says that this diamond was a powerful symbol for King Louis the 14th.

RK: What do diamonds signify? They signify wealth. They signify trade with the Orient. They signified power. And for Louis the 14th, the sun god, they signal, you know, glory, brilliance, literally brilliance. Uh, and the power over light.

TC: And as the sun set on the Sun King, he died at Versailles. For people who talk about the Hope Diamond's curse... Louis the 14th is seen as one of its earliest victims. He had a lot of health problems, including symptoms of diabetes, boils, gout, and ultimately, he died of gangrene, which is not a nice way to go. But he was 77-years-old, and had ruled France as an absolute monarch for 72 years -- the longest rule of any monarch in European history. Despite his spotty health, he lived way longer than most people in his country would have at that time. I'm going to go ahead and declare Louis the 14th... curse free. Eventually, the French Blue diamond made its way to Louis' great great great grandson -- King Louis the 16th. This is probably the Louis that you've heard the most about. He threw lavish parties, and his wife -- the infamous Marie Antoinette -- was known for wearing lots of diamonds, all while they were mismanaging France's finances and misjudging the public's appetite for their flashy lifestyle. This came to a head in 1789. That's the year that things really heat up for the Diamond's curse... and for France. Because it's the year the French Revolution started. Needless to say -- this freaked out Louis and Marie. In response to a panicky royal family holding a collection of jewels -- including the French Blue, which would be valued at 23 million dollars today -- the Crown Jewels were confiscated, so they couldn't be pawned off by the royals in exchange for safety.

RK: And, um, it gets put in this building and actually they opened it up, the government opens it up, and they say to the people, "Come in and take a look at the gems that Louis the 16th and Marie Antoinette have look how wealthy they are."

TC: And in a classic case of "not reading the room"... the French government put these jewels on public display with light security, in front of people who were in the early stages of a revolution that was about -- in part -- not having enough to eat... you can guess what happened next.

RK: Well, what happened in September 1792 is a theft occurred and the Hope Diamond along with many of the other great French crown jewels were stolen. And it was real ineptitude, both on the thieves, as well as on the police and authorities, but, uh, some of the diamonds were kept

-- turned up later and were returned to the French Crown Jewels. But that Blue Diamond never really turned up and people speculated about what happened to it.

TC: But we don't have to speculate about what happened to Louis the 16th and Marie Antoinette. They lost their heads to the French Revolution's guillotine. And among people who believe in the diamond's curse, Louis and Marie are its most high profile victims. But here's the thing: Richard Kurin says that Marie Antoinette and the French Blue weren't even friends.

RK: She never wore the blue diamond.

TC: That we know for sure.

RK: There's no documented cases of Marie Antoinette wearing the diamond.

TC: Okay, yes, something very bad did happen to Louis and Marie after their fleeting relationship with the diamond... but at the same time, it WAS the French Revolution, and many people would say that the "Let Them Eat Cake" crowd brought it on themselves. Personally, from a curse / no curse perspective, I'd have to chalk this one up to royal ineptitude. You can't blame the blue. That's the end of Louis and Marie's story. But you know the blue diamond keeps going. And... with that... we're gonna take a quick break. Coming up, the French Blue reemerges... transformed. And the legend of a curse begins to take shape in the public eye.

[BREAK]

TC: Welcome back. So... We've followed the Hope Diamond, also known as the French Blue diamond, from its initial purchase in India, all the way to disappearing in Paris during the French Revolution. But then the *allegedly cursed* diamond goes missing. And we don't really know what happens to it. BUT here's what we do know... almost exactly 20 years after the huge blue diamond went missing -- just days after the statute of limitations for crimes committed during the French Revolution expired -- another very large gray-blue diamond turned up in London. Here's national mineral collection curator Jeff Post.

JP: There's a memorandum that was written by a jeweler and he draws a picture of this diamond on that memorandum, and he describes it, the weight of it. The color, everything matches perfectly with the diamond that we know today as the Hope Diamond. So, somewhere between 1792 and 1812, when this memorandum was written in London, the French blue diamond now we believe was recut into the stone that we know today as the Hope Diamond and this diamond eventually ended up in the collection of Henry Phillip Hope, and that's where the name of the diamond comes from.

TC: Hope was a wealthy British merchant who loved collecting gems. And the Hope family, while they weren't French royalty, they were a powerful bunch. Okay, back to Hope Diamond historian Richard Kurin.

RK: The Hopes were tremendously, tremendously wealthy. They're the big banking family. In fact, it was the Hopes, and the Hopes' success of the Baring family, that ended up loaning Thomas Jefferson the money to buy Louisiana.

TC: So, ya, big deal. The Hopes owned the diamond -- and many other valuable items -- but as their wealth passed from one generation to the next, family battles over who inherited what bit of wealth often had to be settled in court. The diamond passed from Hope to Hope for over sixty years, until the last Hope eventually sold the diamond in 1901 because, finally, the Hopes were broke. After the Hopes, the diamond bounced between a few different jewel merchants and collectors. But the Hope name stuck to it. And when one of these merchants owned the diamond... there was an economic downturn. Here's Richard Kurin with that story.

RK: Basically what we call a recession. And they couldn't sell the diamond and so it sat in their safe and there was a story in the financial pages about how the company was going broke because of the Hope Diamond. And so it was like "The, the glare of the hope diamond sits in that safe emanating its light, bad luck for the company." And so it was first the bad luck economic story.

TC: This is the first acknowledgement in the press that the diamond was causing its owner some distress. But it's not a real curse... yet.

RK: When it was again sold, The London Times invents a story about how during these sales it went to the sultan of Turkey and it goes to his paramour and he's killed in the revolt of the Turks. It goes to this other guy and he goes off a cliff. It goes to som -- you know -- it's all made up! I mean, it had nothing to do with -- it was really a tongue-in-cheek story.

TC: Like it's taken really seriously?

RK: It was tak -- London Times! And people took it really seriously. And it just caught on! That it had been stolen from an idol in a temple, like it was from the third eye of a deity in India. It was stolen, so this was the revenge of the gods against the people who sold it and their subsequent owners. So, all sorts of personalities are thrown in -- this person owned it! This person owned it! This bad thing happened.

TC: And boom! You have a cursed diamond... but the curse, of course, was a work of fiction. The deaths of Marie Antoinette, Louis the 16th, and the Hope family blowing its fortune... it's unfortunate. But that's just a handful of events in the course of 250 years. And still... many people took the curse seriously. Except one very wealthy young woman: It was the romantic story behind this mysterious stone that she found so enticing.

RK: Evelyn Walsh McLean. So, the Walsh's, Evelyn's family -- they struck it rich in Colorado in mining.

TC: Her husband was Ned McLean. And his family was also pretty loaded -- they owned The Washington Post.

RK: Their son Vinson was born, and when he was born he was called the \$100 million dollar baby. She'd import flowers from Europe for dinners in Washington. I mean it was outrageous, and, and indeed that's why when she bought the Hope Diamond, people warned her against it. Even Florence Harding, the first lady of the United States, who would become First Lady of the United States, warned her against it. Her relatives had her take it to a, um, member of the clergy, had them bless it so the curse wouldn't affect it, but she liked the idea of the curse because she liked the story.

TC: And Evalyn McLean lived it up. She used the Hope Diamond in a way that sure doesn't seem like she believed in the curse.

RK: I interviewed, you know, some of the descendents, the great-grandchildren, grandchildren. So, you know, they talked about her, you know, like throw a quarter in the pool and dive for it, here, throw the diamond in the pool. I mean, people, the way she dealt with it was just, you know, all over the map. You have, gee, I -- I've met people who had it for their wedding, you know, like the wedding thing, something old, something blue, whatever that thing is. You know, the something blue was the Hope Diamond.

TC: And if they ran it could have been something new.

RK: Ya.

TC: Really think about that for a second... the Hope Diamond... as a pool toy. (pause) Okay, it's easy to sneer about a wealthy woman who treated a wildly expensive diamond like a toy -- but there's also something pretty cool about it. Like her or not, Evalyn Walsh McLean's story was very sad. It starts with her oldest son, Vinson.

RK: When Vinson was six or seven in Washington he was crossing the street and he was hit by an automobile, a Model T Ford. He was knocked unconscious and later died. And all of a sudden newspapers around the country screamed "The curse of the Hope Diamond strikes again". And people who before kind of made fun of the curse of the Hope Diamond all of a sudden started whispering: "Maybe it's real."

TC: And... things kept getting harder for Evalyn and her husband, Ned.

RK: He ended up going insane. Was alcoholic, it was really terrible. They lost the Washington Post. Uh, and then, uh, later in life, her, uh, daughter committed suicide.

TC: It's absolutely horrible. But at the time, there were people who kinda felt like Evalyn deserved this, for her extravagant spending and lifestyle.

RK: So, was this just desserts? The very symbol of her own wealth and power -- the Hope Diamond -- was maybe the vehicle of her undoing.

TC: Evalyn Walsh McLean died in 1947 of pneumonia. And two years later, her estate sold the Hope Diamond for a mere 177 thousand dollars -- three thousand dollars less than what she paid for it.

RK: After Evalyn died, Harry Winston, uh, got the diamond on the cheap at a, uh, an estate sale, basically.

TC: And if the name Harry Winston is familiar... there's a good reason for that.

[Play short clip]

TC: He was called the King of Diamonds. And he didn't believe in the curse. The way that Kurin tells it -- Winston loved the United States and wanted to do his country a solid.

RK: You know, he felt like any half decent country had some collection of gems. Here was the U.S., kind of growing into a superpower post World War Two, and we didn't have any gems, so what the hell are we gonna do? So, he was going to provide it.

TC: And provide it he did. After touring the diamond around the US, Canada and Cuba for charity, Winston donated the Hope Diamond to the Smithsonian Institution, where hundreds of thousands of people see it every year. It became a national treasure. But on the subject of the curse, Richard Kurin sees less of a paranormal force... and more of a cautionary tale about modernity, wealth and western culture.

RK: I think in this case, the curse of the hope diamond was that here you have wealthy people that acquire stuff and acquire wealth and there's something unfair about it. And so isn't it interesting that the gods or the supernatural forces then, uh, take their revenge on those wealthy people?

TC: At its core, the Hope Diamond's curse is just a story -- one that first appeared in the newspapers a century ago... and... it's made up. Fiction. But people use stories to make sense of uncomfortable truths. So if you look back at this story and see greedy people getting what they deserve -- maybe that's your version of the Hope Diamond's curse. Or you might see the story of people who wanted to own a remarkable piece of history and ultimately, they had bad luck. The story of the Hope Diamond is long enough that you can find in it whatever you want. But it does reveal a few truths: Wealth doesn't last forever. Neither does life. And misery can find you, even if you're among the richest people on Earth. For me? I just see a beautiful diamond, and I feel lucky that I *can* see it... because if it wasn't here at the Smithsonian, it would be locked away, hidden from the world, maybe even at the bottom of an eccentric billionaire's swimming pool.

[CREDITS]

TC: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. If you want to see the see the Hope Diamond in person, it's located on the second floor of the National Museum of Natural History in the Harry Winston Gallery. And don't forget to join us next time, when we travel to Panama to explore an archaeological mystery more than 700 years in the making. Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian National Board. It's also supported, in part, by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, enhancing public understanding of science, technology, and economic performance. More information at Sloan DOT org. And thanks, as well, to listeners like you, who allow the Smithsonian to keep doing its amazing work. Sadly, our AMAZING associate producer, Rachel Aronoff, is leaving us to pursue a new life out West. We're going to miss her in SO many ways... but we all know you can never really leave the Sidedoor family. Rachel, you are stuck with us in spirit. And since this is Rachel's last episode on the staff -- I wanted to get her in the studio to read the credits. So... for one last curtain call... here's Sidedoor associate producer Rachel Aronoff.

Rachel Aronoff: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Rachel Aronoff, Jason Orfanon, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Elisabeth Pilger. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. Extra support comes from John Barth, and Genevieve Sponsler. If you'd like to sponsor Sidedoor, please email sponsor AT PRX DOT org. I'm Rachel Aronoff. I have a parrot. Over and out.

TC: And I'm your host, Tony Cohn. Thanks for listening!

[Music out]