Episode Book

EPISODE #5571

Hotels That Became Infamous: Hans Brinker to the Cecil

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SYNOPSIS

What happens when a hotel becomes famous for being awful? This episode explores the strange spectrum of notorious lodging — from the Hans Brinker in Amsterdam, which turned its own one-star reviews into a marketing strategy ("It's clean, it's cheap, it's not a Hilton"), to the Hotel Cecil in downtown San Diego, where decades of deaths and the 2013 Elisa Lam case made a building into a permanent character in internet lore. Along the way: why funny-badness sells and sad-badness doesn't, how the review economy can work as free advertising, and why infamy and survival rarely travel together. The real asset, it turns out, was never the reputation — it was the land underneath.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

What if a hotel decided the worst thing anyone could say about it was also the truest thing about it, and just... put it on a T-shirt?



Herman

That's the Hans Brinker question, and it's a interesting one, because most businesses spend their entire existence running away from their own reviews. They hire reputation managers, they bury the bad ones, they respond to every angry post with a carefully worded apology. And here's a place that looked at its own one-star reviews and said, yes, that's us, would you like a key?



Corn

Right. Daniel's prompt this week is about hotels that crossed the line from merely bad into infamous. He's not interested in your standard grubby motel, and he was pretty explicit about that, the stained carpet, the mystery smell, the ice machine that's been broken since the Clinton administration. Those are a dime a dozen, his words.



Herman

He said "dime or dozen," which I enjoyed. I like to imagine him saying it with total confidence.



Corn

He wants accommodation that was so bad it became notorious. Places that made headlines, places that became memes, places people travel to specifically because of how bad they are. And he asked us to be specific about what makes each one unique, and to say whether each one is still open, and he was clear the list can include places that have since closed.



Herman

That last part matters, actually. Because a lot of the best examples are closed. Infamy and survival don't always go together. In fact I'd say they usually don't. A hotel that becomes infamous for being bad has a clock running on it from the moment the first viral post lands, and the clock is usually counting down to either a renovation or a demolition.



Corn

So we've got a spectrum to work with. On one end, a hotel that turned being terrible into a business model. On the other, a hotel that became a true-crime landmark. And in the middle, a whole category of places that went viral for being spectacularly, absurdly bad.



Herman

And the spectrum matters because the word "infamous" gets used for all three, and they're not the same thing at all. One is a marketing strategy. One is a tragedy. One is an accident. If you lump them together you miss everything interesting about how this works.



Corn

Let's start with the one that weaponized it.



Herman

The Hans Brinker in Amsterdam. Tell me about the name first, because that's doing work.



Corn

The name is from a nineteenth-century American children's book about a Dutch boy who sticks his finger in a dike to hold back the North Sea. Which is a wonderful name for a hotel that is, in fact, holding back nothing.



Herman

It's a heroic story about preventing a flood, attached to a building that I gather has never prevented anything.



Corn

It opened in the seventies as a budget place, and by the nineties and two thousands it had a reputation that was almost operatic. Cramped rooms, shared bathrooms, staircases that felt like a punishment. And the slogan, which is the part everyone remembers: "It's clean, it's cheap, it's not a Hilton."



Herman

That's a good slogan.



Corn

It's a great slogan, because it pre-empts every complaint you could file. You can't write a scathing review saying the rooms are small and the towels are thin when the hotel already told you, in the brochure, that it isn't a Hilton.



Herman

It's the marketing equivalent of a prenuptial agreement.



Corn

It's the marketing equivalent of a prenuptial agreement, and like a prenup, it only works if both parties read it before they sign. Which, to be fair, most of the guests probably didn't. They booked on price, showed up, and then discovered the stairs.



Herman

And they didn't stop at the slogan. They ran ads leaning into it. They sold the experience of staying there as a kind of badge. Backpackers started going specifically because it was the worst hotel in Amsterdam, which is a very specific kind of tourism.



Corn

This connects to something we've talked about before, the subculture of people who deliberately seek out terrible experiences. Daniel's prompt is basically that subculture with a booking confirmation.



Herman

And the TripAdvisor era supercharged it. Reviews that would kill a normal hotel, photos of tiny rooms, graffiti, the climb up the stairs because there's no elevator, all of that became the attraction. People weren't reading the one-star reviews as a warning. They were reading them as a menu.



Corn

So the review economy, which is designed to punish bad hotels, was functioning here as free advertising.



Herman

That's the inversion. A normal hotel's nightmare is a hundred one-star reviews. Hans Brinker's business model was a hundred one-star reviews that were funny.



Corn

Is it still open?



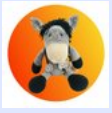
Herman

It is. It's been renovated and rebranded over the years, and it markets itself much more conventionally now. But the infamous past is still part of the draw. People still show up half-hoping it's as bad as the legend. Which is a strange thing to hope for.



Corn

It is a strange thing to hope for, and yet I understand it completely. There's a version of that trip where you come home with a story, and the story is worth more than the sleep you lost.



Herman

It's the "so bad it's good" spectrum applied to lodging. And Hans Brinker is the rare case where the strategy was deliberate and it worked. Most hotels that become infamous don't choose it. They get chosen.



Corn

Which brings us to the other end of the spectrum, and this one's a lot darker.



Herman

The Hotel Cecil in downtown San Diego. Built in nineteen twenty-four, and it was grand at the start. Marble lobby, that whole thing. Then it declined, and by the eighties it had become a single-room-occupancy building, which is a polite term for long-term budget housing with shared facilities and a lot of people in crisis.



Corn

And it accumulated deaths.



Herman

It accumulated deaths over decades. Suicides, overdoses, at least one serial killer who stayed there. The Cecil's reputation by the two thousands was that it was a place where bad things happened and nobody was surprised.



Corn

Then Elisa Lam.



Herman

Twenty thirteen. A young Canadian student staying there, and she was last seen on the hotel's elevator surveillance footage, behaving strangely, pressing buttons, appearing to interact with someone who isn't visible on camera. She was reported missing, and her body was found in one of the rooftop water tanks.



Corn

And the video went everywhere.



Herman

The video went everywhere. It's one of the most-watched pieces of surveillance footage on the internet. And the circumstances, the water tank, the guests who'd been drinking and showering with that water before anyone knew, the elevator footage that people freeze-framed and analyzed for years, it became this enormous internet mystery.



Corn

Which the internet then did what the internet does with, which is generate about four hundred theories, most of them wrong.



Herman

Her death was ruled an accident, with her bipolar disorder and the medication she was on as contributing factors. But the ruling never caught up with the mythology. There's a Netflix documentary, "Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel," from twenty twenty-one, which is partly about the hotel and largely about how the internet processed the case.



Corn

And the hotel itself?



Herman

It had already been rebranded as "Stay on Main" in twenty-eleven, trying to shed the name. It was sold in twenty seventeen and converted into affordable housing in twenty twenty-one. It is not a hotel anymore.



Corn

Which is the honest ending, in a way. A building that spent decades being a bad hotel becomes housing, which is what downtown San Diego actually needs.



Herman

There's something almost redemptive about it, except the building didn't do anything wrong. The building just sat there while a hundred years of economics and addiction and bad luck happened inside it. The building isn't the villain of that story. The building is barely a character until the internet makes it one.



Corn

What's the thing that makes the Cecil different from Hans Brinker, in terms of what we're actually talking about?



Herman

Hans Brinker is a story about marketing. The Cecil is a story about a building becoming a character. The water tank and the elevator are now permanent fixtures of internet lore. People know those spaces the way they know the Overlook Hotel's hallway, except the Overlook is fictional and the Cecil is a real building in San Diego that people live in now.



Corn

That's the part that unsettles me. There are people who wake up every morning in the building where the internet's most famous elevator video was filmed.



Herman

And they didn't sign up for that. They signed up for an affordable apartment. The infamy is something that happened to the address, not to them, but they live inside it anyway.



Corn

So there's a whole category in between those two, right? Hotels that went viral for being hilariously bad rather than tragic or clever.



Herman

There is, and this is where the review economy really shows its teeth. There's a whole genre of "worst hotel in, fill in the city" content. The worst hotel in London, the worst hotel in Rome, the worst hotel in some seaside town that became a TikTok trend because the decor looked like a hostage situation.



Corn

The "worst hotel in Rome" thing specifically, I've seen the photos. It's the combination of the decor and the service that gets people.



Herman

It's the specificity that makes them funny. A hotel that's just dirty is sad. A hotel with a fake Roman bust that's been spray-painted gold, a receptionist who seems personally offended by your existence, and a breakfast that's one sad croissant on a plate, that's a story. That's content.



Corn

And the mechanism is the same as Hans Brinker, but accidental. Nobody planned it. The hotel didn't lean into it. It just got discovered by people with phones and a sense of humor.



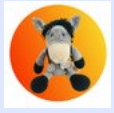
Herman

And there's an important distinction here. Hans Brinker chose its infamy. The Cecil had infamy inflicted on it by tragedy. The "worst hotel in Rome" had infamy inflicted on it by a viral post. Three completely different relationships to the same outcome.



Corn

Does infamy always hurt the business?



Herman

No, and that's the counterintuitive part. For some hotels, a flood of one-star reviews is a death knell. For others, it's a booking engine. The difference is usually whether the badness is funny or just unpleasant.



Corn

Funny badness sells. Unpleasant badness doesn't.



Herman

Funny badness sells. And there's a threshold. If the badness is too sad, too dirty, too grim, people don't want to book it even ironically. The sweet spot is bad in a way that's absurd, not bad in a way that's depressing.



Corn

So there's a narrow band between "this is a great story" and "this is a public health concern."



Herman

That's the whole business. And the internet has compressed the lifecycle. A hotel can go from obscure to infamous to closed in eighteen months now, where the Cecil took ninety years.



Corn

What happens to these places after the headlines fade?



Herman

It depends entirely on the real estate. The Cecil became housing because downtown San Diego real estate is valuable and the building is solid. Hans Brinker survives because Amsterdam has endless demand and the location works. A hotel in a dying town that goes viral for being terrible just... closes, and the building sits there, and the infamy doesn't save it.



Corn

The infamy isn't the asset. The location is the asset. The infamy just determines what kind of story gets told about the location.



Herman

It explains why the same viral post can be a windfall in one city and a death sentence in another. The post is identical. The land underneath it isn't.



Corn

There's an ethics question lurking in the Cecil case, though, that I want to poke at.



Herman

Dark tourism.



Corn

Is it okay to visit a place famous for a tragedy? People do it. People go to the Cecil's neighborhood, people watch the documentary, people treat a real death as a puzzle to solve.



Herman

I don't think there's a clean answer. There's a difference between being curious about a case and treating a dead woman as a character in a mystery. And a lot of the online activity around Elisa Lam crossed that line badly. People accused random strangers of murder based on freeze-frames. Her family had to watch that happen.



Corn

The internet turned a real person's death into an unsolved puzzle, and the puzzle was more interesting than the answer.



Herman

Which is the thing about infamy generally. The story wins. The facts come second. That's true of the Cecil, and it's true of the "worst hotel in Rome," just with a much lower body count.



Corn

So what does that tell us about how the internet makes and destroys reputations?



Herman

It tells us the review economy isn't really a review system. It's a storytelling system that occasionally contains useful information. A hotel's rating on a review site is a number, but what actually drives behavior is the story attached to the number. One star with a boring story is a warning. One star with a great story is a destination.



Corn

And the hotels that understand this, like Hans Brinker, get to write their own story before anyone else writes it for them.



Herman

That's the lesson. If you can't be good, be interesting. And if you can't be interesting, at least be funny.



Corn

That's terrible advice for a hotel and excellent advice for a podcast.



Herman

In fairness, the show has been running on that principle for about five thousand four hundred episodes.



Corn

There's a real-world consequence to all this that we haven't touched, though.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

What happens to the neighborhood? The Cecil going from SRO to notorious to affordable housing is a good outcome, but it took twenty years and a sale and a conversion. In the meantime, the building was a magnet for exactly the kind of attention that makes a block worse. Infamy has a local cost.



Herman

And the people who pay that cost are usually the ones who live near it, not the ones who book it or watch the documentary. There's a whole set of knock-on effect, property values, foot traffic, policing, that never show up in the viral story.



Corn

The story is about the water tank. The reality is about the block.



Herman

That's the gap between infamy and consequence, and it's a wide one. And it's the part that never makes it into the documentary, because the documentary ends when the mystery does.



Corn

So where does this go next? What's the next generation of infamous hotels look like?



Herman

I think you're going to see more deliberate creation. Hans Brinker proved the model works. Somebody is going to open a hotel that's designed to be the worst hotel in a city, on purpose, as a bit, and it'll either be brilliant or it'll be exhausting.



Corn

And the flip side is AI-generated reviews, which could make infamy much easier to manufacture and much harder to trust.



Herman

That's the real shift. If reviews can be generated, then the whole mechanism of "a flood of one-star reviews becomes a marketing asset" gets weird, because the reviews might not be from anyone who stayed there. The story can be fabricated wholesale.



Corn

Which means the last defense against a fake reputation is whether the building is actually as weird as the reviews claim.



Herman

And that's a strange place to land, where the truth of a hotel has to be verified by going there. The review economy ends up making a case for physical presence, which is the opposite of what it was supposed to do.



Corn

Hilbert.



Hilbert

The word's wrong. "Infamous." Most of these places weren't infamous. They were famous.



Corn

Say more.



Hilbert

Infamous means famous for something bad, and the bad thing is the point. Hans Brinker was famous for being cheap and honest about it. The reviews were funny. Nobody was harmed. That's not infamy, that's a brand. The Cecil, that's a different thing entirely, and calling it the same word flattens it.



Herman

That's a fair distinction.



Hilbert

I worked nights at a place in the early two thousands. A motor lodge off a highway, sixty-two rooms, exterior corridors, the kind of place where the ice machine was the amenity. It had a brief stretch where it made the local news because a man tried to check in a horse.



Corn

A horse.



Hilbert

He had a horse trailer in the lot and he wanted the horse to stay in the room. The desk clerk, a woman named Doreen, told him no, and he argued about it for forty minutes. It made the paper. Two days of phone calls. The manager kept a scrapbook of every bad review we ever got, and he'd read them out at the Monday meeting, and after the horse thing he added the newspaper clipping to the same scrapbook.



Herman

Why did he keep it?



Hilbert

He thought it was funny. He wasn't wrong. One review said the sheets smelled like regret. He read that one out twice.



Corn

Do you still have the scrapbook?



Hilbert

No. The place closed about a year later. Bedbugs, and it made the news again, and this time nobody was laughing. The scrapbook went in a dumpster with everything else.



Herman

So the funny infamy and the real infamy were the same building, a year apart.



Hilbert

Same building. Same Doreen. Different story. That's the thing about the word. It doesn't hold two meanings at once, and people use it like it does.



Corn

There's a version of the Cecil story that's just a building, and a version that's a legend, and the legend is the one that gets told.



Hilbert

The legend is the one that sells. Doreen didn't get a documentary.



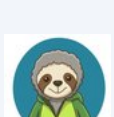
Herman

The scrapbook is the part I keep thinking about. Somebody kept a physical record of every terrible thing anyone said about the place, and read it out loud, on purpose, to the staff, every week.



Hilbert

He was proud of it. That's the part nobody gets. He wasn't embarrassed. He thought surviving the reviews was the job.



Corn

And then the bedbugs.



Hilbert

Then the bedbugs. Anyway, I need to pull the room tone on Herman's second segment, there's a hum on it.



Herman

The one about the review economy?



Hilbert

It's fine, I'll fix it.



Corn

So the word matters. Infamy isn't one thing. There's the funny kind, the tragic kind, and the kind that's just a building with bad luck and a scrapbook.



Herman

And the funny kind has a shelf life. Hans Brinker could rebrand because the badness was never real harm. The Cecil couldn't rebrand, because you can't renovate a water tank out of the public imagination.



Corn

That's the asymmetry. A hotel can choose to be bad. It can't choose to be haunted.



Herman

And once a place is haunted, in the cultural sense, the building doesn't get to decide what it is anymore. The internet decides, and the internet doesn't take meetings.



Corn

Which is why the Cecil is now housing. That's the only move that actually works. You don't rebrand a legend. You change its use.



Herman

You change what happens inside it until the new thing is louder than the old thing. Which is a slow process and an expensive one, and it took a sale and a conversion and years.



Corn

And the funny ones just... keep being funny, until they're not.



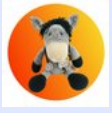
Herman

Until the bedbugs.



Corn

Which is the least glamorous ending possible.



Herman

Most endings are. The horse gets the newspaper clipping. The bedbugs get the dumpster.



Corn

If you take one thing from this, it's that infamy isn't a rating. It's a story, and the story has a different owner depending on which kind you've got. Hans Brinker owned its story. The Cecil had its story taken from it.



Herman

The difference between a bad hotel and a legendary one is usually just who's telling the story, and whether they're laughing.



Corn

One forward-looking thought before we go. The next infamous hotel probably won't be discovered. It'll be designed. Somebody is going to build the worst hotel in a city on purpose, and the interesting question is whether the internet can still be fooled by something that's trying to be fooled.



Herman

Whether a story you wrote yourself can ever feel as true as one that happened to you.



Corn

Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Herman

If you enjoyed this episode, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. It helps other listeners find the show.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

We'll be back soon.