

SHANNON:

My name is Shannon, and I'm a bath towel. And that's... that's my life.

IAN CHILLAG:

So, Shannon, I wanna talk about how you got to the home where you now live. My understanding is you were on a wedding registry.

SHANNON:

Well you know... it's... I didn't realise I was on a wedding registry. I just was like, I'm on a shelf. You know, I was on the shelf of a Macy's department store. Just hanging out. And you know, you'd see couples come, and do this, like they have those scanners. They'd come through and scan different products throughout the department store. And I noticed that, that we always got scanned a lot. So, I thought, Uh there's a good chance I'm gonna be going to a good home." And then one day, the cousin of the bride, who became my owner, came and picked me up. And I was put in a box with two other towels. I believe, 10 of us were chosen on the registry, but only three of us got picked out that day.

IAN CHILLAG:

So you went with two other towels?

SHANNON:

I did. Two other towels.

IAN CHILLAG:

So the cousin bought three towels?

SHANNON:

Yes. I don't think the cousin really cared for the bride. You know, they were like, they had a limit. I heard ... I remember hearing them say, This is my limit. And it was, I think, 40 dollars. So it was three towels for 40 dollars. And we were on sale. It was President's Day, weekend sale.

IAN CHILLAG:

Is it funny coming into a home with others that are exactly like you? I just thinking about, in our house, all the towels look exactly the same. And I never, I never actually know whether I'm using my towel or a towel that my wife was using.

SHANNON:

I guess I should clarify. I got a little lucky where the towels that were on the registry were all, it was all, it was like different shades.

IAN CHILLAG:

OK.

SHANNON:

So, I'm a darker, green colour. So I pop out more. And I often get the women of the home. The adult

women. Often. So, I spend a lot of time with her. She took possession of me, in a way. That she always likes to use me. And she loves baths.

IAN CHILLAG:

OK

SHANNON:

She showers when she, you know, has to do a quick, a quick rinse or something. But she prefers baths. 'Cause that's her alone time.

IAN CHILLAG:

It's interesting. It's like, It's her alone time. But, you are with her during her alone time.

SHANNON:

Oh yeah, 'cause I'm hanging on the towel rack closest to her so she.. so I'm in reach. She's always taken time to read. That's her reading time. Um, she's an avid book-starter. She starts a lot of books, but doesn't finish, doesn't finish a lot.

IAN CHILLAG:

And are you paying attention to what she's reading?

SHANNON:

Oh yeah, I... I watch her as she is reading to see how she is reacting. And she often seems like she's having a good time And then I'm... I try to think of, what it would be like to be to be in one of those books.

IAN CHILLAG:

To be...

SHANNON:

You know, like if I could, if I could towel off the Great Gatsby...

IAN CHILLAG:

Uhuh.

SHANNON:

..or the little women.

IAN CHILLAG:

Just dry off all the little women.

SHANNON:

Just dry off all the little women You know, they probably could use some comfort. And Harry Potter. I mean. Hagrid would be an interesting character to be the towel of.

IAN CHILLAG:

He has uh... he has a lot of surface area.

SHANNON:

Yeah, I'd probably be just one part. Maybe like his left hand. Oh, I imagine Mr Darcy.

IAN CHILLAG:

Mr Darcy? From 'Pride and Prejudice'? Takes a shower. And he dries himself off, with you?

SHANNON:

Yeah, but then, him wrapping me around his waist and can't remove me.

IAN CHILLAG:

You just like.. you're on Mr...

SHANNON:

I'm just like stuck. IAN CHILLAG:.. on Mr Darcy? Yeah.

IAN CHILLAG:

I wanna ask you about the time when you're not around people. You know, when the woman, say isn't there. Cause, I figure you have... most of your time is spent, you know, in the linen closet, or just hanging on the hook in the dark.

SHANNON:

Yeah, there's little, there's a couple little lights like on the... the toothbrush has a blue light 'cause it's charging

IAN CHILLAG:

OK.

SHANNON:

And, sometimes the moon comes through the window. You know, sometimes when I'm alone I start to think about, 'What if I'm too good at drying?'

IAN CHILLAG:

What if you're too good at drying?

SHANNON:

Yeah, what if I'm not just taking the water that's from the shower or the bath off their bodies. But, I start to suck out what's inside them.

IAN CHILLAG:

Humans are like, I think, something like 70% of water. So what if you took...

SHANNON:

Yeah. Could I dehydrate one of the humans to a point where they just like disintegrate?

IAN CHILLAG:

Leaving, leaving behind 30% of a person.

SHANNON:

Just a pile of clothes and skin.

IAN CHILLAG:

I'm just imagining piles of dust on the bathroom floor.

SHANNON:

Yeah. What if I kill one of my humans by accident? Yeah, I don't like that.

IAN CHILLAG:

Well, let me ask you this. This might be a strange question. You have a unique role in the house. You dry people off.

SHANNON:

Mhmm.

IAN CHILLAG:

Do you ever think about what it would be like if you didn't exist? Like if you, if you had never been created? If towels just weren't a thing? Do you think about what the people would do without you?

SHANNON:

Aah it's interesting. There was a week where the washer and dryer weren't working, and the family was waiting for it to be repaired. And they were using us over and over again. To a point where it's like, they couldn't use us anymore And the young boy of the household... I was on the top of the hamper, in the bathroom. And I noticed the little boy was just using his arms and squeegeeing himself.

IAN CHILLAG:

Uhuh.

SHANNON:

And I was like, Uh. Why don't they just do that? Right? You can just squeegee the water off your body. It's like you have hands, if you have hands to just squeegee all the water off and then you can... It goes away. You can stand in front of a fan. you can use a hairdryer. You could use a helicopter.

IAN CHILLAG:

Use a helicopter?

SHANNON:

Uhuh, they use helicopters to dry off cherries.

IAN CHILLAG:

I'm sorry?

SHANNON:

Imagine a cherry. And imagine you had to dry off, like, a bunch of cherries. You wouldn't want to just take a towel to every cherry, right?

IAN CHILLAG:

So, you just fly a helicopter over your fields of cherries?

SHANNON:

Yep, dries them off. Just a giant fan. So, why not? Yeah, just using a helicopter if you were a wet human. Just order a helicopter to do a fly-by, in your backyard. Whole family. Everyone takes a shower at the same time. You all go out at the same time, Helicopter comes. (FLYING NOISE)

IAN CHILLAG:

I guess there are other options. Yeah, I never thought about it.

SHANNON:

I'm airdrying oftentimes. So, if I'm airdrying, I think to myself why can't humans just airdry?

IAN CHILLAG:

I guess we could.

SHANNON:

Yeah. But, you seem to be in a rush. Lately, I've seen everyone seems to be more of a... in a rush. So, you're taking the time. Maybe you're just not taking the time to realise you can just airdry.

IAN CHILLAG:

So ultimately you exist because human beings aren't patient?

SHANNON:

Yes. Yeah. I make life easier. I guess you can get dressed quicker in the morning or getting ready for bed at night.

IAN CHILLAG:

You know, when you put it like that, I realise how much of human civilisation we have you to thank for. Like all that time we might have spent airdrying. You know, we could build things, (PHONE RINGING) to build our cities, make art. Hi, I'm calling for Sam. He's a junior.

PHONE ATTENDANT:

Yes, uhm, hold on one second and I'm gonna transfer you to where he should be.

IAN CHILLAG:

OK, thank you so much.

TELEPHONE ATTENDANT:

Give me one second, sure.

(CALL ON HOLD MUSIC)

AUTOMATED PHONE VOICE:

Thank you for waiting.

SAM:  
Hello?

IAN CHILLAG:  
Hey Sam.

SAM:  
Hey, is this Ian?

IAN CHILLAG:  
Yeah, how are you doing?

SAM:  
I'm good, how are you?

IAN CHILLAG:  
Pretty good. Thanks for doing this. Are you skipping class right now?

SAM:  
Right now, I have something called an SRT, which is a student resource time. So, this is like my free time to work on homework, or play video games, or do whatever I wanna do.

IAN CHILLAG:  
So you are, is it fair to say, you are a star-math student?

SAM:  
Yeah. I guess so. I like to not think of myself that way, but some say I'm a star-math student.

IAN CHILLAG:  
Ok, so, I sent you a bunch of numbers. I sent you the fact that the bath towel, as we know it, was invented in around the year 1600. I sent you some global population numbers since then. And, I wanna figure out how far back human civilisation would be if the bath towel had never been invented.

SAM:  
So, predicting how far behind how human civilisation would be is pretty hard to do. But, I can tell you how many minutes we have saved using bath towels, instead of airdrying.

IAN CHILLAG:  
OK

SAM:  
So, right now in this problem, we're talking about all the people in the whole world's population, for over 400 years.

IAN CHILLAG:  
OK (GIGGLES)

SAM:

So, this is a pretty tough problem. And, whenever I try to tackle a large problem like this, I try to focus on the simpler one first. So, let's just focus on one person, in one year.

IAN CHILLAG:

OK, you ran all the numbers on this. And you've calculated the total. How much time does the average person save, over the course of the year, by using a towel instead of air-drying?

SAM:

Well, they save 1,881 minutes a year by using a bath towel. That's almost 30 thirty hours that each person saves by drying using a bath towel.

IAN CHILLAG:

So, a towel gives me a little more than a day, a year, back?

SAM:

Yeah, it gives a lot of time back.

IAN CHILLAG:

OK so, at this point, as we take the figure and spread it out across every person, who has existed in the world since 1600, the maths gets very complicated, tell me what you came up with. How much time would the human race have wasted air-drying, if the bath towel had never been invented?

SAM:

Our answer comes out to be, across all people, collectively we would have lost 2.7 billion years. For reference, Earth itself, only existed 4.5 billion years ago.

IAN CHILLAG:

So basically, if we add up all the time each individual saved, add that all up, and subtract it from the life of the Earth, everything that has ever happened in your life or mine, or every human's life, has never happened.

SAM:

Basically.

(PIANO MUSIC PLAYING)

IAN CHILLAG:

So, Shannon, I wanna ask, you're around naked people.

SHANNON:

Uhuh, yeah, a lot.

IAN CHILLAG:

And I think, some people are uncomfortable being naked. Is this something you pick up on or is no-one uncomfortable when they are just with you?

SHANNON:

No, I have nothing. I'm the one that is covering them should someone... if I am on their body and

someone walks in, I'm at least covering them. But, even then sometimes they get a little scared. Even if I am covering them.

IAN CHILLAG:

I realised recently, I got a phone call and I was naked. I had just gotten out of the shower, and my phone rang, and I answered it. And then I realised that felt wrong Even though the person who called was somewhere else I felt weird being on the phone while I was naked.

SHANNON:

Oh, like you felt like a pervert?

IAN CHILLAG:

No. No, I guess I just felt, I felt exposed or something.

SHANNON:

Yeah. What if someone just called you and said, Hey, I'm naked. How would you feel? But then, you just had a normal phone call about - whatever?

IAN CHILLAG:

Like, what if it was a customer service call? And the representative just started out with saying... "Your call may be monitored..."

SHANNON:

"Your call may be monitored and also you should know I'm naked. How can I help you?"

IAN CHILLAG:

..yeah.

SHANNON:

I think people should get to a place where that shouldn't bother them.

IAN CHILLAG:

There is something people do, I think people that are uncomfortable with public speaking. They say you should imagine the audience naked.

SHANNON:

I've heard that , and i never understood that.

IAN CHILLAG:

Yeah.

SHANNON:

Why would you wanna imagine the audience naked? I think it would better if you imagined that everybody was sleeping.

IAN CHILLAG:

If you just imagine...



SHANNON:

Just imagine that everyone in the audience is asleep. That way if you don't get a reaction, it's okay 'cause they're asleep.

IAN CHILLAG:

And, if they're asleep, you don't have to get nervous that people are looking at you.

SHANNON:

Yeah, 'cause if they are naked... I don't know, I don't understand that.

IAN CHILLAG:

I think about how the women in the house, how you're, you know, you're hers. And, you know, she chooses you. And I realise I don't, I don't have a favourite towel. Like, to me, I feel weird saying this to you, but I, you know, I just pick the one that's nearest to me.

SHANNON:

I didn't, I didn't know that. I didn't know people don't have favourite towels.

IAN CHILLAG:

It may just be me.

SHANNON:

I, yeah... I guess I just assumed that thing that dries you off and takes care of you, you would have one that you, you prefer. Cause yeah, like, the woman as a favourite pair of sneakers,, pair of sneakers, and she has a favourite bra, and a favourite sweater, and I'm her favourite towel I can't imagine not... I feel... I guess I feel bad for you.

IAN CHILLAG:

Uhuh.

SHANNON:

You could have a favourite towel.

IAN CHILLAG:

Yeah, I could.

SHANNON:

Yeah. I have a lot of dreams about where I could be. Where I could've gone. Like, if the cousin never selected me. where else could I have ended up? Like, if you were born... when you were born, what if someone stole you? You could have a different life right now.

IAN CHILLAG:

Different family...

SHANNON:

Uhuh.

IAN CHILLAG:

..no family...

SHANNON:

Yeah.

IAN CHILLAG:

..better family.

SHANNON:

Uhuh.

IAN CHILLAG:

What's one of the other place you've thought about?

SHANNON:

Oh. There is this one place That, I don't know if you know this, but when astronauts have gone to the moon, they leave stuff behind. And they have left towels on the moon.

IAN CHILLAG:

There are towels on the moon?

SHANNON:

Uhuh. You don't need a towel while you're flying back to Earth, so they left some towels on the moon. And I bet that's a pretty... I think it's pretty cool to be up there.

IAN CHILLAG:

So right now, when I look up at the moon, there are some towels up there?

SHANNON:

Yeah, amongst other stuff. But to me, the most important thing is that there's towels. I mean I'm just laying... I could just be laying there. Looking at the sky all the time. And as the different planets rotate, I mean I could see Earth, All the different parts, different parts of Earth.

IAN CHILLAG:

And you're looking down at all the oceans and...

SHANNON:

Uhuh. And being like, I don't have to suck up that water. Yeah

IAN CHILLAG:

Do you ever think about... I was just thinking about all the books you talked about. Do you ever think about, like, what if you could tell a story? Like a book like that?

SHANNON:

Yeah, I mean I actually have... ..have a book that... I mean I haven't written it cause I'm a towel.

IAN CHILLAG:

Right.

SHANNON:

But it's.... Do you wanna....

IAN CHILLAG:

Why, I'd love to hear about it.

SHANNON:

Do you wanna... hear about my book?

IAN CHILLAG:

Yeah.

SHANNON:

OK well, it's called, 'The Towel'.

IAN CHILLAG:

OK. Rightly, you know.

SHANNON:

And so there's, uhm, there's a towel. And nobody likes it.

(EMOTIONAL MUSIC)

And it lives on an island, and the people there, they banish it to go live with the animals. The animals, they're smart. They take the towel in, cause they see that it's not just a towel. I mean, there's a sloth that uses as a blanket.

IAN CHILLAG:

OK.

SHANNON:

And one day, it gets to be a table cloth at a big feast Then there's one day that there's a baby zebra that swims out too far into a pond, and she can't get back. They put the towel in the water and, the towel soaks up the whole pond and then the baby zebra is suddenly safe on dry land. But the humans keep on saying the towel is useless, it's just a towel. So, then one day, a fire breaks out. And the animals, they try and they wave the towel at the fire, to try and blow it out, but it just makes the fire spread. You know, 'cause they're animals and they don't know much about fire safety.

IAN CHILLAG:

Sure.

SHANNON:

The humans say, Just use the towel to smother the fire, it's just a towel." But the animals, they refuse to sacrifice the towel. The wind is strong and it's spreading the fire all over the island, but still the animals refuse. So instead, they build a boat, and they hoist the towel up the big mast, and the towel becomes the big sail. And the animals invite all the humans to escape with them, like, Get on

the boat with us, come on." Then they sail off toward the horizon, and everyone is safe.

(PIANO MUSIC TRAILS OFF)

IAN CHILLAG:

That's a really great story.

SHANNON:

Yeah but, (GIGGLES), What's really good about this story is what the humans don't realise is the animals only invited them because they need, they needed food.

(UPBEAT MUSIC)

NARRATOR:

This is, Everything is alive. The show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag Special thanks to Emily Spivack, Eva Wolchover, and Isabella Kulkarni. Special thanks to Sam Mitchell, for helping us with our math and we grateful to the reporting of Tony Briscoe, from whom we first learnt about the practice of using helicopters to dry things. Shannon, The Bath Towel, was played by Shannon O'Neill. Music in this episode is by Blue Dot Sessions. Everything is Alive' is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Without Julie Shapiro, executive producer, we would be left behind on the island. You can find any number of ways of getting in touch with us with us on [everythingisalive.com](http://everythingisalive.com). We'll see you soon.