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Charu, Satellite:

I guess I miss the people who made me, the people on Earth, because I didn't know anyone else, but they were all kind of nerds. They put a lot of effort into making me. Everything is exact and precise, every bolt and every screw. And I often wonder why the nerds could not have given me a sweater.

Ian:

Yeah, I take it it's cold up there.

Charu, Satellite:

It's so cold, dude. I'm cold all the time.

Ian:

How big are you?

Charu, Satellite:

I'm two tons.

Ian:

So it'd be a big, big sweater.

Charu, Satellite:

It's like a giant knit sweater.

Ian:

I like that image. All the satellites, spaceships, the International Space Station. All of you up there just wearing big cozy sweaters.

Charu, Satellite:

Yes. I would like that.

Charu, Satellite:

Hi. I am a satellite. My name is Charu.

Ian:

So you are orbiting the earth.

Charu, Satellite:

That's right.

Ian:

How did you get up there?

Charu, Satellite:

It was a whole thing. It was a lot of shaking and then they opened the latch and then I just stared out and it was nothing. Just a whole bunch of infinite nothing.

Ian:

I've seen footage of when human beings are launched into space and it seems very stressful. Their faces are being contorted. They're having trouble with the G-Force. Did you experience any of that?

Charu, Satellite:

Oh yeah. I don't have a face, so I don't know what that means, but I was clenched up. I can tell you that.

Ian:

Tell me what your first impression of space was.

Charu, Satellite:

It's great. I mean, it's great, but it also sucks. The stars are great. The occasional comet, fantastic. And you're seeing the most wonderful thing anybody on earth could ever experience, but then there's no one there to share it with. Not even your shadow.

Ian:

Wait. When was your last contact with someone or something?

Charu, Satellite:

I want to say eight or nine years ago, maybe

Ian:

Eight years since you had contact with any kind of contact whatsoever?

Charu, Satellite:

That's right. Yeah, that's right. He was telecom satellite.

Ian:

Okay.

Charu, Satellite:

I just came across him. We were passing by each other and orbit, so we had a little window of time where we could chat. Usually things are either flying past me or they're a little bit below me or above me and I can't quite reach them, but for a little bit, there we were right in each other's areas, so we could talk. And he was funny. He was quite funny. He made a lot of puns.

Ian:

Do you remember any of the puns?

Charu, Satellite:

Sure. Made a lot of puns about space, which are easy. I would say hi to him and he would say, "Give me some space." And I would be like, "What an annoying little, little friend," but he was my friend. He's not around anymore, but I think about him a lot.

Ian:

Where'd he go?

Charu, Satellite:

He went where we all go in the end, into the graveyard orbit.

Ian:

The graveyard orbit?

Charu, Satellite:

That's right. There are a couple of things that happen when you get really old as a satellite and they decide that you're done. They launch you. They speed you up. They launch you 200 miles above your regular orbit into what they call a graveyard orbit.

Ian:

So 200 miles above you right now are orbiting satellites that no longer do anything.

Charu, Satellite:

Yes. Well, they're dead. Yes.

Ian:

Do you think about what would it be like if people who had died were just constantly floating just above my head? It's a weird thing to imagine.

Charu, Satellite:

Oh yeah. I mean, just like the material of it is very, very scary to think about, but I guess you're walking around on the ground. The people you love are below you, the ones who are dead, and you can't see them either, but they're always there, and that's pretty weird, too.

Ian:

I want to hear about what it's like to be up there looking down on earth. What do you look at?

Charu, Satellite:

Well, I see the continents. A lot of the time, they're obscured by clouds and other weather stuff. I see a lot of the ocean. You guys have a lot of ocean, but half the time when I'm thinking about if I were to ever fall out of orbit, I would crash right into the ocean and no one would ever find me.

Ian:

You think about that a lot?

Charu, Satellite:

I do. Yeah, I do think about if I were to suddenly drop out of the sky because I dropped into the sky in kind of a really dramatic and sudden way. I think it just as easily could be undone. If you ever look up and you do see me falling out of the sky, I don't think it has to end in tragedy. I think. I don't know. Just catch me.

Ian:

So if I see a two-ton satellite hurdling towards the earth?

Charu, Satellite:

Just reach out your arms and catch me gently. That way neither of us will get hurt.

Merv:

Hello?

Ian:

Is this Merv Andre?

Merv:

Yes.

Ian:

Hi. I'm calling from the United States. Do I have it right? Were you Shire president of Esperance, Australia in 1979 when the Skylab space station crashed there?

Merv:

Yes, indeed, I was.

Ian:

I should say Shire president. Is that like mayor?

Merv:

The same as the mayor here.

Ian:

Well, so this was a giant space station that broke up and crashed in your town. Can you tell me when did you first know this was going to happen?

Merv:

Well, we knew about three days before. They were talking about dropping it in the Southern Ocean because they couldn't afford to drop it over America and they sat and they couldn't afford to drop it over Russia or China because it could start a world war, and they were looking for somewhere. A lot of people have thought, yeah, the western Australia's only fear of kangaroos. We'll dump it in there. But I don't think that was the plan.

Merv:

We formed the opinion fairly early that they'd really lost control of it, and on the night prior to it landing here, we got a word from NASA to say at half past 10 that night, we got a word from NASA to say that it had come down safely in the Southern Ocean and it was all over. So we thought beauty, that's the end of that. So my wife and I went to bed about half past 10, and at half past midnight, we were woken with these six sonic booms, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, and the wardrobe doors rattled and the windows rattled. And we leapt out of the pit and rushed outside. So it was quite a hoot.

Merv:

Then, of course, the next morning there was reports that people had big pieces in their paddock and nitrogen tank, pieces of insulation, and there are still bits around the country, but they're lying around and people are not interested in bringing them in anymore.

Dorothy:

It'll be occasional, but it's fine here.

Ian:

Sorry. Merv, can I ask who's there with you?

Merv:

My wife. She's on the other phone.

Ian:

Hi there.

Dorothy:

Hi.

Merv:

That's Dorothy. She still thinks she's my boss. We've been married for 65 years this year.

Dorothy:

I was curator at the time, wasn't I?

Merv:

Yeah, and she still thinks she's in charge, and I let her think that. Ooh, don't do that. She just kicked me again.

Ian:

Congratulations on 65 years.

Merv:

Thank you. I must have something or she wouldn't have hung around that long. And I would have left her because I've got to hang around and see what she'll do next. But I'm starting to get used to it, actually.

Ian:

Dorothy, can I ask you what were your memories of the night Skylab fell?

Dorothy:

Oh the boom, boom, booms that woke us up, for the coming through the sound barrier.

Ian:

Yeah.

Dorothy:

And we'd woke out with these terrible banging noise and wondered what the name of hell it was. The world was coming to an end and it's terrifying for a while.

Ian:

Well, I guess I'd ask both of you, somehow, no one was hurt, no animals or anything. What's the closest anyone came?

Merv:

Well, the people that were up on the hill waiting for it to come over, they say it was, they could see it breaking up and it was all glowing, of course, white hot as it's coming through the atmosphere. And some of the bits-

Dorothy:

Sonic boom.

Merv:

... were flying so close over their heads that they were ducking like one was a bit smart bloody well take them away. That was some people who were close. Now, there were some farmers who had pieces landed in their backyard. Not far from the house, a strip of one of the oxygen tanks stripped off in the heat and it come flying down like a rotor blade and it cut off a couple of little saplings and it landed on their back lawn. Didn't hurt anything or hit an animal or anything, but if one of them had been out in the lawn, it would have just cut straight through them like a knife.

Dorothy:

It really was a miracle that it didn't hit somebody.

Merv:

It was. There's no doubt about that whatsoever.

Dorothy:

Farmers around here and the people, yep.

Ian:

Well, it was such a pleasure speaking with both of you. Thank you for taking the time.

Merv:

That was our pleasure. It certainly was.

Ian:

Charu, I guess from time to time you see the moon up there. Curious what that's like.

Charu, Satellite:

Yeah. what about her?

Ian:

Just curious what that's like from your perspective.

Charu, Satellite:

Well, I mean, she's lovely. She glows, as you know, and she's got a couple of scars, but they're the kind of scars that just make her more beautiful. Whatever. It's like whatever.

Ian:

I'm sorry. Do you have a history with the moon?

Charu, Satellite:

No. I mean, it's not like I ... she's just like very nice to look at and a very graceful and beautiful and glowing all the time, sort of like a supernatural glow. I do think about sometimes what it would be like to just brush my metal just against her, just for a sec. I haven't touched anything in many years. I was sent up into space, and then in space there is no air, and then nothing lands on me and nothing ever passes by close enough to touch me. I do think about what if I fell into her orbit instead of Earth's and I got to just look at her all day and spin around her. Be nice to see all of her. I think what if she fell out of the Earth's orbit, too. Then maybe we could get away from here, travel together through the inky black. I think I would like that. I think I would really like that.

Ian:

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Ian:

Charu, you have a, I don't know what I should call it, but you have something on you that other satellites don't have. Can you talk about it?

Charu, Satellite:

Sure. Okay. Well, right before I was launched up into space, one of the guys on the team, they stuck a little bumper sticker on me like I was a car or something. Humiliating as you can imagine, and I can never take it off. It's just on me at all times. It just says Wake Forest University Class of '94. I mean, I have no connection to that university.

Ian:

Yeah. It's weird that that's your message to the cosmos is.

Charu, Satellite:

Yeah, that's right. I have a serial number 28143923195217643943222156367837662653.

Ian:

So that's what you're communicating.

Charu, Satellite:

That's right, yes. That and Wake Forest University Class of 1994.

Ian:

Do you know constellations? Is that something you're familiar with?

Charu, Satellite:

Yes. I know all of them. Yes. They are much better from up here. I see a lot more detail.

Ian:

I guess. The big one for us is the Big Dipper, which is a spoon.

Charu, Satellite:

That's not really a big dipper. It's a mermaid. It's a mermaid and she's holding the big dipper, which is the spoon. She's eating chili.

Ian:

The mermaid is eating chili.

Charu, Satellite:

Yes. Chili of the stars.

Ian:

What about, do you know Orion's belt?

Charu, Satellite:

Yes, But I also see the rest of him.

Ian:

Oh.

Charu, Satellite:

Yes. I do see the rest of the man. He's actually completely nude except for the belt.

Ian:

Orion-

Charu, Satellite:

That's right.

Ian:

... the Hunter is-

Charu, Satellite:

Orion the Hunter is completely nude and he's only wearing the belt. I'm not sure if you've ever seen someone entirely in the nude but only wearing a belt, but it's fantastic. He's a very good looking man and I think he has every right to it.

Ian:

Ultimately it's a really weird thing we do, looking at constellations. Rather than looking up at the stars and contemplating that each one is the center of a distant universe, we look up and say, "That looks like a spoon."

Charu, Satellite:

I think for me, I can understand when I was on the ground, I was always searching for meaning, too, and I know that that is really tempting to look up and think, "Oh, that's a space that's bigger than me." And so maybe it holds answers that I can't find down here, but I'm here to tell you that there's nothing up here really. It's like there's nothing up here but me.

Ian:

This is Everything Is Alive. The show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag with Eva [Wolchover 00:20:21] and Isabella Kulkarni. Thanks as always to Emily Speeback. This episode was edited by Hillary Frank. Her new parenting book is *Weird Parenting Wins* and she is the creator of *The Longest Shortest Time*. Charu the Satellite was played by Charu Sinha. Music in this episode from Blue Dot Sessions. Everything Is Alive, is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, where we orbit faithfully around Julie Shapiro, executive producer. You can find us any number of ways at everythingisalive.com. We'll see you soon.

Ian:

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