

Alligator, Alligator

ALLIGATOR:

I am 'Alligator'. I am a stuffed animal. I live with my boy and his family and I don't know, what else can I tell you?

IAN CHILLAG:

Well, maybe for our listeners that can't see what you look like, can you just describe your appearance for us, as best you can?

ALLIGATOR:

I'm green, you know. I'm a couple...couple feet long. I am an alligator, at least, that's what they call me. It's possible I am a crocodile. The distinctions are subtle, especially once you're, you know, plush. I mean you can tell an alligator from a crocodile by their teeth.

IAN CHILLAG:

How is that?

ALLIGATOR:

My teeth are... Yeah, I mean like if you ever watch 'Animal Planet', which I do a lot, you'd know that, but my teeth are made out of felt.

IAN CHILLAG:

Let's... Why don't you tell me a little bit about the boy that...is it, I mean, should I say you belong to him? Or what's the right terminology?

ALLIGATOR:

Well, yeah. I mean, I think...I think, I think, belonged is tangled up with him I think is...better. Like, my boy, I mean, when he started out I was bigger than...than he was when they first gave me to him. I was, I was longer than him and he's just gotten bigger and bigger, and I got to say he's much longer now. He's a very long boy.

IAN CHILLAG:

How did you all... How did you end up together?

ALLIGATOR:

Don't know, honestly. My first memory is of just like a face, was a woman's face and it just kinda went by. I was moving by on something and there was a big room, a lot of noise and things. And looking back on it now, knowing what I know now, it was probably a factory, right? But I've had a moment there where...where somebody must've looked at me and saw me as an alligator and not like a product, and that's when we wake up is when somebody connects with us.

And the next thing I know, I'm being, like, put in the cradle with my boy and that was it. Like, when the boy looks at me, I'm always awake. I always wake up because he sees me, right? He sees Alligator.

IAN CHILLAG:

So, you are, as you said, you're, 'Alligator', you're also an alligator. You're a, I guess, a representation of, you know, the real creature in alligators. Do you... What do you know about them? What do you think about, you know, actual alligators?

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ALLIGATOR:

Well, you know. I don't think they could do my job and I also don't think I could do theirs. For one thing, I'd probably get eaten by an alligator.

IAN CHILLAG:

Well, is it? Let's actually...let's imagine what it would be like for you to be in a swamp with alligators. I'll fit up a little swamp sound here.

MISS SWAMP:

Well... Woah. Alright, so, there I am Miss swamp, miss grass. It's humid out, I mean, I know humidity I've been in a washing machine. Bugs, a lot of bugs and alligators, they're all laying there. I'm probably bobbing there. I mean, what if one of these Gators decided that he wanted to...he wanted to cuddle me. They got little arms, you know. They could put those little arms around me. I've never met an alligator, they could be all right. But yeah, I know I'd be looking out for people because that's my thing. Yeah, I imagine like a boy, you know, like walking down the the shoreline there and he's, he's got a stick and he's poking in the in the weeds and, and he's coming toward me and I think, God, maybe he'll, you know, maybe he'll see me and he'll, you know, he'll see me as, you know, alligator and grab me out of there. You know, but... Yeah, but what if he... What if we did that, you know, and he came close to me and one of these other alligators went for, you know? I don't know. I don't think I wanna talk about this anymore. I don't like...I don't like that whole scene.

IAN CHILLAG:

You know, thinking about you as an alligator, as a representation of an alligator. You strike me as very warm. And you know, alligators are this reputation of being, you know, just cold and really terrifying.

ALLIGATOR:

Yeah, well, I mean, the difference is that alligators, real alligators, have to eat, right? So, they got to put on a show. But you know there...alligators faces are more sensitive than the human fingertip. Now, think of that, like, the human fingertip. Like you can touch...you can feel the tiniest, smallest, little thing with your fingertip. Temperature and if something's like vibrating, you know, a piano or something, you feel that.

And an alligator's face is more sensitive than that. Like, when it's laying at the bottom of a swamp, it is feeling all of this stuff - little stuff swimming by. And it knows when something that is good to eat is in the area and coming by and that's all feeling it's...with its face.

IAN CHILLAG:

That's so weird to think about.

ALLIGATOR:

I mean, imagine what it could do with its snout is sensitive as a finger, the gentle caress of an alligator's face. Yeah, I'll bet it happens. I mean, I bet it could play the violin.

IAN CHILLAG:

You know, that's a much...that's a much better swamp scene to think about. Let's redo it and we'll change the ending.

ALLIGATOR:

Oh, yeah. You know, maybe he'll see me and he'll, you know, he'll see me as, you know, alligator and grab me out of there. You know, but... Yeah, but what if he...what if he did that,

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and he came close to me and one of these other alligators? You're pulled out of violin and started playing in the song.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC)

And all the other alligators they gathered round. The song was beautiful and everything in the swamp just, kind of, quieted down to listen.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC)

And the boy took me and we walked away.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC)

And then one of the alligators ate the violin.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC)

IAN CHILLAG:

So, Alligator, you mentioned earlier watching television. I assume...assume with the boy. Tell me what that's like?

ALLIGATOR:

Oh, well, I'm the neck pillow which is great because I've got...he's got my tail sticking out one side of his head and my head sticking out the other, and I got the best seat in the house. I see everything he sees, I hear everything he hears and so I'm I get it, I get the gist of the story.

IAN CHILLAG:

What's your favourite television show?

ALLIGATOR:

Well, 'SpongeBob SquarePants'. I just think, in a way, I probably relate to SpongeBob, in a way, because he's, you know. He's absorbent, I'm absorbent. I also really like Law and Order.

IAN CHILLAG:

You know, I realize you are present all the time, with the boy. So, everything that happens to him, happens to you. So, you know, to the extent that we're formed by our experiences, you and the boy end up being very much the same.

ALLIGATOR:

No, that's exactly...that's entanglement. That's what I was talking about. We are completely tangled up and not only have I experienced everything that he has... Mean that there was a... I thought for a while I had a blankie because when he was really little there was a blankie that was always with me. Sometimes I was wrapped in it. If we were travelling, we would be stuffed into the day pack together and we were coming back from somewhere.

We were on a plane and his dad picked me up and stuff me into the backpack. And my head was still sticking on I could see the blanket was stuffed, kind of, down between the seat and the, like, the inside of the plane. You can just see it sticking out there and I just thought, "Oh,

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oh. He doesn't see it." And the boy didn't see it. And suddenly they pull the zipper closed on me, and out we go. And that was the last I ever saw blankie.

I thought it can happen. I mean it can happen right being left to that. Yes, exactly being left. And I just...that's the thing that I fear the most in this world. Probably more than the dog, honestly.

IAN CHILLAG:

What do you think the blanket is doing right now?

ALLIGATOR:

No, I know what it's doing. It's the only thing you could do is...he's waiting. He's just waiting. That's all, that's all we got, you know. Is we wait.

(CELLPHONE RINGING)

IAN CHILLAG:

Hi, Brenda. Is this the Unclaimed Baggage Centre or Unclaimed Baggage Centre Store. I realized I don't know which one it is.

BRENDA:

It's the Unclaimed Baggage Centre.

IAN CHILLAG:

OK. If you have a minute, I was just curious. What happens to the stuff that gets left on planes? Can you tell me how it works down there?

BRENDA:

The ARC of a airline subtends 90 days trying to reunite bags with their owners. We purchase from Airlines, after those 90 days, and then bring them back to our facility here in Scottsboro. Where we, literally, unpack these bags every single day.

IAN CHILLAG:

I think that would be the best job, to be able to open those bags.

BRENDA:

It could be fascinating, at times, of course. Most Americans are pretty normal people, you know. Although you have your few that are a little extreme in one thing or another.

IAN CHILLAG:

So, what... I guess, what are some of the stranger things you found in a bag?

BRENDA:

Well, it's interesting as we have Hoggle from the movie Labyrinth, that was Jim Henson production back in the 80s. We've had...

IAN CHILLAG:

Wait, sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't...what from the movie? What from Labyrinth?

BRENDA:

Hoggle, Hoggle, Hoggle.

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IAN CHILLAG:
What's... Hoggle? OK.

BRENDA:
Even the main puppet character from the movie Labyrinth. You know, we have we have a 13-foot rocket. Of course, we get Taxidermy the items. We get wedding dresses and suits of armour.

IAN CHILLAG:
That was in somebody's luggage?

BRENDA:
Well, it's in somebody's luggage.

IAN CHILLAG:
I... So, I just brought up the Unclaimed Baggage Centre's Instagram here. And you have some of the items that you have for sale. I'm looking at what appears to be... I don't know, is this a Wildebeest skull?

BRENDA:
Oh! What is that? It's a... It is an African animal. I don't think it was a Wildebeest. I can find that one out for you, I just don't recall off the top of my head what it was.

IAN CHILLAG:
But it was in someone's bag?

BRENDA:
Oh, yeah. Yes.

IAN CHILLAG:
Are there things that you find in bags that are too personal to resell?

BRENDA:
Oh, sure. I mean, there's everything from true personal belongings, you know photos and things of that nature. Too personal things that are inappropriate for us to sell and of course, we destroy and throw away all those types of things.

IAN CHILLAG:
Oh, I wasn't even thinking of that.

BRENDA:
Well... (INAUDIBLE)

IAN CHILLAG:
Alligator, do you know...do you know who Marie Kondo is?

ALLIGATOR:
I know that name. I don't know why.

IAN CHILLAG:
So, she's this home organization, guru. She helps people declutter. And she said this thing that it's hard to give away a stuffed animal because we have such a connection with them.

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And her recommendation is that humans blindfold them when they're taken out of the home, if they're taken out of the home.

ALLIGATOR:
Blindfold the stuffed animals?

IAN CHILLAG:
Yeah.

ALLIGATOR:
God, I mean, that's... Number one, that's totally wrong and frankly stupid. The other thing is that just sounds...it sounds like you're, you know, it's like you're kidnapped them. You know, like why just throw a black hood over their head and throw them in the back of a white van and you don't dump them in a shallow ditch. Is that what she wants us to do?

IAN CHILLAG:
I don't think that...I don't think it goes that far.

ALLIGATOR:
Well, it looks like that. I don't get it at all. I mean, it sounds like she has had somebody like me in her life to even think that. It must have ended badly. That's that's all I can say.

IAN CHILLAG:
It's a...it's a funny thing because I, you know. A stuffed animal is this thing that when it's in a room, it can mean so much. It can mean everything to one person in the room and nothing to somebody else in the room, you know? Like, to some people it's just a toy and to another person, it's this, sort of, beloved relationship.

ALLIGATOR:
Yeah, yeah, that's us. But it's kind of a raw topic still. You know, I... My boy is, you know, he's getting bigger and he's, you know, he's he's been at school now for like even years, I think, eight years. School changed everything. When he first went to school everything changed. all of a sudden he came home. He was like "Oh, anxiety," right?

Like...this kid never had any anxiety and all of a sudden it's all anxiety and I feel everything he feels, and it was like we were a wreck. But he gets these friends, and there are other...there're other people like him. I mean, there're boys and there're kids but for some reason, he won't... He won't keep me around when friends are over. My guy gets stuck in the drawer, right? Which is like I'm never in the drawer, otherwise.

You know, I thought at first, you know, he didn't want these boys seeing me and maybe trying to steal me, right, or take me or be friends with me and it would make him jealous. But it's more like he's, I don't know. I think he's... Honestly, I think he's, he was kind, he's kind of embarrassed of me.

IAN CHILLAG:
It sounds like, I mean, sort of, his whole life has been changing, right. Like he started out when he was smaller than you and now he's bigger and he had, sort of, one way of being with you and now it's different. And you are kind of, you know. You are pretty much unchanging.

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ALLIGATOR:

Well, I mean physically, yes. I mean, I... You know, I, kind of, baggy, getting baggier as I age, I think. People do that too. But, you know, I'm holding together. I think what's, what is

changed is, you know. He is... He's not just getting bigger, he's getting different. I'm not getting bigger but I am also... I mean, I'm getting different. You can't help but learn what the people around you teach you about yourself.

Like the people around you let you know who you are. And maybe it's different for people and you can decide for yourself who you are and you can not pay any attention to that, I don't know. It's... I don't know. But for me, I have no choice in that. I am what people think that I am. So yeah, I am changing. I am feeling different because I can see that my boy is thinking differently about me.

It sounds crazy. But but I think sometimes like... What if I started growing and I would, you know, get longer again. Like maybe someday I'm longer than him again.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYING)

And then he grows and he's longer than me, and then... I grow and I get longer than him and... Then he grows and we just keep growing, getting longer and longer and longer forever. And we're just like these enormous things, just like growing and growing until we just, like, fill up all the space.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYING)

IAN CHILLAG:

This is Everything is Alive. The show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag. With Evilwatchover and Isabella Coolcally. Special thanks to Emily Spivac. We are grateful to the reporting of Shannon Fischer, from whom we first learned about the sensitive snouts of alligators. Alligator the alligator possibly a crocodile was played by Tom Bodett. Thanks to Brenda Cantrell for talking to us about unclaimed baggage.

Also, thanks to Avi for his excellent suggestion last week. Music in this episode from, Blue Dot Sessions. We also heard the song 'Angle of Light' by David Hilowitz and the violin piece we heard was the fifth movement of Bach's 'Fifth Partita for Solo Violin' performed by Ben Goldstein, not performed by an alligator. 'Everything is Alive' is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. And without Julia Shapiro, executive producer we would be mired in a swamp.

You can find any number of ways of getting in touch with us at everythingisalive.com. I'm Ian Chillag, see you soon.