

IAN:

Hey everyone, Ian here. A quick favour to ask, it's time for our Annual Audience Survey, so we're hoping you could take a few minutes to share some information about yourself and give us a little feedback about the show. It'll take less than ten minutes and it is a really big help. Just visit surveynerds.com/alive, that's surveynerds.com/alive

IAN:

The nerds are us, not you and thanks so much. Little warning. Today's episode of Everything is Alive contains some language that you may find objectionable. OK, you've been warned. On to our interview with Tara, a bar of soap.

TARA:

Good buddy of mine. Good friend, ah-nah, he's got a story.
(BACKGROUND MUSIC PLAYING)

TARA:

Little kid. Playground. You know how they have those fences with the, you know their... steel...I don't know. Little girl. Five, maybe. Maybe four. Sticks a head. Right through. Can't get out. Head's through, body's on one side, head's on the other side. They call the police, they call the fire department, they call the ambulance as you got 50 parents there. People are going bongos, they got the doers of life. You know what did it? Do you know what got this kid free and why she's alive today? Soap. My buddy, that was him. He was there, he was there, and they put him on her head and... she was free.

(BACKGROUND MUSIC STOPPED)

That was it.

IAN:

Well, why don't you just introduce yourself for me.

TARA:

Hi, I'm Tara, I'm soap.

IAN:

What kind of soap?

TARA:

I'm a Lever 2000.

IAN:

So, you're a bar soap, we should say.

TARA:

Yes, yeah.

IAN:

So, tell me about where you are right now, where you spend your time.

TARA:

Well listen, you know it's not news. But things haven't been going well for us. You know, things haven't been... they haven't been great. You know, we...and it makes no sense as far as I'm concerned, right? I mean here, we are. We do everything. We're a one-man band, you know?

We're a one stop shop, and meh...what? Ten, maybe 20 years ago, you got body wash. Fuckin' body wash. Are you kidding me, right? I mean, have you even ever thought about the fact that they call it body wash? You know...what do you think we do? We have a nice, inventive, interesting name sounds good, soap. I think it's a great name, you know, I think it sounds good.

IAN:

Yeah.

TARA:

Right? Something else, they just call...it's just so... you know, body wash. You know, what that's why 'cause you're... and it's like limiting itself, it's saying don't, don't use me to free your kid's head. I'm just for washing bodies, you know? Ridiculous.

IAN:

Yeah. Would you say that, you know, would you say that you're bitter?

TARA:

I would say that I'm bitter. I would say that I'm bitter. I'm absolutely bitter and I don't just mean with regards to the denatonium. Do you know that they...they put denatonium in some soaps to make them bitter.

IAN:

It's a...

TARA:

That's not what I mean.

IAN:

...OK, it's like a bitter flavoring so people don't eat you.

TARA:

Correct, yeah. And that's - I don't mean it in that sense. I mean bitter in the, you know, jaded.

IAN:

Uh-huh.

TARA:

Angry.

IAN:

When you do get used though, when you know, someone is I guess showering or bathing with you, do you like the work you do? Do you enjoy that?

TARA:

Oh, yeah, I love it. But I mean look, you know I know I'm not for everybody, right? Not everybody takes baths. I'm sure you know someone who doesn't take baths or at least someone you suspect.

IAN:

Yup, absolutely.

TARA:

OK, you know, Ben Franklin took air baths. I mean, air bath means you just walk around naked. I mean, that's not a bath. There wasn't even water.

IAN:

Air baths?

TARA:

Yeah. He believed it was good for his health if you just walk around naked for an hour, every morning, you know he'd be there butt naked. You know, just writing or reading, you know then he'd go back to bed.

IAN:

It's, I have to say it's weird to think that like, like these great aphorisms like, "He who lies down with dogs, shall wake up with fleas." That was actually written by a naked man in a chair 200 years ago.

TARA:

Yeah, yeah, yeah - I mean, you know unbelievable, really, yeah. And a naked man who didn't use any soap, you know, imagine that.

IAN:

Sitting there, just bare naked with his quill and it comes to him, "A true friend is the best possession."

TARA:

Yeah. (LAUGHS)

IAN:

Get that down.

(TARA LAUGHING)

TARA:

Yeah, I mean listen, are you what? Well, you think I'm surprised? My whole life, essentially, right, is being with naked people. And as far as I'm concerned, that's you know, that's when they write their best. So, it doesn't surprise me that Ben Franklin really did his best thinking naked, you know, people are at their best, naked. That's at least in my opinion, you know, from what I've seen.

IAN:

I just wanna ask you sort of about how your life works.

TARA:

Sure.

IAN:

So, do you belong to a single person or do you clean lots of people?

TARA:

You know, there was a time that there was, that it was a few people, you know, there was a few people. You know, there was a tall one. There was a very small one. There was one with red hair who I remember fondly. Now, it just seems to be, you know, just one. Just this tall one, who is perfectly...nice. And it's not every bath, you know. It's a one off you know, and I sort of think to myself well, this is, you know, this is as we say... your silver life crisis, alright. I am, you know, I'm at that stage of life. I am in a dish, I, you know, half of my life is behind me. And I'm not being used, like I used to. But, you know, the silver lining to people not using us as much is that life expectancy is way up.

IAN:

Yeah.

TARA:

You know. I mean we've had an exponential growth in life expectancy, and so who knows? You know, I could be in this dish... weeks, weeks. You know, I mean, when did my Grandmother live? Two days?

IAN:

So you, so Tara, you live in what is, you know, it's like the most private of private spaces that humans have. You're just like around so much of our private stuff.

TARA:

Oh yeah, I mean you know, of course you know there's a... there's the singing, you know, when the tall person sings in the shower, that's the good part.

IAN:

What's the bad part?

TARA:

Well, I'll tell you a story. I don't know the circumstances. All I know was the small person had done something. The tall person came in, snatched me out of the dish and right away, I knew something was wrong, right? Right away, because I'm not usually touched at all, if the water's not on. So, right away, you know I just was on high alert. You know, I was, "This isn't good, this isn't good, this could be the end, who knows?" Anyway, then next thing I know, small person is there. Tall person is there. Small person is crying, I'm being put into the mouth. I don't go in mouth, the kid must have said something he's not supposed to say. That's where, "You're not supposed to say this, you're not supposed to say this." What does that have to do with me, I'm thinking to myself, you know. And it was just, it was just awful.

IAN:

That's punishment for you too.

TARA:

It was absolutely...

IAN:

Put into a mouth.

TARA:

..punishment for me, I didn't say a thing. But unfortunately, there I was.

IAN:

Do you know what the kid said? Could you tell me what the kid said?

TARA:

Yeah, I can. It was dick.

IAN:

OK.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYING)

IAN:

Can you describe your scent for us?

TARA:

Oooah, can I describe my scent? Well, let me ask you this. Can you describe your scent?

IAN:

I...I've never thought about it, I guess.

TARA:

Yeah.

IAN:

I live with it so much I guess I don't notice it.

TARA:

Yeah, there you go. That was, I was trying to lead you into that, I don't know. (LAUGHS) Yeah, I cannot smell myself.

IAN:

Can you describe, can you describe my scent?

TARA:

Not without using profanity. It's not good honey, when people come to me, it's not good. Usually, right? I mean that's it. Where is the person, you know, who... is already smelling good (PHONE RINGING) when they come to me, you know.

IAN:

Hey, is this Saskia?

SASKIA:

Yeah, speaking, hello.

IAN:

Hi. So, you're with the Institute of Art and Olfaction in Los Angeles?

SASKIA:

Yeah, I founded it.

IAN:

Oh, OK. So, I visited once and I went into the back where there's this wall of, would you call them essences?

SASKIA:

Essences is a little hippie-dippie for us so...materials. (LAUGHS)

IAN:

Essentially, it was a wall of smells, pretty much.

SASKIA:

Yes, you got it.

IAN:

So, what you do is you take all of those smells and you use them, you combine them to make new smells. The reason I'm calling, I'm hoping you can answer, what ingredients would you use to make the smell of a person?

SASKIA:

Wow, that's really long, let's see, it depends. Probably some animalics, some funky smell 'cause humans, you know, are funky, we smell funky which is we're mentally complicated creatures so it's sort of kinda categorically answer that.

IAN:

Wait, I'm sorry, I have to back up. What was the word you said, like anim...

SASKIA:

Animalic.

IAN:

Animalic? Meaning like, animal-like?

SASKIA:

Yeah. Well, it's a fragrance family and they...so called because they basically come from animals, or it traditionally came from animals.

IAN:

So ultimately, it sounds like it's just pretty complicated and it comes down to the individual person.

SASKIA:

It's literally the person, yeah. I mean there's ways to recreate it categorically, for sure. I mean, we are...all our smells are chemical, you know. So, if you could you know, capture exactly which molecules those are, you could easily replicate that in the lab. It's not that hard. In fact, there's a company in France that's actually specializing in that, they're recreating the smells of your past loved ones which is sad but apparently it's quite effective, apparently they really nailed it.

IAN:

So, it's essentially like, it's like a photograph you would have of someone but it's a smell photograph.

SASKIA:

Yeah, yeah, sad.

IAN:

Yeah, but sweet.

SASKIA:

But beautiful, yeah, exactly.

IAN:

So, Tara. I'm curious how different your life is from what you thought it was gonna be. Can you kind of take us back to when you were at the store on the shelf, just kind of waiting to see what was gonna happen.

TARA:

I mean, can you imagine anything more exciting? You know, when we're there on the shelf, you

know, all of us together... I mean that's all you do. For days, weeks, sometimes months even. Right you sit there and you imagine your wildest fantasies, where am I gonna be?

(PIANO PLAYING)

TARA:

Am I gonna be in a pre-school? Am I gonna be in an employee bathroom? Am I gonna be in a duplex on Central Park South. You know, we just sit around coming up with the wildest things, you know.

(PIANO PLAYING)

TARA:

And then that day comes. You feel that little rustle, you know. And...on your box, you go, "This is it, this is it." And you know, goodbye to the fellas. You know, that's it, "I'm outta here fellows. Wish me luck, here I go." And that's it, and then - boo! I mean, from there it is just lightning fest. You get the hand, it takes you, you're flying through space, rustling around on the box, this all kinds of noise, you know. I mean, it's just unbelievable. Then someone it's just a dead stop. it's just a dead stop, right? And that's what we have been told it's called, being in the pantry. Now, I'm not sure what that means, really. But for us, we just know that means be patient, relax, who knows what's coming next? Other times, boom! Straight to business. You show up, you take it out of the box, you're put into a dish and it is non-stop. Down and dirty and loud and exciting. Auto-mechanic shop.

(PIANO STOPPED PLAYING)

TARA:

That for me was a fantasy. Didn't work out that way for me. I got the tall guy, what are you gonna do? Made the best of it.

IAN:

So, Tara you mentioned you're not being used every day anymore?

TARA:

Yeah.

IAN:

What do you do with your time?

TARA:

I have, it's interesting. It was a utilitarian life for so long.

IAN:

Just work.

TARA:

Just work, work, work, work. Literally, you know, you work until you're worn away. We actually give of ourselves until we're dead. That's how it is for us. You know, that's how it is. We give, we give, we give, we give, the end. And now, I'm kind of kicking back you know. And I'm asking myself, you know... Were you as important as you thought? Were you as valuable as you thought? And what kind of a mark will you leave, you know. Mildew.

IAN:

Yeah.

TARA:

A soap stain. You know, that's what we normally leave behind. Now I think that you, I mean I hope, I don't mean to offend your people. People, humans...

IAN:

Right.

TARA:

...You thought soap scum was a bad thing. But for us, you know, that was just a little mark we left on this world after a life of service. That was, you know, a tomb stone. And so now I guess I'm wondering what, what mine will be?

IAN:

And so, what do you think? What do you wanna be remembered for?

TARA:

Boy. You know I think of times, that the tall person came into the shower and was just miserable. And within a minute, there he is singing. You know, I did something.

IAN:

What kind of stuff did he sing?

TARA:

Opera, I guess. I don't know the songs, you know, I mean it's just music.

(OPERA MUSIC PLAYING)

TARA:

He takes you places. You forget about the hair stuck to you. You forget that every day you get a little smaller. A little more likely to fit down the drain. When he sings, it's like the angels are taking a big shower together.

TARA:

And the tall person you know, he's forgetting too. And I consider that how to duet.

IAN:

You know, Ben Franklin said, "Wish not so much to live long, but to live well."

TARA:

Uh-huh, probably when he was naked.

(OPERA MUSIC PLAYING)

IAN:

You know what...you know what I realize we just did? We just made a soap opera.

TARA:
Alright.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYING)

IAN:

This is Everything is Alive. Show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag. We got help this week from Emily Spivack, Sarah Guys, Lawrence Bauer and Phoebe Flanigan. We're grateful to the reporting of Simon Worrall. Tara, the bar of soap was played by Tara Clancy. The piece you heard at the end of the show was Donizetti's L'Elisir D'Amore, Una furtiva lagrima

IAN:

I apologize for my pronunciation, performed by the MIT Symphony Orchestra. Adam Kerri Bowles, Director and Brendon Buckley, Vocalist. We also heard music in this episode from blue dot sessions. Everything is Alive is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX and we are eternally grateful to Julie Shapiro, Executive Producer. You can find any number of ways to get in touch with us at everythingisalive.com

IAN:

We'll see you soon.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYING)

IAN:

Is there a part of the body that you like washing the least?

TARA:

Of course, there's some part of the body that I like washing the least.

IAN:

What is it?

TARA:

I'm not...come on. Come on, can I have a little dignity here, you know.

IAN:

OK.

TARA:

I don't wanna talk about it.

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC)

IAN:

The radio diary's podcast, my friends and officemates have been working on an ambitious new series called Last Witness. I wanna tell you about. It's portraits of the last surviving witnesses to important moments in history. Here's a clip. This is Olivia Hooker, the last survivor of the Tulsa race riots of 1921.

OLIVIA:

At first, we saw a bunch of men with those big pine torches come through the backyard and I remember our mother put us under the table. She took the longest tablecloth she had to cover four children and told us not to say a word."

IAN:

That's the radio diary's last witness series. Check it out.

(MUSIC PLAYING)