

CHIOKE:

My name is Chioke and I am a grain of sand.

IAN:

And tell me a little bit about sort of where you spend your days right now.

CHIOKE:

Right now I am in an aquarium in some dude's house. There's a couple fish. I think they're goldfish. They're very confused.

(Background music plays)

CHIOKE:

They do this thing where they swim toward the boundary of the tank and then they kind of realise it's a boundary and each time they say, "Oh, it must be the other way." And then they just kind of turn around.

CHIOKE:

And they swim towards the other boundary, hit it and then they're like, "Oh, it must be the other way." Like they're...I think that they think they're just lost in a place and they have to find the exit, but they've been doing that for like two years now.

IAN:

Do you feel sorry for them?

CHIOKE:

No, not at all. They seem like really stupid fish.

IAN:

I guess you've been on a beach and you've been in the ocean. So, you have enough experience to know there is more than the aquarium but, you know, maybe they don't?

CHIOKE:

Yeah, I mean, I think that if there's one difference between them and I... Sorry, I'm just having trouble with the pronouns, you know, we're doing this interview and I'm a grain of sand.

IAN:

Yeah.

CHIOKE:

But that's not really the way I would think of myself. I think normally I would just say, "We are sand."

IAN:

OK.

CHIOKE:

So, you see that there's the mass noun thing happening and it's weird to talk to you because you don't have a mass noun thing. Or you don't seem to have a mass noun arrangement. So, you say yourself that you're a person, right?

IAN:

Yeah, I would say I'm a person.

CHIOKE:

So, like why aren't you a grain of person?

IAN:

Like why do I not consider myself as like a fraction of all of humanity?

CHIOKE:

Yeah, like that makes more sense. It just seems to me like if you recognise the degree to which you owed your existence to other people you might also be nicer to other people.

IAN:

Yeah, I read this thing that there are seven quintillion, 500 quadrillion grains of sand in the world. So, like all of that you consider is you.

CHIOKE:

I mean, I'm not saying there is a psychic connection or whatever. I'm just saying that when I think of what I am, I am the sand in the aquarium or we are the sand. And when I'm on a beach, we are the sand on the beach.

IAN:

Does it ever get overwhelming? You know, I think about the difference between the aquarium and the beach when, you know, there are probably thousands versus millions and billions. When it's that many that you feel like you're a part of, what does that feel like? Is it ever too much?

CHIOKE:

I mean, I think that maybe the opposite is true. That when we are in an aquarium and there's not that many of us then it feels like too little.

IAN:

Well, I'd like to ask you about the beach. First of all, what was it like having humans sit on you?

CHIOKE:

I mean, as near as I can tell most of the humans who come to the beach, that is the journey that you all seem to like of going to the beach, is always to some degree a frustrating journey.

IAN:

Yeah.

CHIOKE:

You either forgot something or you forgot that it was going to be hot that day or you don't like that someone else is playing music or you've lost track of someone and you can't find them. Like, I've never really seen a human have a fully pleasurable experience at the beach. There's always something of some sort that goes wrong and then you all often express a great deal of surprise that there's sand everywhere.

IAN:

Yeah. I have to say, I find the beach, at least just sitting on the beach, boring. Do you find it boring?

CHIOKE:

Yeah. So, I don't really experience boredom. All of my existence is observation and reflection. So, I'm never bored.

IAN:

Wow.

CHIOKE:

I've noticed that humans have a kind of problem with, let's say, a problem with boredom. They have a problem with time, right? Because it seems to me that boredom reveals a fundamental anxiety that many humans have about their lives in the first place. A constant kind of question as to, where is this going? What should I be doing? And so, then there's not really a willingness to kind of sit and just be which I recommend. You should really try it sometime.

IAN:

Do you want to try it? Do you want to sit and be right now?

CHIOKE:

Oh, man. That sounds great, let's do it.

IAN:

I have to say, I'm already starting to feel uncomfortable.

CHIOKE:

I think this is great.

IAN:

I know I'm supposed to be enjoying this silence, the space between us talking, but I'm only worried about the space as it's happening.

CHIOKE:

You feel the need to fill all silence, don't you?

IAN:

Most silence, yeah.

CHIOKE:

I feel like if you could let go of that you would perceive a lot more in the world.

IAN:

Sitting in the silence I'm starting to notice the silence. Like I'm noticing what the room I'm in sounds like.

IAN:

Would it be cheating to bring up the sound of the beach? So, it was like what it was when you were the sand of the beach doing this sitting and being.

CHIOKE:

I mean, I do like the sound of the beach.

(OCEAN SOUNDS)

IAN:

So, we've talked about you being on the beach and in the aquarium. Sand is also used a lot by humans like in construction, putting out fires. Have you ever had to do any of that?

CHIOKE:

I mean, no. No, I haven't. I have nightmares about being sandpaper.

IAN:

Yeah.

CHIOKE:

But no. I've never been a sand plaster. I've never been used to smother a fire. Yeah, no one's ever called for Inspector Sands.

IAN:

I'm sorry?

CHIOKE:

Inspector Sands. It's in London. They have like a secret code for when there's a fire or something like that in the subway. So, you'll hear over the PA, Inspector Sands, please report to the control room." I think it's a call back to back when they used sand to put out fires, right? So, they don't want to say they have a fire because, you know, panic. So, instead they say, Inspector Sands, dadada...

IAN:

I'm pulling it up here. There's a video of an Inspector Sands alarm here.

MAN OVER PA:

Would Inspector Sands please go to the operation room immediately.

IAN:

Everyone is just looking around. No one is alarmed, but clearly there's something going on here.

CHIOKE:

Yeah, I mean, I think that probably slight confusion is better than the all-out panic of thinking there's a fire when you're literally in a tube.

IAN:

Yeah.

IAN:

Hello, I'm calling for Eleanor.

ELEANOR:

Hi, there. Yes, It's Ellen speaking.

IAN:

Hi. So, I understand that you are the voice of some of the underground trains in the UK. Is that right?

ELEANOR:

That's right. Mainly Northern, Piccadilly and Jubilee lines on the London Underground, but on several other stations and lines, as well now.

IAN:

So, what's an example of something I might hear your voice saying?

ELEANOR:

So, at say Farringdon station, you might hear me saying something like, "The next train to Heathrow terminal one, two, and three will depart in three minutes." Something like that.

IAN:

So, you're familiar with the Inspector Sands announcement?

ELEANOR:

I've heard of it, yes.

(ELEANOR LAUGHS)

ELEANOR:

I've heard about it. Luckily, I haven't actually heard it going out, but I remember my mum ringing me from a platform once saying, "They said Inspector Sands, should I get out?" And I said, "Well, yeah, just in case, get out." But actually, nothing serious had happened. I think, you know, it may even have been there might have been a very small fire controlled and contained, you know, in the kitchen. It could have been anything.

IAN:

Have you ever recorded an Inspector Sands announcement?

ELEANOR:

No, I haven't, no. What we found when we were recording the tube announcements, and this is well, I'd just given birth to our twins the week before we got the contract. So, they're 13 and a half now. So, it's quite a long time ago that I recorded them. But we found...I was the nice friendly voice that told you which train to catch, but anything that was kind of, "Right, you need to listen and you need to behave," was Phil. So, anything that really needed to be listened to apparently you needed a man to do that.

IAN:

So, Phil, your husband Phil did the Inspector Sands because it looked like they wanted the male authoritative voice. Do you remember talking to him about doing Inspector Sands or talking about Inspector Sands?

ELEANOR:

Yeah, I mean, I think that he quite liked the fact that he was in on a secret. But, of course, for something like that when it's an announcement that you know could herald bad things you don't actually want it to be delivered ever. You know, we were both very happy if it was never heard.

IAN:

So, can I ask when you're recording these, you know, various train announcements what kind of direction do you get? What do they tell you they want from your voice?

ELEANOR:

Well, you need to be as clear and as neutral as possible. They deliberately chose my voice and Phil's voice because we're very clear, very neutral and very easy to understand. And the other thing is, the way that we've done it, is we've always used the same studio, the same microphone, obviously the same voices and for consistency reasons we kind of find a contract to say that we would be available for ten years, you know, unless obviously anything happened. And actually, God bless him, Phil died about, you know, three weeks after that ten years expired. So, he did his time, but fortunately we've got enough of his voice on record that it's never been an issue.

IAN:

I was sorry to hear that.

ELEANOR:

Thank you. He was a good guy. You know, very lovely guy and I feel very privileged as a widow to have his voice. I don't say that lightly because I know a lot of people who would give anything to hear their husband's voice again. And mine won't shut up. (ELEANOR LAUGHS) He never did and I'm hoping he never will.

IAN:

So, can I ask and if this is too personal just let me know, but...

ELEANOR:

No, it's OK.

IAN:

Does it happen that you'll be standing on a platform somewhere just going wherever you're going and you'll hear his voice?

ELEANOR:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, I frequently travel to London for meetings and work and recordings and what have you and yeah, I hear him a lot. And it's always lovely to hear him. And I actually quite like the fact that obviously nobody else would know that this is so special for me. And I just love the fact that he's still there just getting on with life and, you know, directing people to where they need to go and just being part of the furniture of London. But actually, hearing that he's been taken off of certain platforms I know that he used to be the main voice at Waterloo until about a year and a bit ago and when somebody told me that he'd gone from Waterloo I grieved again as if I'd lost him. You know, it affected me that much knowing that his voice was just slowly being taken away.

IAN:

Is there a recording that you particularly like hearing of his?

ELEANOR:

Well, I suppose mind the gap is the iconic one. That's the one that everybody knows, and everybody recognises. So, I love that fact that he is that voice, but I run the London marathon in April because it was just something I kinda wanted to do. I wanted to raise money for a cancer charity because, you know, in Phil's memory and I felt it was a lovely omen because I was staying in a hotel the night before and I hadn't heard Phil at all and got to my hotel. I think, it was High Park. And the doors opened, "Mind the gap, please." And I thought, "Yep, he's there. He's watching out for me. This is going to go well." And again, when I finished all I could hear was myself. Telling myself which train to catch. So, that was really nice actually. There are certain times when I just say, "He's looking after me." Which, of course, is probably nonsense, but it's lovely to think. (LAUGHS)

IAN:

Yeah. Well, this has been such a pleasure talking to you. Thank you so much for taking the time.

ELEANOR:

Thank you for asking me. It's been lovely to speak to you.

(Instrumental music plays)

IAN:

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(Instrumental music plays)

IAN:

So, Chioke, there are the sort of beaches which I'm familiar with which is like kind of, I guess, beige sand? And then humans love to talk about white sand beaches. Like, there'll be like an ad for a tropical resort and they'll talk about their white sand beaches. Have you ever encountered white sand?

CHIOKE:

Oh, yeah. That's not sand.

IAN:

You're saying white sand is not... like you don't think of it as sand?

CHIOKE:

Oh, no, no, no. No one should think of it as sand. That's poop.

IAN:

Do you just not like white sand?

CHIOKE:

No, no, no, no, no. I mean... (CHIOKE LAUGHS)

No, that's not the problem. I'm just saying that white sand isn't sand. It is literally poop. It's parrotfish poop. Parrotfish they eat coral and they poop what you are calling, white sand.

IAN:

So, when I look at, you know, a white sand beach what I'm seeing centuries of parrotfish poop?

CHIOKE:

That is exactly right, yeah. And furthermore, every sand castle you build on a white sand beach is actually a poop castle.

IAN:

Right. Do you know how old you are?

CHIOKE:

Not exactly, no. I think, it probably would amount to somewhere in the hundreds of thousands of years. Like, I mean, I wasn't always sand, right? Like there was a time when I was a boulder.

IAN:

Yeah, yeah.

CHIOKE:

Yeah. So, you know, like do you know about the myth of Sisyphus?

IAN:

Yeah.

CHIOKE:

Yeah, that's a funny one to me because Sisyphus is cursed to roll this boulder up the hill for eternity, but really the boulder would eventually erode. I mean, a hundred thousand years or so. It would be like a little pebble. Like, just stick it out, Sisyphus. You'll be done in no time, you know?

IAN:

Eventually it's just going to be sand.

CHIOKE:

Yeah, exactly. And in addition, the hill will also erode. And so, you know, Sisyphus after some time would have a flat plain instead of a hill and maybe like a marble instead of a boulder.

IAN:

Yeah, so, yeah. So, he's cursed for eternity, but really, he just needs to get through I don't know 50,000 years or something.

CHIOKE:

Yeah, like he should really stick to it. And then that'll show the Gods.

IAN:

It's funny to think about a man serving out his eternal curse and what it is, is very easily pushing a marble along the ground.

CHIOKE:

Yeah. And also, like, maybe stop conscripting innocent boulders into your curses, humans.

IAN:

You know, you're right. It ultimately ends up worse for the boulder than for Sisyphus.

CHIOKE:

Oh, for sure.

IAN:

The boulder is destroyed while Sisyphus lives on for eternity.

CHIOKE:

See what I mean? And is dizzy the whole time. I don't know. And how good is Sisyphus in conversation?

IAN:

So, this might be a strange thing to say, but you seem kind of remarkably free from worry.

CHIOKE:

Yeah, I mean, I guess I would say that it's hard to have anxiety when you count time in geologic ages. Like I say, I was a boulder once upon a time and I'm part of sand now. So, that was a long time period.

CHIOKE:

I think that time under reflection gives one the space to think about how to direct one's anxieties. Whether to have them, what to worry about, what to fear, what to just kind of be OK with. And I think that by the time one becomes a grain of sand especially a grain of sand as small as I am, then there's not really any place for anxiety. One just kind of accepts that erosion is the only law.

IAN:

I'll tell you this, I realized recently that when I go out to eat, after I order, when I'm waiting for the food to come, I realize I have a kind of low grade anxiety that I've ordered the wrong thing. And that I've set myself up for a less than optimal experience.

CHIOKE:

So, just to make sure I have this right. Human beings strive for individuality but are also intimidated by options.

IAN:

Oh, yeah. That's definitely true.

CHIOKE:

Alright. OK. OK. But isn't it like literally always true that you're missing out on a better or another something else? Like isn't that the state of human existence? Like to be is to be missing out on something, somewhere at some time, all the time?

IAN:

Because I can't be everywhere any individual moment, there's something else I could be doing. Is that what you mean?

CHIOKE:

Yeah. You're worried about whether your BLT would have been better than the grilled cheese...

(Background music plays)

CHIOKE:

...But you aren't just choosing between the grilled cheese and a BLT, you were choosing between the grilled cheese and any other thing that is possible within human experience.

CHIOKE:

In that moment instead of a grilled cheese, you could be spending time with your mom. You could be going to see the Northern Lights.

CHIOKE:

You could be napping. You could be on a beach somewhere with me between your toes.

IAN:

How does that feel, by the way?

CHIOKE:

It depends on the toes.

IAN:

Yeah.

CHIOKE:

I mean, right now you're talking to me. That's a choice. Is it the best possible choice for this moment? You could be doing anything. You could be with anyone.

(Instrumental music plays)

IAN:

This is Everything's Alive. The show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag. We got help this week from Emily Spivak and Eva Wolchover. Also special thanks to Stevie Ling. We are grateful to the reporting of Royce O'Conner and James Cave. Also, a big thanks to Eleanor Hamilton for talking to us about Inspector Sands. Chioke, the grain of sand was played by Chioke l'Anson. We heard music in this episode from Blue Dot Sessions. Everything is Alive is a proud member of Radiotopia for PRX. We mean it. And without executive producer, Julie Shapiro, we would just be a grain of sand stuck between someone's toes. You can get in touch with us any number of ways at everythingisalive.com. We'll see you soon.