

PAUL:
I'm Paul. I'm a tooth.

IAN:
And what kind of tooth are you?

PAUL:
I'm a front incisor.

IAN:
OK.

PAUL:
I chew, I bite, I nibble, I help you say the letter 'T'. That's my task.

IAN:
A kind of tip of the spear.

PAUL:
Well said. Yes, well spoken.

IAN:
And it's I guess it's a little strange too because I think we think of teeth as being in the mouth. You're an adult tooth and you're not in a mouth.

PAUL:
I'm not.

IAN:
So, can you tell us just where you are?

PAUL:
I'm alone and polished. I live in a display case.

IAN:
Where is it?

PAUL:
It's on a shelf. There's a light on me sometimes. That's kind of what I know. I was in the mouth. I know I was knocked out.

IAN:
Do you know how it happened?

PAUL:
I don't. I mean I was truly knocked out.

IAN:

Unconscious...

PAUL:

I was unconscious, yeah. I mean some sort of blow I take it. I've wondered if I'm part of a memorable sports injury. If he took a helmet to me, you know, maybe it was rock climbing. Is it impossible to think, is it stupid to think that maybe a meteor might have hurtled through the atmosphere and knocked this guy square in the face and knocked me right out of his mouth? And here I am singled out by the finger of fate? Possible. Do you think it's possible?

IAN:

It's absolutely possible.

PAUL:

Yeah, it's possible. I mean I think, you know, maybe a fight to defend someone's honor. I think that would be a nice way to, if I took a punch or if I...I mean I'd love to think he sunk his teeth into someone's shoulder. I got stuck there. I hung on. I would love to think that's how I...how I left the mouth.

IAN:

I read a story that Jackie Chan, you know who Jackie Chan is?

PAUL:

Yes, I do. Yeah. Hey, we go to the movies and we're we get a good view of the screen that popcorn gets, you know, usually often we kind of we see the first hour, first 30 minutes and then we kind of have to guess the rest. You know, the popcorn gets finished up. But if you've got a nibble on your hands, my guy was not a nibbler. He was a shuffler. But if you got a nibble on your hands you could see the whole movie. But yeah, I've seen the first 30 to 40 minutes of quite a few Jackie Chan movies sure.

IAN:

I read the story that Jackie Chan once was in a fight and for days after thought that he had broken his arm and that a piece of his arm bone was sticking out. And he was, you know, he's a tough guy, eventually figured out that it was not his bone, but it was the tooth of the person he'd been fighting had embedded into his skin and he had thought that that was him.

PAUL:

Yeah, I love that. And we celebrate Jackie Chan. Well, where's that guys. I hope that tooth got to go back and rejoin his buddies. You know, I hope whatever happened there, I hope Jackie Chan called that guy up and said, "Hey, I have your tooth. And whatever disagreement we have, whatever argument was between us, this tooth has done something honorable. It deserves to return to the mouth a hero." And I hope that he went back.

IAN:

So, you don't remember how you got knocked out?

PAUL:
I don't.

IAN:
Do you miss the person you were in?

PAUL:
I wonder. You know, I wonder how he's filled the gap, so to speak. Yeah, I wonder what he's eating. I'd love to know what's happening in there now, how the rest of the guys look and yeah, I'd love to get the story.

IAN:
Well, how much did you know about the person you were inside of or a part of? I don't really...
What's the right terminology?

PAUL:
Yeah. No, I mean I think that's right. There's no right or wrong. I was inside of a human mouth. And I saw what he ate. I knew who he kissed. I knew what he spoke about. So, I had a good, I had a pretty good sense of the guy.

IAN:
I do wanna ask you about kissing.

PAUL:
Sure.

IAN:
Can you just tell me what that's like?

PAUL:
Well, you know, you're in darkness and day dawns, a little pinhole of daylight. That would be the pucker. You know, you draw and you see another wall of teeth advancing at you. And then there's kind of blackness. There may be some contact, you know, we don't love it. You know, you don't want... In the kiss, we're trying to prevent tooth to tooth contact.

IAN:
Yeah.

PAUL:
Yeah.

IAN:
We are too.

PAUL:
Yes, right. Good. And rightly so. Painful, not ideal. But yeah, I mean you kind of you see 32 strangers coming at you. And I guess we're doing this now and we're just trying to keep it civilized and not too close for us.

IAN:

And when you're, I guess, up close and personal with the teeth in the other mouth...

PAUL:

Mm-hmm.

IAN:

...Are you interacting at all? Do you do you talk about what's happening or?

PAUL:

I mean, it's not... I take it that that's very important to you guys...

IAN:

Kissing.

PAUL:

..Kissing. I'm not involved. If you see two people kissing and you're not involved in that, is that a pleasure for you to be there?

IAN:

To watch two people.

PAUL:

Yeah. Do you like to watch two people kissing?

IAN:

No.

PAUL:

You're just there. Yeah. So, imagine being inside the mouth.

IAN:

Yeah. Is there anything you think is in your world, in the tooth world, is the equivalent that makes you feel like a human feels when they kiss someone?

PAUL:

Oh yeah, celery.

IAN:

Paul, I wanna ask you about brushing. I guess just...what was it like?

PAUL:

It feels good to be cleaned off. It feels really good. When I would get brushed, it felt amazing. I felt new. But when I think about the teeth that came before me, that just wasn't important to them.

IAN:

Just to be clear. By the teeth that came before you, you mean you don't mean baby teeth. You mean like the teeth...

PAUL:

I mean teeth in history.

IAN:

Yeah.

PAUL:

Yeah. I mean, I think you think of...you think teeth 100 years ago looked very white. I think- I think they tried their best, you know.

IAN:

In getting ready for this interview, I read about in the early 20th Century, humans were using radium a lot to make things glow in the dark. And there was at least one case at this one factory where they were making these clocks that with radium that glow in the dark. One of the women that worked there would paint her teeth with radium to make them shine.

PAUL:

That sounds beautiful.

IAN:

It was probably short lived.

PAUL:

I bet not for nothing. I bet the teeth are fine.

IAN:

They're probably still glowing.

PAUL:

I bet the teeth are still glowing and looking good.

IAN:

I also read that the women who worked at that factory when they would blow their noses at night, their handkerchiefs would glow.

PAUL:

That sounds kind of beautiful too, a little galaxy across your handkerchief. You think about it. And if I had been covered in radium, I could have been a flashlight to my guy. He gets up in the middle of the night, he's going to the bathroom, fetch a snack, and all he has to do is smile and I would have lit his way. Nice, safe path. And maybe because he didn't have that, he tripped, he fell, tooth got knocked out. Yours truly and that's what happened to me.

IAN:

Radium could've saved you.

PAUL:

Yeah, would've been fine for me. Probably would have been ultimately pretty bad for him.

(BACKGROUND MUSIC)

IAN:

Hey, big thank you to Helix Sleep for supporting this show. Right now, Helix is offering up to \$125 off all mattress orders. Helix Sleep matches your mattress to the way you sleep, firm, soft, hot, cold, whether you sleep on your back, face down, the thing where you put your pillow between your legs and sleep on your side, and maybe you fall asleep with one arm under your partner and your arm falls asleep but it looks so peaceful and you don't wanna wake them. However you sleep, just go to helixsleep.com/alive, take their two-minute sleep quiz and they will match you to a mattress that will give you the best sleep of your life. They could even split your mattress down the middle, making each side perfect for you and for your partner who again has trapped your arm underneath them and you've lost all feeling in it but you're still not gonna move because that's what love is. Get up to \$125 off at helixsleep.com/alive. That's helixsleep.com/alive for \$125 off your mattress order.

(BACKGROUND MUSIC)

IAN:

Support for the show also comes from Bombas. They're socks. I will tell you the truth, I'm wearing them right now and I love them. In particular I'm wearing the no show variety the type of sock you wear when you for some reason don't want anyone to know you're wearing socks. Usually no shows fall down and then they get caught under the arch of your foot. And you're walking long and you're telling yourself you'll just live with it. But finally, it becomes too annoying and then you have to take your shoe off and fix it right there in the street while passers-by you imagine are silently judging you. Bombas don't do that. They don't fall down. It's miraculous. And also, when you buy a pair, they donate a pair to a homeless shelter. So, in short, they're good socks. And as a listener of this show, you get 20% off your first order. Go to bombas.com/alive, that's bombas.com/alive and use the promo code "alive". We can wear matching socks.

(BACKGROUND MUSIC)

IAN:

So, Paul getting back to, you know, how you may or may not have left the mouth, are there other ways you think about?

PAUL:

Maybe it was an explosion.

IAN:

An explosion?

PAUL:

Or maybe another tooth exploded.

IAN:

And that doesn't seem likely.

PAUL:

It hasn't happened in 100 years or so. There's a lot of things that haven't happened in a while that are possible.

IAN:

Yeah.

PAUL:

Teeth used to explode. Did you know that?

IAN:

No.

PAUL:

Teeth are aware of it. Teeth used to explode. Teeth would explode so loud. There's a case of a tooth exploding and the person whose mouth it was in, the tooth exploded, they couldn't hear for days. A tooth.

IAN:

You're not talking about just like a tooth crumbling or...?

PAUL:

No, I'm not talking about a tooth crumb... That wouldn't make a sound. I'm talking about, boom. Oh, the humanity, you know. And so maybe, you know, one of the other teeth just blew up and I got ejected from the mouth. I went flying.

IAN:

Wow.

PAUL:

That'd be worth putting the tooth in the display case for I think. I hope not though. That's sick to think about but it's exciting.

(PHONE RINGING)

IAN:

Hi, is this Thomas Morris?

THOMAS:

Yes. Hello.

IAN:

Hi, it's Ian Chillag. How are you?

THOMAS:

Hello, fine thank you. Can you hear me okay?

IAN:

Yeah, yeah, you're coming through well.

THOMAS:

Great.

IAN:

Well, I was hoping to find someone who'd had a tooth explode in their mouth, but they of course were all 100 years ago. Could you read an account from one of the tooth explosions?

THOMAS:

Sure. The first account I'm aware of came from 1817 and it happened to a patient from Springfield in Mercer County, Pennsylvania. And it goes like this: At 9:00 am of August 31st, the right superior canine or first bicuspid commenced aching increasing in intensity to such a degree as to set him wild. During his agonies, he ran about here and there in the vain endeavor to obtain some respite. At one time boring his head on the ground like an enraged animal at another poking it under the corner of the fence and again going to the spring and plunging his head to the bottom in the cold water which so alarmed his family that they led him to the cabin and did all in their power to compose him. But all proved unavailing till at 9:00 the next morning, as he was walking the floor in a wild delirium, all at once a sharp crack like a pistol shot bursting his tooth to fragments gave him instant relief. At this moment he turned to his wife and said, "My pain is all gone. He went to bed and slept soundly all that day and most of the succeeding night after which he was rational and well. He's living at this present time and has a vivid recollection of the distressing incident.

IAN:

You know, when I hear explosion I guess I imagine flames. But that that wasn't part of it.

THOMAS:

No, there's no description of flames in the initial reports. Now, one possible explanation to these explosions is that these... The chemicals used by dentists in these early years of putting fillings in teeth, caused some sorts of reactions. So, a slow reaction that might have been generating a gas of some description inside the tooth. And it's just possible, you know, theoretically that if there was a flammable gas generated like hydrogen then maybe the gas had exploded. In that case, I guess you might have seen a flame.

IAN:

So, I guess is there any chance this could happen to someone today?

THOMAS:

Well, I mean I think you have to apply a certain degree of skepticism to these accounts. About 50 years ago, one of the British dental journals looked through its archives and there was a short correspondence where various dentists and retired dentists wrote in to compare notes on their various cases of exploding teeth. And one of the things that's quite striking about it is that nobody really had a safe explanation for it. Nobody could say what had caused these cases. Nobody could say that it definitely wouldn't happen again. So, who knows? Maybe there will be further epidemics of exploding teeth.

IAN:

So, Paul, I'd like to ask you about the Tooth Fairy.

PAUL:

Sure, the Tooth Fairy. Yeah.

IAN:

Now you're an adult tooth. So, the Tooth Fairy, she doesn't come for you?

PAUL:

Right, it wouldn't be something where she would come for me. And I don't know that I would want her to. Just to be taken to where she does whatever she does with children's teeth. Why does she want the teeth? Is she making furniture with the teeth. She's paving roads. I don't know. I guess if you just heard that someone was, "Hey, I'll pay you for teeth. I want them." Well, what would you think they were doing? You would think it was something not good.

IAN:

Yeah, if a friend said, "You know, one thing I like to do is go to houses and pay people for their teeth that fell out of their mouths."

PAUL:

Right, and I keep them. Why? I think it would be something you'd begin talking to other people, you know, and you'd be saying, "Hey, have you heard about this thing where this guy is, this friend of ours is taking teeth?" What's the thing there? What's the project?

IAN:

Why does he need those teeth?

PAUL:

He couldn't. Yeah, it's the kind of thing where you think I have to find out now or I'm gonna read about it on the news in a few years. It's not good. You know, it's just I'm glad it's not an option. It's not something that happens to adult teeth. If she wanted to take me and put me back in the mouth and get back to work or if she wanted to come visit me and she just wanted to tell me how I left the mouth, what happened, that would be great. I would love that.

IAN:

You know, I have to admit when we started talking today, I started thinking about kind of hoping that the memory would come back to you. But it hasn't?

PAUL:

No.

IAN:

I wonder if it would just...we could just... Just so you had the memory, if we could just sort of come up with one. Just so, you know, so you kind of had a story. So, there wasn't that hole.

PAUL:

Yeah, that gap.

IAN:

Yeah, let's try it. Let's see.

PAUL:

Sure.

IAN:

Let's kind of we'll set a scene. So, you're in the mouth.

PAUL:

Mm-hmm.

IAN:

Maybe your guy is out on a walk, say.

(TEETH CHATTERING)

PAUL:

I think it's winter 'cause I'm chattering in here. You know, I'm beating up against other teeth. Feels like winter to me. Some of the guys are sensitive to the cold.

IAN:

Yeah. Then your guy starts running.

PAUL:

Yeah, he's probably trying to catch a bus. He's probably late for the bus.

IAN:

OK.

PAUL:

There's an icy patch. Suddenly I'm seeing straight up into the sky. Suddenly I'm airborne, I'm in the sky. It's so bright. I keep waiting for the mouth to close and it's not.

PAUL:

I'm not in the mouth.

IAN:

Can you see your guy?

PAUL:

Yeah, I'm seeing his face for the first time when I'm not part of his face. And no one's near me. I'm alone. There's no other tooth around. I'm just a tooth.

PAUL:

And I'm cradled in a warm palm and that's so strange. And I'm brought over to him. I'm seeing his face and I'm seeing him smile and I'm seeing where I should be in that smile. And he's looking at the person who found me and there's a connection between them. They are laughing about the fact that I fell out of a mouth. And it's OK.

(SLOW ACOUSTIC MUSIC)

And I guess I don't go back in the mouth, but I think my guy and the person who found me I think they keep talking.

(SLOW ACOUSTIC MUSIC)

IAN:

And you...the reason you end up in a display case, the reason you ended up as, you know, a special thing, you're kind of a souvenir of their meeting.

PAUL:

Souvenir? I'm the one who made it all happen. I'm the one who went out into the world and this person brought me back and I said, "Look who I've brought. Look who's come with me."

IAN:

You're the one who introduced them.

PAUL:

Exactly.

(SLOW ACOUSTIC MUSIC)

PAUL:

Can we do one more thing while we create this memory?

IAN:

Of course.

PAUL:

Could I say goodbye to the other teeth?

(INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC)

IAN:

This is 'Everything is Alive'. The show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag. We got help from Emily Spivack. We're grateful to the reporting of Maggie Ferguson, Kate Moore and we learned about exploding teeth from Thomas Morris. Tom has a book coming out in November called 'The Mystery of the Exploding Teeth' and 'Other Curiosities from the History of Medicine'. Paul the Tooth was played by Andrew Tisher. We heard music in this episode from Blue Dot Sessions. Everything is

Alive is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX and without executive producer Julie Shapiro, we would just be a baby tooth. If you know how Paul actually got ejected from the mouth, do let us know. You can get in touch with us any number of ways at everythingisalive.com. We'll see you soon.

(BACKGROUND MUSIC)

IAN:

Hey, I wanna tell you about a new series from our friends at 99% Invisible. It's all about what we wear. It's called 'Articles of Interest' and it's produced by long-time 99% Invisible producer Avery Trufelman. I've heard the first episode. It's really good.

(UPBEAT MUSIC)

WOMAN:

Introducing a new six-part series from 99% Invisible. It's called Articles of Interest and it's a show about what we wear.

WOMAN:

And so maybe the ideals about clothing...

MAN:

You can attach...

WOMAN 2:

..our ideals about class.

MAN:

..an idea of home to a piece of cloth.

WOMAN:

These are best to last...

MAN:

Any fool can wear clothes, but if they ain't got the attitude and style to carry it off, man you're just a clothes horse.

WOMAN:

Look for it in your 99% Invisible podcast feed.

IAN:

You can hear all six episodes of Articles of Interest on 99% Invisible or learn more at articlesofinterest.club

(OUTRO MUSIC)

WOMAN:
Radiotopia. From PRX.