

IAN:

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Support also comes from GREATS. GREATS is Brooklyn's first sneaker company. Offering men's and women's styles including the classic all leather royale lace-up in white. I have a pair and I really like them. I thought I would record this spot in their natural habitat. A sidewalk. I have to say, not only do they look great, they are performing admirably, providing the agility needed to avoid many a puddle of unknown origin. My only hope is I return home with these shoes looking as lovely as they looked when I started. You can save 15% off your first purchase by going to greats.com and using promo code [alive](http://greats.com). That's greats.com, promo code [alive](http://greats.com) for 15% off your first purchase.

AYO:

Hi, I'm Ayo and I'm a red balloon.

I'm originally from this place called Party City.

I'm made of latex and mostly human breath, I guess. Since I'd come from a place called Party City, you know, my thought was that I would end up at a party. Unfortunately, for quite a while now I have been in a net.

IAN:

A net?

AYO:

Yeah, I've been in a net. I was, you know, picked up and blown up and I was actually meant to be one of the many balloons that was supposed to drop from the net for Hilary Clinton's victory speech. And so, I am sort of still hung up in the net at the top of the Javits Center ballroom.

IAN:

So, you've been in that net waiting for...

AYO:

For two years.

IAN:

For two years.

AYO:

For two years, yeah. I'm pretty sure they forgot about us.

But, you know, who knows. There might be another chance for me to drop. Someone will remember.

IAN:

When did you start getting a sense that maybe this wasn't the party that everybody thought it was going to be?

AYO:

Yeah. Well, we were up top there just sort of getting ready and, you know, music blaring, gorgeous spun, and then like an hour passes and then another hour passes and then like a whole other hour passes and...

IAN:

Right. AYO: And no one's come out. So, we stayed in the net which in my opinion, you know, if you're sad drop us and then we'll make you happy. You know? I wish...I don't know... I wish that maybe we could sometimes be there for people in not so great situations.

I don't know if...

IAN:

Like at a funeral or something?

AYO:

Yeah, just think of that, you know, the person that you loved the most in the world is suddenly gone. You can't talk with them. You can't see them anymore. There's no memories to share. No new memories to make.

IAN:

Yeah.

AYO:

And they're just there, lying in that casket. And you're sort of looking in that casket and all of a sudden, a balloon drop. Hundreds of balloons. Open up the casket to say goodbye, more balloons shooting out.

IAN:

Just come out of the casket.

AYO:

Just come out of the casket. Bright yellow, some blue, some red even. I mean, maybe even it's like you're at the funeral plot, you know what I mean? I mean, that's probably one of the sadder parts of a funeral, right?

IAN:

Mmhm.

AYO:

And then all of a sudden it's like, you know what? We're not using that horrible machine. We're actually going to use balloons.

IAN:

Attach helium balloons to lower the casket?

AYO:

Right into the plot. It's the only thing that can fix how you're feeling.

IAN:

Would be a balloon drop at a funeral?

AYO:

Yeah.

IAN:

So, before you got over to this ballroom...

AYO:

Yes, yeah.

IAN:

For this party you had to be inflated.

AYO:

Yeah.

IAN:

I'm very curious what that experience is like.

AYO:

Oh, yes, wow. I guess, it's sort of the antithesis of being human. I mean, you guys you have all this air and you're letting it in and out as you sort of please, but, you know, for us it's like...

IAN:

Breathing. AYO: Breathing. Yes, right, yes. But for us, for balloons. I mean, you just, you start to feel yourself become yourself. And there's lots of different ways obviously to be inflated. I was sort of hoping for a helium situation. Sure.

AYO:

I don't know why, but instead I was filled with air which I'm not mad about, obviously. It's just is, you know, what happened? Because we were meant to drop. Most of the balloons are being filled up with tanks and, you know, I can see that, but I guess they were running a bit behind and so they started bringing over people to help us get ready and I was filled by human beings, unfortunately. I guess just so you know, that is one of the worst experiences a balloon can have.

IAN:

Being blown up by a person?

AYO:

Absolutely horrid.

IAN:

Well, tell me about it. What's the first thing you feel when someone starts to blow you up?

AYO:

Hm. I mean, the first thing is... hot. It's hot.

IAN:

Yeah.

AYO:

And you feel that, but the second thing is the moisture. It's wet.

IAN:

Yeah, we have moist breath.

AYO:

It's wet from the lips and it isn't perfect, I think is the...

IAN:

Human breath is not perfect.

AYO:

Human breath is not perfect.

IAN:

Yeah.

AYO:

And I sort of feel what's good and what isn't and imagine someone just breathing that into your mouth. Can you imagine that?

IAN:

Just even thinking about it, a human blowing air into my mouth to inflate me at any temperature is unsettling.

AYO:

I wish I could explain it. I wish you were a hedgehog honestly. Cause hedgehogs they get this thing called, balloon syndrome.

IAN:

Balloon syndrome?

AYO:

Yeah, hedgehogs suddenly fill with air. They blow right up.

IAN:

I'm picturing a hedgehog. AYO: Uh huh. And then it's just like a beachball, it's like a sphere.

AYO:

Yes, they just become this spiky little balloons.

IAN:

I'm also, I realize as you describe this to me I'm imagining that it's helium that has filled them up and that they are actually floating.

AYO:

Yes. IAN: Just floating everywhere. Yes. IAN: Hedgehogs. Hold them round the forest. Walking around, there's like six hedgehogs in a little bunch.

IAN:

It's nice to imagine that it's someone's birthday. And instead of balloons I bring them five or six...

AYO:

Five or six.

IAN:

Helium filled hedgehogs.

AYO:

That feels like the right amount.

IAN:

Yeah. AYO: Yeah. Hello, this is Ian. I'm calling for Frank.

WOMAN:

Right, yes. Just one moment, please.

IAN:

Thank you.

WOMAN:

Frank? Sorry to disturb you. It's a call from America.

FRANK:

Hello, I'll just nip into the office. Sorry to keep you waiting.

IAN:

No problem.

FRANK:

Hello, I've forgotten your name already.

IAN:

My name's Ian.

FRANK:

That's right. I'm Frank, you're Ian. We've just taken in three more hedgehogs, no, four more hedgehogs. So, I've settled them in.

IAN:

You just now took in more hedgehogs? FRANK Yep. Paul came in today. Do any of them have balloon syndrome?

FRANK:

No, balloon syndrome is not a common condition.

IAN:

Well, tell me what it looks like when someone brings in a hedgehog with balloon syndrome.

FRANK:

It looks like they are very, very fat, right? And the whole stomach and area around the stomach is swollen and it makes them look rather comical. I mean, it's very sad, but it does make them very comical. It looks like they're definitely a vastly overweight hedgehog. It's called balloon syndrome because it blows up like a balloon cause I understand you're talking to a balloon, are you not?

IAN:

Yes, yeah.

FRANK:

Yeah.

IAN:

So, when you come across a hedgehog with balloon syndrome what's the treatment? Do you pop it?

FRANK:

No, what you do is you get a hypodermic with a large needle and you put it into the stomach.

IAN:

OK.

FRANK:

And you try to locate where the air is and nine times out of ten you do and you draw it off and then you'll do it again until the balloon has gone down and you keep an eye on it and every hour you go and check it and as soon as you see it blowing up again you release more. It's very uncomfortable. It is a very dangerous condition. We don't win them all, but we have saved them. And we will continue to do so whenever they're brought in because for every 100 hedgehogs that are around when I was young and I'm 80 there are four left.

IAN:
Wow.

FRANK:
Yeah, you know.

IAN:
Well, Frank, so you have this hedgehog hospital, Andrew's Hedgehog Hospital. Can I ask how you got started?

FRANK:
Well, you got a little time in. IAN: Yeah. I had my own business, my wife had her own business and we were living in a little village and someone knocked on our door from across the road was a little garden center, and he knocked on our door and he said, "Frank," I said, "Yes, Gordon." I've got three baby hedgehogs on my lawn and I can't find mom anywhere." I said, "Why the hell did you come and see us?" He said, "Well, you're known in the village as the mad couple who loves hedgehogs."

(IAN LAUGHS)

But that was the start of it. They stole our hearts. That was our first three. Last year we took in 571 hedgehogs in nine months.

IAN:
Wow.

FRANK:
Yes, it's... I'm 80 and I've had a very happy life in many, many respects. A wonderful wife, kids. I've been in the services, traveled abroad and I've spent years in Australia and I've had some lovely jobs, but I can quite truthfully say, the last eight years have been the most rewarding of all my life.

IAN:
Hey, Ayo, can we talk about some other types of balloons?

AYO:
Oh, yeah, absolutely, yeah.

IAN:
Maybe I'll just ask you about a few and you can just tell me kind of your quick response.

AYO:
Ooh, OK. Yeah.

IAN:
What do you think about balloon animals?

AYO:

Oh, ah, yeah. I think that the intention is great, you know what I mean? But it's a little upsetting. It's sort of grotesque, I think, the way that humans are sort of manipulating us.

IAN:

Right.

AYO:

Honestly, why would you make a balloon into a dog? Why would you do that?

IAN:

I mean, I think people like dogs.

AYO:

OK. Well, the balloon community maybe not so much.

IAN:

The balloon community does not like dogs?

AYO:

No, we don't.

IAN:

Let me ask you about, balloons do get used by drug mules. Someone will hide maybe a drug that they're trying to smuggle somewhere...

AYO:

What?

IAN:

..in a balloon. They will swallow the balloon.

AYO:

What?!

IAN:

And then that's a way to sort of secret it across a border or something.

AYO:

No, that's horrible. That doesn't make any sense. I mean, what are you celebrating inside of a body?

IAN:

Yeah.

AYO:

That's what we're for. We're for celebration. I don't get it. Is it like your stomach's birthday or?

IAN:

I mean, I think that these aren't celebration balloons exactly.

AYO:

Oh, OK. Well, then I guess just on principle I can't really like support that.

IAN:

Let me ask you about bubbles.

AYO:

OK. Sure.

IAN:

What do you think of bubbles?

AYO:

They're gorgeous. They're thin skinned, though.

IAN:

Support for Everything is Alive comes from SimpliSafe. SimpliSafe is a home security system and right now they're offering listeners of this show, that's you, a huge discount. Just go to simplisafe.com/alive and you'll get 25% off any new system. SimpliSafe is great protection for your home and family. They don't make you sign a contract and there's no hidden fees. CNET, PCMag and Wirecutter, all say SimpliSafe is the best security system there is. So, if you have stuff and you'd like to protect that stuff and you don't wanna, you know, be worrying about that stuff when you're away from your home go to simplisafe.com/alive to save 25%. And make sure to use that URL because it really helps out our show. That's S-I-M-P-L-I-S-A-F-E.com/alive. And, by the way, this deal ends November 26th.

Support for Everything is Alive also comes from Bombas. Bombas are socks. They're my favorite socks. In fact, I recently did a purge of my sock drawer, banishing all lesser socks to make room for more Bombas. They're really comfortable, they look good and there's another great thing about them too. For every pair you buy, Bombas donates a pair to a homeless shelter. So, they're good socks. I've honestly become a little weird about it. I brought them up at a party recently. You can be weird about it too. Get 20% off your first order by going to bombas.com/alive. That's B-O-M-B-A-S.com/alive and use promo code alive. [Bombas.com/alive](https://bombas.com/alive), promo code alive.

(BLUE DOT SESSIONS PLAYS)

I want to go back to the night of the victory party. You must have had some time before you got put in the net.

AYO:

Yeah, that's true.

IAN:

What was that like?

AYO:

Fine, I guess. I mean, the humans were really bored, though, you know? And I feel like that was most of what I was preoccupied with. Oh my God, have you ever been bored? Because they did this thing with me that I...

IAN:

I have been bored.

AYO:

They batted me around. IAN: Yeah. And they wouldn't let me touch the ground.

IAN:

Yeah, that's a kind of classic game.

AYO:

That's a classic? OK. I wasn't sure if they had invented it.

IAN:

What is that like by the way from your perspective?

AYO:

Yeah, I mean, OK. At first, you know, they've got you, they've grabbed you. They might do a few test bounces on the hand and then all of a sudden before you know it... whoosh! You're up in the air. It almost feels like I'm full of helium. Like I'm up in the air and OK, then I'm falling again all of a sudden and it's like, boom! It's a foot. And then OK, a head hit. And then all of a sudden I'm looking and it's like, they're being very serious about this. Actually they don't want me to hit the ground. And so I'm asking myself, why? Like why don't they want me to hit the ground? Is the ground sharp? I'm freaking out. Maybe this isn't a game, maybe this is very serious and OK, I'm actually very close to the ground. Nope, OK. Saved by another foot. And then all of a sudden, I'm high up, so high like it's incredible and I'm looking down and then I'm seeing they're walking away and then I'm falling and I'm falling and I'm about to hit the ground, I'm seriously about to hit the ground. Nobody cares and this is it, it's over, I'm dead and then that's actually not true. I hit the ground and it's carpet.

IAN:

Do you think about popping a lot?

AYO:

Oh, it's hard not to. It's everywhere. Anything could be a danger. The wrong corner on a shelf or a table. If you're outside, I mean, possibilities are endless, you know? Nails, sharp mohawk.

IAN:

(LAUGHING) Sharp mohawk?

AYO:

Yeah, lightning strike.

IAN:

Yep, that'd be bad for a person, as well.

AYO:

A cat.

IAN:

A fork. Spork even. A cactus. A rose. Yeah, a rose has thorns, sure. Well, you know, people are always doing that sort of like rose and balloons sort of double package situation.

Big on Valentine's Day.

AYO:

It's so ignorant. Imagine you give it too fast or you nestle it improperly, I'm done for.

IAN:

Yeah. AYO: Chopsticks. Sometimes it just happens.

AYO:

You get sucked into a trumpet.

IAN:

That seems unlikely.

AYO:

Mardi Gras, kids! Incredible danger. Sometimes they'll just try to squeeze you and squeeze you and squeeze you until you really pop.

IAN:

I think with kids like when a kid pops you they get upset too. You're kind of like a bee in that way. Like, you know, you die, but you get one last shot on your way out.

AYO:

I mean, I guess in a way there's something good about being popped cause if you're popped it means you're out there living, you know? It's like you were having adventures. You were doing something that meant something. I'm safe, I'm literally stuck in a net. I'm in a safety net.

IAN:

Well, if you were going to have an adventure, what would it be?

AYO:

My wildest dream would be to bust through the ceiling, you know? Just break that ceiling and float up.

IAN:

Like a helium balloon?

AYO:

Yeah, like a helium balloon.

IAN:

It does happen that helium balloons will get let go and go up in the sky.

AYO:

I've seen it. Sometimes they've passed us and they seem so nervous.

(SAD MUSIC PLAYS)

There's no, you know, child's hand to be tied to. No sort of set of sand or weight to hold you down. You're like finally free.

And I mean, I'm sure there's people like screaming, you know? Ah! You let go! Ah, it's up! You won't get it back!"

But even though that purpose is done you finally get to see what's up there.

I just wonder how high you could even go, you know? Go up past the clouds and my air's meeting the night air and I'm looking at the stars and I don't know, I'm just going up and up and up.

There's space and all that stuff. I'd love to get stuck on a star. Just get tied to a star. Then I'm the balloon in the sky. Yeah, kids look up and they're like, "Oh yeah! That's that constellation that has a balloon on it."

IAN:

You know, I think about the person who blew you up and in a way you're kind of a time capsule of that person's breath in that moment in time. Like that moment where she blew you up, her breath got inside of you, it was tied off and it's saved.

AYO:

Yeah.

IAN:

I don't know, I just wonder if you think about her.

AYO:

I guess, I mean, most of the time I don't. Just sort of live my own life, but I guess it's hard not to. You know? She was stressed and I think that's all in me, but I do wonder maybe like what the other balloons she might have blown up might be, you know?

IAN:

They're like your half siblings in a way.

AYO:

Oh, yeah, I guess I have a kind of balloon family that I don't even know about. And I guess I do wonder, you know? What are those other breaths she's taking that she didn't even breathe into

balloons, you know? Where is she breathing those? You know, maybe there's others by the sea or the mountains? Places I haven't even been, places I wish I could be. Maybe in a weird way...

(BALLOON POPS)

IAN:

This is Everything is Alive. The show is produced by Jennifer Mills and me, Ian Chillag with Eva Wolchover and thanks to Emily Spivak. Ayo the balloon was played by Ayo Edebiri. We are grateful to the reporting of Christina Gaddi and a big thanks to Frank Tett for telling us about hedgehogs and balloon syndrome. If you're curious about the work Frank does or just want to look at pictures of hedgehogs, check out andrewshedgehoghospital.org.uk. Andrew's Hedgehog Hospital was named after what Frank says is a very famous hedgehog named Andrew. Everything Is Alive is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. And without Julie Shapiro, executive producer, we would have never been inflated in the first place. You can find any number of ways to get in touch with us at everythingisalive.com Twitter is the best way. I'm at [@ianchillag](https://twitter.com/ianchillag). We'll see you soon.