

Rachel (00:00):

Like a great pizza party.

Clair (00:02):

Yeah, at a bowling alley.

Rachel (00:04):

Wow, that sounds so fun.

Clair (00:05):

Yeah, it was good. I needed it.

Rachel (00:08):

So, Clair, tell me who you are, where you grew up, where you live now, your age, what you do. Give me like a who's who about you.

Clair (00:19):

Hi. I live right on the block that we're actually on. So sometimes when I'm cooking I just come over and snip an herb and walk right back with the stove still on, which is probably a bad idea. And I grew up in downtown Brooklyn in Ditmas Park mostly. So my parents live four miles away still, which in Brooklyn is actually really far. When you tell people far how far it is they're like, "Oh, that's really close." I'm like, "No, it's actually, it takes an hour to get there so welcome to Brooklyn." And for the last 10 years I was a cheesemonger. And I just left that field literally three weeks ago. And I work at KIT Brooklyn now. It used to be [inaudible 00:01:11]. And I have a regular set schedule, which I didn't have for my entire adult life.

Rachel (01:18):

People don't usually go from something else to working at a restaurant and then being like, my schedule is regular.

Clair (01:27):

Yeah. Because I am the morning person. So I get up really early and I like ride my bike in the dark and I love it. And it's the first time in my adult life I haven't had anxiety.

Rachel (01:39):

Wow.

Clair (01:40):

Yeah. And I'm almost 40.

Rachel (01:42):

Wow.

Clair (01:43):

Yeah. Took two full weeks to not have anxiety.

Rachel (01:46):

That's not that long of a time.

Clair (01:48):

No but it like happened almost immediately.

Rachel (01:51):

Wow.

Clair (01:51):

My whole life.

Rachel (01:53):

What changed?

Clair (01:54):

My job.

Rachel (01:58):

Congratulations.

Clair (01:59):

Yeah. So last night going to the staff party for that job. It's like not the people that were bad, it's the situation and sometimes how things are run can affect your entire life. And how you eat and how you shop and how you cook. And being able to come here changed everything also.

Rachel (02:21):

So how long have you been a member here?

Clair (02:23):

This is just my first year. I've only lived at the apartment down the street for six months. I moved here in March. I had a stoop garden before, and my landlord, before I moved in, I was like, "Can I have a stoop garden?" He was like, "Yeah, no problem." I was like, "I'm going to want to grow like herbs and vegetables." He was like, "That's fine." And then when I did, he got annoyed and I had to get rid of it in a second year I lived there. And there was no community garden like this near my house, even though I was only a mile away.

So I knew that when I found the apartment, that finding something like this was really important. I needed to rework my whole... Every part of my life basically I reworked this last year, culminating in the job. And part of it was finding something like this and this community and these incredible people, but also being able to just walk down the street and like touch stuff and be outside has helped me so much, changed my life really.

Rachel (03:23):

Talk to me about that.

Clair (03:27):

So I grew up, like I told you earlier, in Ditmas Park with my dad who is a prolific gardener. My mom wishes she had never let him have the backyard as a garden, as you can't entertain in a pile of compost that she likes to say. My first memories are of like digging with him and identifying food and plants.

So I did a bunch of research and I didn't realize, I came here when it was in February so like the garden was closed and I'd come from the other side of the street. I didn't even know that it was here. Which was like incredible when I started to do the research and I realized the one that I could join was literally on my block. And that was amazing. I didn't even know that there was... There's a Carnegie Library around the corner, like 44 more feet away.

Rachel (04:23):

What's the Carnegie Library?

Clair (04:25):

Andrew Carnegie was like one of the founding people of New York who gave money to the arts. So it was built by a really famous architect. They're all over the city. There's one like on, you know the one on 6th Avenue and 9th Street is like, looks like a monolith basically?

Rachel (04:41):

Oh, a public library that was like designed through Andrew Carnegie's money.

Clair (04:46):

Yeah. And so they're some of the best, most long lasting beautiful libraries, but they're also usually better funded.

Rachel (04:54):

Interesting.

Clair (04:55):

Because it like carried through for a long time.

And so all of my favorite things are literally within a one block radius. It's been incredible. I just come down here. We all have take turns doing chores. So some people water on certain days a week. I take out the garbage on Sunday because I only have to walk down the street and it's worth it. You get in what you put out. But even if you only put in a little bit of sweat, it's the equity you get from touching everything and helping to plant. Like today, and we might not finish today, but it'll make a lasting impression for the entire neighborhood that we're like doing this and we care. It's pretty powerful.

Rachel (05:40):

So you were telling me about your dad.

Clair (05:42):

Yeah.

Rachel (05:42):

First memories were digging with him.

Clair (05:44):

Yeah. He loves dirt.

Rachel (05:48):

And so, you left home and you've always found ways to garden where you live?

Clair (05:55):

Yeah. I usually would have like a stoop garden or something in my apartment, but I'll just go back home and help him. He has this like notebook. So they moved here in 1996. And I guess that notebook is from then and everything he picks. He doesn't ever go outside and like pick a tomato and eat it. He puts it in a basket and he brings the basket inside and he weighs everything.

Rachel (06:22):

So he is very like obsessive.

Clair (06:25):

Yeah. And he loves seeing what happens the year before. You can't go out and eat a tomato. You have to bring it inside. You have to weigh it. And then you have to do the special wash that he likes to do and lay it out to dry. Which when I was younger, I was like, what the fuck is he doing? Like, this is weird. I just want eat a tomato from the sun. But now I understand it. He likes to study it almost. It's like almost a scientific approach. But then he'll be like this year, he'll look back and see when was the first tomato of the year, and he has it on record every year.

Rachel (06:59):

I mean, it's amazing record keeping.

Clair (07:03):

It's encyclopedic almost.

Rachel (07:05):

Maybe I could talk to your dad.

Clair (07:07):

He would love to talk.

Rachel (07:08):

I would actually love to talk to him for this project.

Clair (07:09):

He loves to talk. Ask Alex about old rad dad.

Rachel (07:14):

Okay.

Clair (07:15):

If you have Instagram, that's his hashtag I made for him.

Rachel (07:19):

Because talking to some gardeners who've been gardening in the city for like 20, 30 years has been...

Clair (07:25):

Whose phone do you think that is?

Rachel (07:26):

I don't know.

Clair (07:26):

I don't know.

Rachel (07:33):

I guess it'll go unanswered.

Clair (07:34):

Yeah.

Rachel (07:38):

So let me ask you my framing question for this project, which is when you think about the climate crisis, what do you think about it and how do you feel?

Clair (07:47):

It's scary because not everybody gives a shit about how that's going to affect our lives or the fact that we might not even be able to have lives because of it. If everybody just did a little bit, it would make a big difference. It's really scary when you really think about it, so I try not to think of it too much. But that must be very immersive and scary for you to think about all the time.

Rachel (08:12):

Oh yeah.

Clair (08:13):

Does that give you a lot of anxiety?

Rachel (08:14):

Yeah, but I started this work because I had the anxiety.

Clair (08:16):

You had to find a way to...

Rachel (08:18):

I've been working through my eco-anxiety for like 10 years, through my artwork.

Clair (08:23):

Oh cool. Having worked in cheese so long, you have to kind of separate your life from your work because you use so much plastic at work. And you have to almost ignore the fact that you're using that much plastic more than a normal person. So the rest of my life, I use almost none. Actually, I remember when I first started to get to know Alex and we were shop, I walked into him at the co-op and he was like brought his own mesh bags for his brussel sprouts. And he's picking each brussels sprout and putting in this mesh bag. And I was like, wow, he's so dedicated. Look at this mesh bag. How many times has he used this for brussels sprouts? He's like, this is for my brussel sprouts. I just picture him like with his little cart and the bag of brussels sprouts. It's so cute.

Rachel (09:09):

I know. I love that.

Clair (09:11):

But those like little things you can do can help a lot. I wish that everybody did it.

Rachel (09:17):

So it feels scary.

Clair (09:19):

Yeah.

Rachel (09:20):

What feels scary?

Clair (09:24):

For me I think that so many people don't care or think it's like, not that I know... I live in this world where people believe in it, but I think what's scary is that people don't literally don't think it's real and just think they can do whatever the fuck they want. Imperfect foods told us they could take back the insulated bags and the ice packs. And I rushed upstairs the other day to give the guy back mine. He's like, we throw them away. They don't even recycle them.

Rachel (10:04):

They just take it back so you feel better about getting the delivery.

Clair (10:07):

Yeah. And that's really fucked up. It made me want to like change that service.

Rachel (10:13):

Yeah. I actually heard that service is not great. That they take foods that generally used to be taken to like food pantries and other places. And actually they just found a way to sort of market something that was already not necessarily being thrown out in the first place.

Clair (10:32):

Yeah. I was thinking, I've read a lot about Farm to People and that seems really good. Part of living alone in New York is that getting all the groceries you need without a car is really hard and really heavy. So I've been supplementing with those kind of services that promise to be eco-friendly and turn out that they're not right.

Rachel (10:56):

Brin actually called the co-optation of businesses for sustainability, she called it. We're living in like a hellscape.

Clair (11:04):

It's completely accurate and really crazy that people ignore that. How can you ignore that?

Rachel (11:14):

Talk to me about like changes that you've noticed over the course of your lifetime. You've lived in New York your whole life?

Clair (11:20):

Yeah.

Rachel (11:21):

And you've also been growing food in New York, your whole life.

Clair (11:24):

And I grew up with a dad who like saves everything and reuses everything and a mom who does not. And the like difference between their lives, and they live in the same home, is really insane.

Rachel (11:36):

What do you mean?

Clair (11:36):

Well, my dad will save all the plastic bags that the New York Times comes in.

Rachel (11:42):

What does he do with them? I also have the New York Times.

Clair (11:45):

So he folds them a very specific way and they're in a drawer in the kitchen and he'll use them for sandwiches. He'll use them on car trips, he uses them for produce, a little bit of everything. But like, that's a lot of bags. Why haven't they figured out a way to not do that? Most of the time, if the delivery

person cared a little bit more, which I understand that most of them don't, they could be tied up and put in a place where it wouldn't get wet with some twine. But America wants an easy fix, which is affecting everybody. Well, it's not just America. It's pretty much everywhere wants an easy fix. We're just lax with it compared to other countries.

Rachel (12:29):

So what changes have you noticed like seasonally, weather, landscapes...

Clair (12:36):

Do you remember when everybody just blamed every weird weather pattern on El Nino? And now you can't blame it on El Nino now you know it's climate crisis.

Rachel (12:47):

Tell me about that. When did you first notice this?

Clair (12:49):

I mean, look, what day is it now? It's October 10th. It's almost 70. That's not normal. In Canada now they're having their first frost and it snowed today in one part of Canada, that's a little early. I don't know, the summer felt a lot hotter this year. And then spring will feel like it takes a lot longer. It kind of feels like all the seasons are a little delayed. That's what I think I've noticed.

Rachel (13:22):

When did you start noticing that?

Clair (13:24):

Probably like four years ago. I think it got worse the last like four or five years.

Rachel (13:33):

Did you have any emotional experience? What does it feel like to start noticing unseasonable weather? What does unseasonable weather feel like?

Clair (13:42):

Yeah, I guess it depends on the season, but also affects your allergies. So like I have fall allergies now and I never did. Those are pretty horrible. You feel like you're going to die when you just have an allergy to a pollen that's delayed. That feels scary. Like what's going to happen when we have no seasons left and we're like Florida? Hopefully we won't be Republican.

Rachel (14:15):

So what's the emotion, like what happens to you emotionally?

Clair (14:20):

Well, at a certain point you have to turn it off or you become a hot mess.

Rachel (14:27):



I know. And this is the second time you talked about it, turning it off.

Clair (14:31):

I think that like growing up here, you have to see things differently. You have to change your mindset in a way that most people who are not from New York or have never lived here don't understand.

Rachel (14:45):

What do you mean?

Clair (14:46):

It's hard to describe. You have to be tougher from an early age because you see so much, so young. And there's also a lot more rats now. What do you think that's from?

Rachel (15:11):

I think it's from the development. That's what I've heard. It's from like all of the development happening.

Clair (15:17):

It's so many rats.

Rachel (15:18):

That's what people have been saying.

Clair (15:19):

Every day when I ride to work, there's a dead rat, at least four, so many.

Rachel (15:23):

Yeah. I've actually been noticing a lot of rats in my life.

Clair (15:26):

Dead rats. It's gross. They're in every street.

Rachel (15:30):

I saw a particular dead rat on my way to the studio, like on my bike ride.

Clair (15:35):

And it's still there.

Rachel (15:36):

It's the tail is there.

Clair (15:37):

I know. Yep. How long does that take to decompose?

Rachel (15:42):

So long, it's on pavement.

Clair (15:44):

And there's a lot more now that there's all the outdoor dining, because they're just eating the garbage. There's more garbage. And what does that affect? Everything. It's fascinating. I could see why you would want to do it, but also does it bring you down a lot?

Rachel (16:05):

Yeah.

Clair (16:06):

I think that part of growing up in New York, you have to almost disassociate from that or you can't keep going and stay here. I have to turn those emotions off.

Rachel (16:22):

What is that do to you or for you?

Clair (16:25):

That fucks you up a lot.

Rachel (16:26):

What do you mean?

Clair (16:27):

So being able to come here and like keep those emotions on and know that this is going to make a difference for our community has helped tremendously.

Rachel (16:35):

Okay. So tell me about that.

Clair (16:38):

Well, for most of the spring and summer, every Saturday, a few of us would get here early and we would pick. And grow NYC also gave us eggs and we would give to people in the community and that made a big difference. People who can't get access to fresh vegetables because we're basically in a food desert here. There's no real grocery stores that have good produce that's seasonal.

Rachel (17:03):

Just fancy restaurants.

Clair (17:04):

Yeah. What's that like when you live somewhere and you can only go to a bodega. That's really shitty. And that's all you've known then you perpetuate that cycle. You grow up with diabetes and obesity. You're really fucked up. Being able to come here and just pick the vegetables seasonally is really great.

Rachel (17:30):

So does it feel like you're able to kind of face the world as it is more when you're here because this space sort of, I don't know, relieves the pressure or makes you feel calm or gives you a sense of control?

Clair (17:45):

A little bit. Sometimes I equate it to like what people must feel when they go to church. I've never felt that going to church or synagogue or anything, but when you come here, it's like, oh... You pause and take the time to see what you're doing and do something tactile and also just breathe nice air. No one smokes cigarettes in here and like usually it smells like dirt and leaves and like green and that's really good. Being able to take that moment and that pause is pretty incredible. I wish that everybody could do it because then maybe they'd see that it would change the world.

Rachel (18:29):

Everyone talks to me about the air in their gardens and actually, especially in neighborhoods that have like high air pollution people talk to me who've had asthma their whole life, talk to me coming into the gardens, their asthma goes away.

Clair (18:47):

Wow.

Rachel (18:48):

That they don't need to use their inhaler. They come because they need to treat their asthma, and just in these micro, micro spaces, micro climates of the city in densely polluted areas.

Clair (19:05):

It's too bad that we have to keep developing everything. There should be one like this on every block.

Rachel (19:14):

Yeah. Talk to me about what this moment requires from us. Something that I've been thinking about is paralysis, malaise, lack of imagination. What does meaningful change look like? What does meaningful action look like? And how do we step up to this moment?

Clair (19:39):

I think not everybody can. You get stuck in a rut when you're here. You get in this cycle where you go to work and you go home and you do your chores and like that's your life. And then having to be stuck inside that last year was, for some people fine. They were okay. They got a fucking Peloton and they didn't leave their house. I don't want to live like that. I want to leave my house. I want to be outside. I want to touch stuff. I want to dig in the dirt. I want to talk to crazy plant ladies who are like always covered in slime. I love them. I think that you have to be able to... I think that also it requires a certain kind of person. We have so many people who signed up who stopped showing up. It wasn't what they wanted to do or spend their time doing. You have to want it. There's a lot of mosquitoes in here, sorry.

Rachel (20:36):

And now actually I think it's, the mosquitoes are gone. It's just like the little gnats that fly around my hat.

Clair (20:42):

Yeah. It requires a specific person to do it, otherwise there would be more.

Rachel (20:54):

So how do we build that momentum?

Clair (20:58):

Yeah. I think that that's the hard part. You can't make people care. You can't, or the world would be different.

Rachel (21:11):

How does climate crisis affect how you plan for your future?

Clair (21:16):

I think having worked in retail my whole life, I couldn't plan for my future. I couldn't make a plan because I never knew what was going to happen next week or if I was going to afford anything. So I never was one know those people who like thought about a picket fence or... Mostly I just want to go get [inaudible 00:21:34] and like be with my friends. I don't really always think about a future. That's a very New Yorker thing I think.

Rachel (21:46):

And now is that changing because of the changes that you've made?

Clair (21:50):

I think so. I definitely will be able to keep coming here. I want to think about what could happen next here. And I didn't have that last year. That's pretty incredible. That's probably all I could handle right now, is this. Yeah. It's pretty good.

Rachel (22:15):

So many people talk to me about the healing that happens when they join a garden.

Clair (22:24):

Yeah, I needed to redo my life and this was a big part of it.

Rachel (22:28):

So amazing. Do you have a spiritual or religious or ethical based values system that really you contextualize?

Clair (22:43):

Not really. No, for me it's always been about food. What it makes you feel, what it makes you feel when you cook for people you love. Especially if you love to cook and you eat seasonally, you can do it really well with people you care about. That's really all I care about.

Rachel (23:01):

Really?

Clair (23:01):

Yeah. I'd rather have a friend over and cook for them than cook for myself. It's about sharing. And that's what's the best part about this.

Rachel (23:17):

What do you fear for the future?

Clair (23:21):

I think that I haven't been able to think about that because I was just so stuck in my life. I guess I'm not at that point yet.

Rachel (23:29):

What do you feel hopeful for?

Clair (23:33):

The garden.

Rachel (23:38):

What feels hopeful about it?

Clair (23:43):

Next year is really cool because over the winter I'll be able to be a part of the planning that picks what we grow next year. That's really cool. And I think that when I first joined last year, I was like, I didn't understand how we picked equally. So I just kind of didn't pick a lot of stuff at the beginning except herbs. Next year I definitely just mostly shop here. It took me a little bit to get comfortable enough to do that.

Rachel (24:13):

Yeah. I can see how it could potentially be an awkward negotiation of not wanting to take too much and then so not knowing how much you can take.

Clair (24:20):

Or not knowing the timing or how many people were going to come. And now we have a better pattern with that or I see the pattern more.

What about you? What are you hopeful for?

Rachel (24:37):

Everybody at this garden is turning the questions back on me today. Oh, I don't know. I'm like holding onto Rebecca Solnit's definition of hope, which is hope isn't knowing that there's a door that you can open and go through but knowing that there's the possibility of a door.

Clair (25:06):

That's pretty good.

Rachel (25:08):

So I'm in the possibility of a door. I also decided to have a baby.

Clair (25:19):

Cool.

Rachel (25:19):

So sort of like actively in the process of that, I had a miscarriage and then, so it's sort of like it's very present. That was a big choice to choose hope, whatever that means. Like I don't think I even know what that means, but it felt like I can't live in a world where the future is so, not just bleak but...

Clair (25:48):

Uncertain?

Rachel (25:48):

Not even uncertain. No. I mean, thank God the future is uncertain. That the future is so certain that it's not worth bringing new life into it. I talk to people who are like I wouldn't have a kid because you're just sentencing them to death. And I kind of think you don't actually know what the future's going to look like.

Clair (26:13):

Also, what life experience have you had that you think that's okay to say to someone?

Rachel (26:17):

Well, yeah. But that's a whole other story. So that's kind of like where my hope is lying right now and the knowledge that I've chosen hope, without even though I'm what that means, thinking about Rebecca Solnit's definition.

Clair (26:32):

That's like where I'm at right now. That's pretty good.

Rachel (26:37):

Although, when I found out... I'll get personal now, since you asked, since we're interviewing me. I found out that the embryo, the pregnancy wasn't viable on the same day that the IPCC report came out like in August.

Clair (26:55):

Geez.

Rachel (26:55):

And it really was like, boy. And there was so much grief and depression around the pregnancy. And it got really tied with my eco-anxiety and I felt very dark like there's no future. And I just could not imagine a future. And that felt really scary.

Clair (27:18):

To have it all come down crashing at the same time.

Rachel (27:20):

Yeah. And to really feel like the future had just closed in. Because I'd spent so many years sort of actively cultivating hope as like an action. And just to feel like all of that, that I'd felt like I had a handle on, realized how tenuous that was. That was scary.

Clair (27:39):

That'll freak anybody out.

Rachel (27:48):

I think uncertainty is actually the best thing we can have right now.

Clair (27:51):

Because it's a way to move forward.

Rachel (27:54):

Yeah. Certainty is really limiting.

So Clair, are there any questions I didn't ask you that you wish I had asked you or that you expected me to ask you?

Clair (28:14):

No, I think they were all pretty good.

Rachel (28:20):

What are the questions you're asking yourself right now?

Clair (28:26):

I kind of haven't. I've taken these last few weeks to pause and not. I haven't given myself grief, about anything, about money or worrying about work. I haven't had to worry about work. That's like the first time in my adult life I haven't been worried about going to work every day. And that's taking this moment to pause and seeing the people I love and coming here. I haven't had to worry.

Rachel (28:57):

That's so great. I'm so happy for you, for that.

Clair (29:01):

Thank you.

Rachel (29:01):

That's amazing.

Clair (29:02):

It's pretty different.

Rachel (29:05):

Totally.

Clair (29:08):

Pretty fucking different.

Rachel (29:10):

Making a big change is significant.

Clair (29:15):

I haven't lived alone in 10 years.

Rachel (29:17):

Wow.

Clair (29:19):

It's great.

Rachel (29:20):

Yeah.

Clair (29:22):

Living alone is great.

Rachel (29:24):

Yeah.

Clair (29:26):

What about you? Do you have any more questions you wish you'd asked me?

Rachel (29:31):

No, I asked you all my questions, but I always like to check in to see if there's things people want to say or talk about or also if they expected something different that I missed.

Clair (29:41):

No, it's fascinating. It's really cool.



Rachel (29:43):

Thanks for talking with me.

Clair (29:45):

Yeah.

Rachel (29:45):

I really appreciate it. Really generous, time, thoughts.

Clair (29:49):

No problem.

Rachel (29:49):

Vulnerability. I'm always deeply appreciative of people talking with me.

Clair (29:54):

That's good.

Rachel (29:55):

Yeah. I will turn this off.