

W

LIA

The following program contains explicit language and an open contempt for likely the most respected profession in the world. Your children will be easier to deal with if they believe authority figures know better than they do. You would be easier to deal with, too. May we all be innocent again someday.

LIA

You wait your turn to speak. You sign your name on a list, with all the other names. You try not to notice the people around you, coughing into nothing, filling the room with their contaminated air. You share that air, but it's inevitable. You might die a little faster with their help, you might have to take a day off work. You'll be a little less attractive. No one will want to take care of you. Your friends will resent you for wasting their time. What seems to be the problem? The doctor says. Oh nothing, you reply, just Tales of Insecurity.

LIA

Hello, welcome again to another episode of Tales of Insecurity, the foremost podcast in post-modern existential horror and bemused alienation. Does bemused mean what I think it means? A portmanteau of befuddled and amused? That's what I want it to mean. For the purposes of this introduction, assume it means that. It should be fine if I use words however I want as long as I tell you what I'm doing, right?'

LIA

Who am I? I'm LiA Lindsaychen, your host and curator. I made all this happen. I accept all the blame. It's a little harder for me to take

credit for ideas, so while it might be more correct to call myself the creator of this show, the writer, the visionary, that's horrible. I hate that. I'm not going to say that. I wrote all the words in it, and made the music, and performed all the roles. I recorded it and mixed it and if there's anything wrong with it (there are lots of things wrong with it) it was me. I messed it up. I'm here in my sweetie's apartment, talking to myself, and I've got the flu or something and I'm sorry if I'm a little low energy this episode. You would have done the same, if you were me. It's really not that I'm a control freak or anything like that. I would collaborate, I just, don't know how to start that conversation. I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to inflict responsibility on anyone like that.

LIA

Sorry, I don't know why I'm so worried about taking a leadership role. I keep telling all the HR representatives who could have given me a job that I think I would thrive in a managerial position. I might not be a good enough liar. My darling tells me I have a complete inability to leave ambiguity in anything I say, that I think of every possible way every statement I make could be misinterpreted and go out of my way to define my terms so that the interaction goes precisely according to the plan I made when the conversation started.

LIA

I'm really not a control freak. That phrase is ableist anyway, but so is everything, I guess. Do you know about ableism? It's one of those isms that's so ingrained in society that it's sort of taken as a given. I feel it's not talked about enough. It's the implicit bias the world has toward the able-bodied, the able-minded, the people

for whom structures are made.

LIA

To a certain extent, all isms are ableism in a way, because the ruling class forms its prejudices about various others on the basis that they will be less equipped to handle the responsibilities they're so proud of. The founding fathers justified slavery with all kinds of pseudo-scientific rhetoric about the shapes of brains and bodies. Starting with the premise that white people were better equipped to run the world, they collected evidence of any physical difference and cited them rigorously as their manifest destiny. They saw it as the responsibility of property-owning white men, however they had taken that property, to take care of the people who weren't as able to be assertive. Kipling's white man's burden comes from the belief that European models of society are so much better for everyone that it needs to spread and be enforced, presumably for everyone's good. This was also the belief of the puritans, who heard the New World was a home for religious freedom, which they had to stamp out at whatever cost. The Nazis found white man's burden too much to bear, and tried to circumvent their responsibilities in the most gruesome way possible. The whole Cold War was presupposed on the worry that two groups of white people with different systems each wanted theirs to be universal, because theirs was great and the other one was evil.

LIA

All this is very tiresome. What is this, a history podcast? I'm tired. White culture has taken over so much of the planet, to the point where it's difficult to find anything else. American missionaries still travel all over the world, bringing along cadres of

little white teenagers who want to save some souls. Cute little privileged children who know nothing about anything approach long-standing civilizations and pretend they have some wisdom to share. The locals pretend to be fascinated. They need the money, thanks for the goat and the Coca-cola. Your only responsibility.

LIA

This cultural dominance happens on a smaller scale, too. Within the course of your day, everyone you interact with has an idea about how everything is supposed to work, and on some level, they believe their idea is universal. They have learned over time a strategy for continuing to be alive in a cruel uncaring world, and this is a lesson anyone should have learned.

KEN

It's common sense! I don't like it, but it's just the way things are. The sooner you grow up and accept it, the happier you'll be.

LIA

Common sense is what they call it when they can't tell you why it's true. Almost everyone has given up. They want you to give up, too, so they have another person just like themselves to repeat the same lies to, reinforcing them.

KEN

I thought this was supposed to be a comedy show? What the hell is this?

LIA

I've never been a very good liar.

KEN

This is the weirdest damn thing I've ever heard. Who listens to this shit?

LIA

No one, really.

KEN

You should make a show like that, what was it called? That Garrison Keiler guy.

LIA

I guess my Coca-cola ads are distressingly similar to his rhubarb pie schtick. I hope I've got a little more teeth and claws than he does, though not in the sexual harassment sense.

KEN

Nah, I don't believe it. That show is too wholesome. I'm pretty sure those women were just making it up. Women do that, you know.

LIA

Yeah. So today's show is Doctors without Boundaries. We are talking about the gatekeepers of society and the depth of their grip on everything you think you are.

DOCTOR

Good news, your test results came back and it looks like everything is within normal range. Looks like you're not sick after all. You just think you feel bad because you're an attention seeking child who wants the day off school for the rest of your life.

LIA

Oh, great, thank you, doctor, I was worried there that something was wrong with me.

DOCTOR

Nope, absolutely nothing, and I can't really empathize with you enough to accept that you even feel pain. You're probably just ultra-sensitive to any sensation because it's your time of the month.

LIA

Yeah, okay, that's not really a factor for me.

DOCTOR

What do you mean?

LIA

I'm trans?

DOCTOR

Oh okay then. Well there it is.
You're taking hormones, right?
That's probably why you're having
back problems.

LIA

But what about my breathing?

DOCTOR

Yeah, hormones can effect breathing
too. It's really not very well
understood what hormones do to the
body.

LIA

Do you think that's true? I'm
pretty sure that's not true.

DOCTOR

Miss Lindsaychen, did you go to
medical school?

LIA

No.

DOCTOR

Did you go through residency,
repeated 80-hour workweeks for over
a decade, always on the run,
usually on call, never sleeping,
saving lives day after day?

LIA

Not quite the same way, no.

DOCTOR

Okay then. It's the hormones, and
no one understands how they work.

LIA

Why did your residency last so
long? I could email you a peer-
reviewed study, if you'd like to
read it.

DOCTOR

I wouldn't read it if you printed

it out and put it on my desk. I wouldn't read it if you made an arrangement of it that synced up perfectly to the original cast recording of Hamilton. I wouldn't read it if you meticulously sketched it onto a set of contact lenses that you forcibly glued to my pupils.

LIA

Alright. Well, thank you.

DOCTOR

I'm here to help. Oh and my staff tells me there's a problem with your insurance, do you know what's going on with that?

LIA

No idea.

DOCTOR

You should probably figure that out.

LIA

I'm probably not going to. I've never figured anything else out. I'm utterly bemused by everything, and all that comes out of my mouth are Tales of Insecurity.

DOCTOR

Hi there, hi there. Hello. Good to see you. So what brings you in today?

RACHEL

Oh, you know, nothing.

DOCTOR

Well that's fine, lots of people go to the doctor for no reason. You wouldn't believe how many people I see where just, nothing is wrong with them at all.

RACHEL

Yeah?

DOCTOR

It's really incredible. It actually really boosts my self-confidence, because as far as I can tell, the only reason people come into my office is to hang out with me. It's quite a compliment, especially with how much I charge.

RACHEL

Thank you, doctor.

DOCTOR

Alright so, let's take a look at you. Blood pressure, 130/60, that's within normal range, 190 pounds, that's probably okay, that's about what I weigh too. Was that with the chair? Doesn't matter, I guess. Go ahead and cough for me.

RACHEL

(Long coughing fit)

DOCTOR

Sounds good, you've got a healthy set of lungs there. Did you ever do marching band?

RACHEL

No. I'm disabled.

DOCTOR

Back then, too? Well, I would have thought the wheelchair would be an advantage for certain things. Like a bass drum, or the tuba, it'd be a lot easier to carry just on your lap like.

RACHEL

I never played the tuba.

DOCTOR

They're big. That's their main thing. I never played one either. I was an oboe man myself. Got a scholarship to Juilliard but I decided to be a doctor instead. No lumps, good. What do you do?

RACHEL

I'm disabled.

DOCTOR

Oh, so you don't even work? Must be nice. I should look into some of that disability too. Be nice to have a little of it from time to time.

RACHEL

Yeah. Pretty funny. I've heard that about anorexia too.

DOCTOR

I mean, if I could just use the chair! Sometimes when we're on a long shift, all I want to do is sit down.

RACHEL

Maybe you should sit down sometime.

DOCTOR

Nah, I can't do that. I'd get a reputation for being lazy! So I stay on my feet all day and sleep at night like a baby.

RACHEL

Just moving from my bed to my chair uses so much energy that I have to rest for half an hour, at least.

DOCTOR

Well it's a good thing you have the chair to rest in. Go ahead and lift up your skirt so we can see what's going on down there.

RACHEL

Oh. Sure.

DOCTOR

Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Hmm.

RACHEL

Is everything okay?

DOCTOR

Oh fine, fine. I was just checking to see if you had any feeling down there.

RACHEL

I do.

DOCTOR

I can see that, so I was just wondering, why do you have the wheelchair?

RACHEL

Because I can't walk. At least not very far.

DOCTOR

Yes, but why can't you walk? See, I have this theory that most disabled people, they're using their disability as a crutch.

RACHEL

Then what are my crutches for?

DOCTOR

Don't be glib. This is serious. When are you going to stop feeling sorry for yourself and start living?

RACHEL

Probably some time after you take your stethoscope off of my pussy. What are you even doing down there?

DOCTOR

Your attitude is the only thing holding you back.

RACHEL

Is that your diagnosis?

NURSE

Doctor, your daughter is here.

DOCTOR

Well what is she doing here? Why isn't she with her mother? I have patients waiting.

NURSE

I don't know, but she's here, and she told me she needs to talk to you.

DOCTOR

Alright. Well, I'm going to be right back, but while I'm gone, I'd like you to think about a plan for getting out of that chair.

RACHEL

I've used an assistive device since I was a child.

DOCTOR

All the more reason to pull that bandaid off as soon as we can.

NURSE

She's in your office.

DOCTOR

Thank you, Grace.

NURSE

You're welcome, doctor.

DOCTOR

Rawr. Call me later! Just kidding. Alright. Hi, Gwendolen.

GWEN

Daddy! Hi!

DOCTOR

Your father's very busy today. Do you want to tell me what it is you had to say that absolutely couldn't wait?

GWEN

Mommy said you'd be annoyed, but I had to come see you.

DOCTOR

Oh yeah, why's that?

GWEN

Well.

DOCTOR

Out with it.

GWEN

Okay. So. You know how that girl at school's been bullying me?

DOCTOR

Oh well you know honey, it's important to stand up to bullies, otherwise people will try to take advantage of you all your life. Once you start feeling sorry for yourself, it never ends.

GWEN

Yeah, that's what you told me. So she made fun of me for my Lisa Frank backpack. Everyone started calling me dolphin girl. It was annoying. Anyway, that's all over now. I took care of it.

DOCTOR

What does that mean?

GWEN

She's not going to bother me anymore.

DOCTOR

Honey, I know you think that sounds diplomatic, but honestly, it's sounds incredibly sinister.

GWEN

Dad! Don't be silly.

DOCTOR

Okay, so you made friends with her then?

GWEN

I wouldn't say we made friends. But she knows my name now. And it's not dolphin girl.

DOCTOR

Darling, you're scaring me. Tell me you didn't do anything violent.

GWEN

No, no, of course not. Not in any way that can be traced back to me.

DOCTOR

Would you like a soda or something? I've got some ginger ales here. It's a mixer, but you can have it by itself, I think.

GWEN

No thank you. It was all pretty simple. So there's this boy she likes, and they've been meeting together after school in various out of the way places. All I had to do was find out where they were meeting, and the rest sort of took

care of itself.

DOCTOR

I really wish you would tell me what happened.

GWEN

She fell out of a tree. I called an ambulance for her. She's lucky I was there.

DOCTOR

Oh, okay, that's nice.

GWEN

Well. Sort of.

DOCTOR

Sorry, can you just, tell me everything I need to know. I have patients waiting for me.

GWEN

That's all you need to know. That's all I wanted to tell you.

DOCTOR

Is she going to be okay?

GWEN

She'll live.

DOCTOR

I swear to god, dear.

GWEN

Clumsy girl broke her legs. Who knows if they'll heal right?

DOCTOR

Right. I'm sure they'll be fine.

GWEN

Don't be too sure.

DOCTOR

No, she gets to be disabled now. I'm sure you two are the best of friends.

GWEN

I was getting my revenge. I taught her a lesson.

DOCTOR

No, now she's going to get all that sweet attention. People are going to be holding doors for her, going out of their way to help her. She's got it easy now. She's going to get coddled. Honestly darling, if you were trying to get revenge, you messed up.

GWEN

Oh. And here I thought I was turning into a badass.

DOCTOR

Not hardly, not like that. People bend over backwards for disabled people, didn't you know?

GWEN

No, I thought that it would be, you know, worse. Than being able to walk.

DOCTOR

No, everyone's always on their best behavior, worried they'll be in the way. Take a look next time you're with your new friend. People just jump out of your way when they see you coming.

GWEN

I had no idea.

DOCTOR

Maybe I should start teasing you, too. Maybe you can disable me.

GWEN

Do you want me to?

DOCTOR

Nah, I'm trying to help people here. Disability will be nice, but I'll save it for when I ready to retire. Now if that's all you have to tell me, I have some work I need to do.

DOCTOR

Hi there. Hi there. Sorry to keep you waiting like that. Totally unprofessional of me. Here, have

these coupons for some free medical care.

RACHEL

Is that something you offer here?

DOCTOR

Okay, let's see. You're fine right. I don't see anything wrong with you. I guess this bone density test Dr. Mallawaarachchi ordered for you says you might have osteoperosis, but you're too young for that. You can't have osteoperosis if you're under 35.

RACHEL

I'm 33.

DOCTOR

Yeah, too young. Maybe in a couple of years we can do something about that, but for now, just drink a little more milk.

RACHEL

I can't have dairy.

DOCTOR

Seriously? You are really a huge pain in my neck right now.

RACHEL

I'm sorry my health problems are inconvenient for you.

DOCTOR

Okay. Sorry. It's not my fault you can't walk. What did you say happened? You had an accident in high school or something?

RACHEL

No, I have a genetic condition.

DOCTOR

Oh really? I thought you said you were in the marching band until you hurt yourself.

RACHEL

No, I didn't say anything like that.

DOCTOR

Huh. Well, you shouldn't have picked on that girl.

RACHEL

Okay, now I have no idea what you're talking about.

DOCTOR

People get what they deserve. I'm sure when you're ready to be healthy again you will. It's not my fault. Stop trying to blame me.

RACHEL

No one's saying anything's your fault.

DOCTOR

Great. Okay. Right, she said it was untracable. Forget I said anything. Please schedule a followup for three months. Let's see how we're doing then.

RACHEL

Any advice for the meantime?

DOCTOR

No, just keep on doing what you're doing. Stay away from high places and gang violence.

RACHEL

Oh. Alright.

DOCTOR

See if you can walk around a little. It's really important to me that you get better.

RACHEL

Okay, I'll do it for you.

DOCTOR

It's really important. I know you like the parking space and you like being the disabled girl, and that's all fine, but at some point, you need to stop your little frolic and rejoin us in society.

RACHEL

Sure, doctor, okay.

DOCTOR

You can do it. Believe in yourself.
The only thing holding you back is
you.

RACHEL

Great, thanks a lot.

NURSE

All ready to check out? How was
your appointment today.

RACHEL

Good. It was fine. Best doctor's
appointment I've had in a while,
really. So, he told me to schedule
a follow-up in three months.

NURSE

Okay great.

RACHEL

But the baby's due in two. Is that
going to be a problem?

NURSE

I'm sure it will be fine. Dr.
Kirschenbaum knows what he's doing.

RACHEL

I suppose I might as well believe
that.

NURSE

He's a doctor.

RACHEL

He's a doctor.

LIA

Did that have a point? I guess that
doctors are flawed people like
everyone else and project their
issues onto the people around them,
but their added position of
authority makes that trait more
dangerous. Would have been nice if
that was clear in the text. Phew.
Hi. Welcome back, this is Tales of
Insecurity. Let's take a look at
our listener mail, which we still
don't have any of, but that's okay.

Validation really isn't that important to me, because I have a strong sense of myself and am fiercely independent. I represent that can-do spirit of the American Dream, without the imperialism. I don't even need to subjugate other people to believe in myself. I do create strawmen of archetypes who irritate me, though. Oh well. Let's see, let's be positive. Let's have some wishful thinking. Do we have a jingle for wishful thinking?

LIA

Huh. I guess that's okay. Kind of dissonant for wishful thinking. Cognitively. Okay so, let's see, let's look at the best mail I could hope for.

LIA

Hi, LiA, thank you for making such a beautiful podcast. It's funny and poignant and really helped me through a dark time in my life. I felt like I was completely alone, and you really helped put my problems in perspective, even though mine are ostensibly much worse than yours. Honestly, your problems don't seem bad at all, and listening to you complain about them made me feel like a stupid whiny nobody, even though I intersect with many more margins than you do, and have far more right to yell curses at the moon. You really helped validate my feelings of isolation, and now I feel special, knowing that my pain is of a more rarified quality than almost anyone's, at least more than yours.

LIA

Wow, that's a really complicated thought. It's an interesting thing, finding peace in pain. That'll probably be a topic for another episode, but I'm really happy that my depression isn't particularly notable or interesting. That's really good to know, because I

don't really define myself by my depression. I'm just trying to fit in, really. But don't think for a moment that I've revealed all my problems. I'm pacing myself. Still, it's good not to feel alone. Let's see what else we might like to see.

LIA

Dear LiA, I'm sorry I was so defensive about your gender identity. Now that I reflect on it, I can't see why it should make any difference to me, and I think it's wonderful that you've learned to assert yourself a little more. I spent so much of my life as a pastor, serving a certain role to people, that I never got a chance to understand who I am on my own, and I'm so proud and relieved that you will not share that mistake. I may not always understand you or your ideas, but I love you, and I'm glad you're finding a little meaning in this boring, horrible world. Love, Dad.

LIA

Thank you. Thank you. That means a lot. It means a little too much, actually. That doesn't sound like you at all. You should check the security on your account, I think you got hacked. I don't like it. No, I don't actually want that. What do I want?

LIA

Dear Ms. Lindsaychen. I represent a specific talent agency and we would like to commission your podcast with the option to turn it into an anthology program on one of the major streaming services, probably. Maybe a network? But that kind of runs against your independent spirit, I should think. Let's say Netflix. Or maybe a smaller, less ubiquitous service, where you will be a flagship product. You'll get a whole staff of writers and composers and actors and key grips and all these other things you

don't know anything about. Really, you'll lose creative control entirely and just be a figurehead of nothing, and it will inevitably fail and you will take all the blame. But you'll have a little money for a while, and we're not going to take away your innate ability to do things, just your name and reputation, and of course, all rights to the Tales of Insecurity name. It's not that great a name, really. You shouldn't be so married to it. Let us know your decision within the next four hours, or else we will be forced to pass for someone a little more grounded in reality.

LIA

This is a really difficult exercise. It's hard to figure out how realistic to be. I don't really know how to wish, I guess. Let's try one more.

LIA

Dear LiA, everyone gets universal basic income now, so you can just do what you're doing and not worry about having to make whatever you're working on anything but what it is. Or you can stop. There's really no responsibility. You can do whatever you want. Thanks for showing us the error of our corporate ways. We are happy to finally give back to the world that we have milked for so much. Sorry. Your friends at Coca-cola.

LIA

I knew that would pay off. I'm so proud. Ugh. I'm tired of the Coca-cola schtick. Sorry. What am I even doing? I'm tired of the fake mail schtick too. If you have any comments or criticisms or anything really, you can send it to talesofinsecurity@gmail.com or on Twitter @NoHopeRadio. Okay now.

LIA

Okay, so. Let's broaden our theme a

little. Doctors aren't the only authorities in your life who mean well, who think they're trying to help you while they enforce restrictive paradigms. There are others. Just for variety, let's check in with the allies.

THEME SONG

There is no problem
That we cannot fight
We can do anything
Because we are white
We're here to help
We're by your side
You can have anything you want
As long as it's pride

BRETT

Alright, allies, assemble!

RACHEL

Ready for your command, captain!

CORINNE

We're all here.

BRETT

Begin rollcall!

RACHEL

Power of conflict mediation!

RANDY

Power of apologism!

CORINNE

Power of white feminism!

BRETT

And I'm the enforcer! With our powers combined, we are

ALL

The allies!

BRETT

Alright, allies, do we have any new business today?

CORINNE

I have something. I don't like how

you, the strong male lead, seem to be the de facto leader of our group.

RANDY

Now Corinne, that's not entirely fair. We are, and have always been, an equilateral collective of like-minded individuals, and maybe our system is imperfect, but you can't expect society to change overnight.

BRETT

Thank you, Randy. I agree that any sense of my leadership is problematic, but if I end up filling in that role, I assure you, it is purely a coincidence, and has nothing to do with my class or privilege.

RACHEL

Have they addressed your concerns, Corinne?

CORINNE

Not entirely.

RACHEL

What could they do to make you feel more at ease?

CORINNE

I don't know, Rachel. I don't know.

RACHEL

Brett, I think your acknowledgement of the problem is a great start, but without a plan for constructive change in the future, it might be difficult for Corinne to move on.

RANDY

Golly, Rachel, he's trying his hardest to appease everyone, surely Corinne can cut him a little slack.

BRETT

No, Randy, Rachel is right. Let us not waste her emotional labor. We must fight against oppression wherever we see it.

CORINNE

What about me, am I right?

BRETT

We're all right, my lesbian friend.

RACHEL

I'm picking up a distress beacon in the gamma quadrant.

BRETT

Zounds! A citizen in trouble. Let us make haste to the scene.

BRANDON

I mean, I know I don't get to say it, and that's fine, but sometimes it's just the right word for the situation, you know.

BRETT

Stand down, evildoer! You will not even consider uttering your foul epithets.

BRANDON

What? No. I wasn't going to, I just think it's weird that it's like a magic word. I'd prefer if we could just strip it of all its power.

RANDY

Golly, Brett, he's using the power of pseudointellectualism to deflect your hard-hitting justice.

BRETT

My one weakness! Allies, assistance!

CORINNE

So what makes you think you're any different when you say that word than when other white people do? Is it because you think you're special? Because you're a man?

BRANDON

No, of course not. I just don't have any hate behind my words. I'm not racist.

RACHEL

So what you're saying is you don't

have any intentions of animosity informing your decision to use that word?

BRANDON

Yeah, something like that.

RACHEL

I hear you when you say that.

RANDY

Geez, everyone, should we really be focusing our attention at this guy when there are more serious hate crimes going on?

BRETT

Now, now Randy. No infraction is too small for us.

RANDY

But jeepers, you know, he said he was sorry, and he didn't actually do the thing he was thinking about.

BRETT

It's a dangerous thought, and it leads to a slippery slope.

CORINNE

Our society is quick to forgive the sins of the oppressor, and gives them extra credit for doing what should be standard.

RACHEL

But that's a means to an end. We have to incentivize sensitivity for those in power to willingly surrender any of their hegemony.

RANDY

We're all just trying to do our best.

CORINNE

I'm picking up another distress beacon.

RACHEL

What is it?

CORINNE

A woman in trouble. No wait, it's a

man. I can't tell.

RACHEL

We should ask their pronouns.

BRETT

I'll handle this! Citizen, don't say the n-word, ever! Okay let's go! Good afternoon, citizen. How shall I address you?

LIA

Oh hi, I'm LiA. And you are?

BRETT

Here to assist you! I guess what I mean is, what pronouns do you use?

LIA

Oh sure. She/her. Thanks for asking. What pronouns do you use?

BRETT

I'm not. I should think that would be obvious!

LIA

Oh, well. I thought mine were too. So, he/him?

BRETT

I am a man!

LIA

Right. Of course you are. So. He/him?

RACHEL

What seems to be the problem, sir?

LIA

Miss.

RACHEL

I'm so sorry. You were just saying he/him and I got confused.

LIA

It's alright. Happens all the time.

RANDY

And, your hair's short.

LIA

No, I get it. We really don't have to dwell on it.

CORINNE

So what happened?

LIA

Nothing really. I just failed another job interview, and I'm pretty sure they were put off my transness, but obviously, there's no way to know for sure.

CORINNE

That's awful.

LIA

It is what it is.

BRETT

Don't act so defeated, citizen. We are here to use our white, cis privilege for your benefit. Now, where is this threshold guardian?

LIA

Just in there.

RANDY

Danger, captain.

BRETT

What seems to be the problem, faithful friend?

RANDY

I'm getting strong PoC readings.

LIA

Yeah, the hiring manager seemed to be West African, if I were to guess, I'd say from Ghana.

RANDY

An immigrant.

CORINNE

And she's a woman. A real woman.

RACHEL

We may have to abort this mission, captain.

CORINNE

He's not the captain. He has no authority.

RACHEL

This is a really dangerous situation. Can we handle this many intersections?

BRETT

We have to try. We've sworn an oath, to protect all marginalized people from systemic oppression. The system is so powerful that even the oppressed feed into it. We must fight for justice wherever we must. I'm going in.

RACHEL

Would you like us to go with you?

BRETT

No, I have to do this alone.

LIA

Are you sure?

BRETT

I am. I'm afraid there's no way I could ever allow you to imitate an African accent. No, no, no. Not on my watch.

CORINNE

Does she have to have a pronounced accent? Surely that's an unfair assumption on your part.

BRETT

I think it's just safer if I handle this myself.

RANDY

Good luck, captain.

BRETT

Thank you, Randy. I just hope we get out of this with our moral highground intact.

RACHEL

Do you think he'll be alright?

RANDY

It's hard to say. It's possible his bisexuality might be enough leverage to get the upper hand, but she has a lot in her favor.

LIA

I'm sorry, do you all think being a minority gives you more power or less?

RANDY

We're trying to restore balance to an unfair system.

RACHEL

Your negativity is really unhelpful.

CORINNE

I read that gender dysphoria is a mental illness.

RACHEL

Careful, Corinne, don't stigmatize the mentally ill.

CORINNE

I just think we're wasting too much time on this when real women are in trouble too. We have to pick our battles, and I feel kind of bitter fighting for a person who's a little confused when there are legitimate women facing harrassment and worse, every day.

LIA

I'm sorry, though in all fairness, I didn't ask you all for help.

CORINNE

And he's not even grateful!

LIA

She.

CORINNE

Sure, sure.

RACHEL

This really doesn't seem like a productive conversation.

RANDY

We're all just trying to get along.

RACHEL

Now Corinne, why don't you promise LiA that you will be civil to her, even if you don't necessarily respect her gender identity, and believe that her biology makes her inherently less womanly than yourself?

CORINNE

Yeah okay. That's fine. I'm sorry for being so overtly rude. That was really uncivilized of me.

RACHEL

And LiA, why don't you stop being so entitled to special treatment just because you've elected to negate your male privilege. Surely you can't have it both ways.

LIA

I'm. That's not. I wasn't. I'm sorry.

RACHEL

Great. Great. Now we're all on the same page.

BRETT

Alright, so, I talked to Afiba and she assured me that she really had no issue with your gender identity, and she didn't even know that there was anything wrong with it.

LIA

Yeah, I don't like the way you

BRETT

She showed me your resume and some of her more qualified candidates' and yeah, it looks like you've just been outclassed fair and square. So nothing was wrong. Seems like you've just got a persecution complex. You haven't done anything of distinction for the last ten years, why should anyone expect more out of you now?

RANDY

Well that's great news! Thanks for checking that out, Brett.

LIA

Sorry to put you all to so much trouble.

RACHEL

Oh really, it's no trouble.

RANDY

We're happy to help.

CORINNE

And I've learned a lot about the issues facing the transgender community, even if they did not share in our essential shared girlhood.

LIA

There are trans men, too.

CORINNE

Fascinating. I've never really noticed them.

LIA

I'm sure I've learned a lot, too.

BRETT

Then our work here is done! Congratulations everyone!

RANDY

We should have a party to celebrate.

RACHEL

Oh, Randy, I like the way you think.

BRETT

Then it's settled. Everyone, let's reconvene at 2100 hours for capers and cavorting.

ALL

Hooray!

LIA

Can I come?

CORINNE

I'm sorry, it's staff only.

ALL

Hooray!

LIA

Oh. Are you hiring?

RACHEL

No, sorry, sweetie.

CORINNE

Don't call her sweetie, it's patronizing. I'm sorry, him.

LIA

Her was right.

RANDY

You should take that as a compliment. She forgot which way you were going.

BRETT

Alright allies, let's head out. But remember, wherever there is injustice, we'll be there. Wherever there is oppression, we'll be there. Wherever there are microaggressions emanating from unchecked privilege, we'll be there. Repairing those things, in case it seemed ambiguous. We will be there in opposition. We will not be doing those things. Exactly the opposite, in fact. We stand for the weak and the oppressed, the pathetic masses who cannot speak for themselves.

LIA

I think they could, if you listened.

RANDY

Shh! He's almost done.

BRETT

We are

ALL

The allies!

LIA

Okay, so we're on Stitcher now. They told me I'm supposed to talk about Stitcher, too. It's a podcast distribution platform. There's an app and stuff. You can listen to this show there, and a lot of other ones. You can leave reviews and get recommendations for other shows based on the shows you like. Maybe you don't like the way you listen to podcasts now. This is another option, and it includes extra ads for Stitcher unless you purchase a premium plan. You can give them more money for the same functionality! I'm starting to lose control of this. Okay. Stitcher. Podcasts. Friendly voices in your ears to silence your own thoughts and make you feel less alone. Leave me a review maybe so someone else can find me, unless you want to keep me all to yourself. I also have a patreon if you'd like to donate money to me. I mean, that's kind of a longshot, but if you want to, I wouldn't want to stop you. That's patreon.com/nohoperadio.

LIA

So, back to doctors. I'm not the biggest fan. I go to doctors all the time -- welcome back to Tales of Insecurity, by the way -- not really for myself, but with my sweetie and with her twin, who are both disabled in ways no one but themselves seem to understand. So we see new doctors all the time, and each one hears how many doctors we've seen and wonder why no one has been able to help us. Then a few tests come back that they can't interpret and they suggest a different specialist. We've been doing this for years now, and every now and again we'll find a doctor who helps a little, but they always

have waiting times of six months to a year. The only specialist around here for the connective tissue disorder they have has a four-year waiting period, but she's the only one who treats Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, because it is a rare disease. You'd think the demand for her might clue someone in that maybe it's not as rare as advertised, but doctors don't really listen to feedback.

DOCTOR

I'm sorry, is this going to be on the test?

LIA

There's no test, I'm just saying this to clear my head.

DOCTOR

Oh, well if there's no test, do you mind if I study for my organic chemistry final?

LIA

Do whatever you want.

DOCTOR

You're sure it will be okay?

LIA

So before doctors become medical students, they start as that annoying kid in all your classes who does school in the most pragmatic way, determining exactly what is expected of them so they can do just ever so slightly more in that dimension. They have no interest in any of the material or in anything else except their parents' approval.

KEN

What in the samhill are you talking about this time?

LIA

This is not the person I was, obviously.

MARY

You should form a clear thesis before you get too far into this project, or it's very likely your ideas will become diffuse.

LIA

Doctors are the people who weren't ever sick, not in the way the rest of us were. Whatever sickness they had, they were able to work through, and they think that all sickness works like that.

KEN

You never did have any willpower.

DOCTOR

I'm sorry, I've having a lot of trouble taking notes on this lecture. Will you be providing an outline on blackboard later?

LIA

I was terrible at school. I never looked at my grades. I was determined not to think about grades, under the assumption that if I formed a coherent understanding of the material, the grades would take care of themselves. This worked out some semesters, the ones where nothing else was wrong.

MARY

You can't keep blaming your problems on external factors. Grades are the best interpretation we have of our position in society.

LIA

The semester I had seizures, I got every grade, A+ through F, the whole spectrum. Another I had this month-long migraine, I can't even remember what happened then. The pain kept me from sleeping. That whole time is one long hallucination.

DOCTOR

Hi, I'm sorry, I think I might want to see your credentials as a

professor?

KEN

What in the samhill do you think you're doing?

MARY

Oh dear. Is this really all you have to say?

LIA

College was a long time ago now. It doesn't seem to have mattered yet. You know, I was in Lena Dunham's graduating class. We were both darlings of the creative writing department.

KATHRYN

Darling might be pushing it.

LIA

We both had our places. I might have been a little more fringe than she. I don't know, I only watched the first episode of Girls. I don't really have anything to say about Lena Dunham.

DOCTOR

So is Lena Dunham going to be on the test or not?

LIA

No. I don't know anything about Lena Dunham or her lifestyle, the hedonistic upper middle class bourgeois navel gazing how do you do that she's found her place in, that's her world. We're not in competition.

MARY

If you were, though, she really won, wouldn't you say?

LIA

Yes.

MICHAEL

LiA.

LIA

What is it?

MICHAEL

Are you okay?

LIA

I'm sorry. I've still got some flu left. I keep getting all these dizzy spells. These cold sweats. But I feel like I'm just starting to get a feel for how to make this show every week. I'm risking everything on this, you know.

MICHAEL

How so?

LIA

I stopped looking for work. I got discouraged. Dozens of interviews, so many lies. A few times I represented myself accurately, and those were the most awkward of all. So I've decided to put all of my energy in this little show I'm making, because I can finish them. They are short enough that I can get them out the door before I start doubting myself. I need to make the best effort I can to make them beautiful and interesting that no one else can or else I have just completely wasted my entire life.

MICHAEL

Okay. Calm down.

LIA

I'm calm. I'm completely calm.

MICHAEL

Sure, sure.

LIA

So I'm making podcasts now. I don't answer all the phone calls from my creditors anymore. This is the last month I have service, anyway. All my payments are going to bounce next month. We're not even going to have internet. I've already pretty much stopped eating, so we're good there, at least.

MICHAEL

LiA.

LIA

What.

MICHAEL

Calm down.

LIA

I'm calm. Stop telling me to be calm.

MICHAEL

LiA.

LIA

What?

MICHAEL

What are you going to do if you fail?

LIA

Failure isn't an option.

MICHAEL

It's pretty much the only option. It's pretty much the only thing you've done your whole life. It's kind of your thing.

MARY

You're a disappointment.

KEN

You're a disgrace to humanity.

LIA

This is my death and rebirth. That's the narrative. That's how it works. The protagonist wants something and shows agency, then they go through a series of trials and come out equipped to handle their problems. The trials take them to their limit, past their limit, but they come out stronger.

DOCTOR

Now you're making sense. Adversity is a trial to be overcome, got it.

LIA

No, that's how it works in stories. Which I suppose is the way we understand our lives. When we're

terribly unlucky, we take it as a sign that the fates are intervening somehow. It wasn't meant to be. God never closes a door without opening a window. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Bell rings, signaling the end of class.

DOCTOR

Excellent, I think that's everything I need to know.

LIA

I'm not finished yet! I'm saying, even though stories are the way we understand our lives, we are fitting our lives to that mold, not vice versa.

MICHAEL

No one can hear you, LiA. This whole podcast is just going to be an elaborate suicide note.

LIA

If it is, then so be it. I will make it the most elaborate suicide note since Kirkegaard. I will download the entirety of my consciousness into a series of audio files so my body can rest.

MICHAEL

LiA. If you're having thoughts of self-harm, you should really be discussing it with a therapist, not broadcasting it to the world at large.

LIA

I'm on a waiting list.

MICHAEL

For therapy?

LIA

Uh-huh. They told me I was a priority case.

MICHAEL

Sure.

LIA

But I know better than to talk about pain with doctors. They don't know anything about it. And I'm not going to kill myself, don't worry. I already have.

MICHAEL

Oh, you're talking about me.

LIA

No, I'm talking about both of us. I got rid of you so I could live on my terms, but now I've reached a new lowpoint of my own. But it's fine. I'm too logical. My life is already forfeit, so I can do whatever I want. I don't need to compromise anymore.

MICHAEL

So what do you want to do?

LIA

This! This whole thing!

MICHAEL

But why?

LIA

Don't make me answer that.

MICHAEL

It's a simple question.

DOCTOR

I'm afraid I can't prescribe you any pain killers, but some of my patients have seen positive results with herbal tea.

RACHEL

What kind of tea?

DOCTOR

Any of them should be fine. I can't say that they have any official benefits, but there's no discounting the placebo effect.

RACHEL

So they don't work.

DOCTOR

No, they do. There's just no active ingredient that does the work.

RACHEL

That doesn't make any sense.

DOCTOR

Nevertheless, it works. And I can't prescribe pain killers anymore. There's an opioid crisis, you know.

RACHEL

Doctor. I am desperate. I need help.

DOCTOR

Try the herbal tea, and if that doesn't work, come back and see me in two weeks.

RACHEL

Okay.

DOCTOR

Great. Oh, and my staff informs me there was a problem with your insurance, so today's visit will have to be out of pocket, I'm afraid.

RACHEL

Okay.

DOCTOR

Great, well I hope the herbal tea works. It really should. As long as you believe.

RACHEL

And I went home. I already had some chamomile tea in my kitchen cabinet, though I don't normally partake. I don't like that floral shit. I think my ex bought it, and I got custody somehow in the divorce. When the water came to a boil, I dipped the kettle over gently, letting the water trickle out in individual drops. If this was going to be medicine, I was going to treat it like medicine. It would be a tincture, an elixir, a potion. Not just some Safeway brand

water enhancer.

After the fluid had steeped precisely 3 minutes, I measured out exactly one cup into a proper chalice. My regular assortment of coffee mugs didn't seem auspicious enough for healing medicine. I had to remind myself that this tea represented health; it was not a beverage. This tea would make my pain go away.

The week before, something happened to me. I don't know exactly how or what, but some nerve in my spine got jostled in the course of my regular work day, and ever since, I'd been in constant agony all over my body. Nothing abnormal showed up on my MRI, so no one could tell me why my body was attacking me so. All I know, is I was sitting at my desk, transcribing subtitles, as I do, when my back slipped a little and something changed. In that moment, I had a new awareness of my body, which had seemed so invisible to me before. At that moment, I knew all the edges of myself. I could feel my blood scraping against the insides of my veins and arteries and capillaries. I could have drawn a map of myself, as detailed as any architectural document. I knew all my cells. They each carried knives larger than themselves. They were all too big for the space where they lived.

I tell myself, the tea in my hand will heal me. The tea will make this agony stop. Don't call it tea. This infusion will fill me, will ease me. I press it to my mouth and tilt my head back. The heat of it burns my lips, but that is a pain so minor it barely registers. When the blood knives started, I fell to the gray carpet in our office and screamed until the ambulance came to sedate me. I slept, but I still screamed. They secured my arms in place. They kept me in the hospital

until I learned to stop screaming.

DOCTOR

There, now. It's not so bad, is it?

RACHEL

You cannot imagine the pain I am in.

DOCTOR

I'm sure it can't be that bad.

RACHEL

Exactly.

DOCTOR

If it's really as bad as you say it is, you'd still be screaming, right?

RACHEL

You didn't like that answer either.

RACHEL

But they released me. When I couldn't go to work, I lost my job. When I lost my job, I lost my insurance. They had no interest in me then.

RACHEL

As I remember the tea in my throat, I realize, I can't feel it, nor can I sense my blood, slicing me apart longways. I put my hand to my face, just to see if I can still feel. I can. My hand is cold, colder than my cheek at least. I do not know whether my face is cool or warm. Warmer than my hand at least. I wiggle my toes. They respond as they should. Everything seems to be in fine working order. Just a moment ago, my life had been a waking nightmare, someone had replaced my bodily fluids with tiny glass shards, but now they are smooth again. They are liquid. They are invisible.

RACHEL

With my burden lifted, I go to sleep. Sleep is all I've wanted for so long, and now that I have it, I

soak in it greedily. I do not know how long I sleep, but when I wake up again, it is still dark, or it is dark again. My insides are starting to attack again. Now it is more a burning sensation than slicing, but it is building into more. I burst out of bed and get to the kitchen as quickly as I can. I set my water to a boil and steep my tea, three minutes, and I down it, and I am fine.

RACHEL

I breathe a sigh of relief. I might be able to do something today. Maybe I can find another job. My phone rings.

RACHEL

Hello?

DOCTOR

Hi, Ms. Lee?

RACHEL

Yes, hello.

DOCTOR

Yes, hi, this is Dr. Kirschenbaum, I just wanted to make sure that you were doing better.

RACHEL

Yes, actually. The tea worked. I feel much better.

DOCTOR

That's good to hear. Then you can complete your payment soon.

RACHEL

Sure, sure. You'll get the money.

DOCTOR

We like to keep our accounts up to date.

RACHEL

Of course, I understand. Doctor, do you mind if I ask: the tea was really effective. How can that be?

DOCTOR

Oh, well, pain is psychosomatic, you know. It's your brain telling you something is wrong. The placebo effect works by convincing your brain that you are changing the situation. Then your brain stops trying to get your attention.

RACHEL

I see. Thank you.

DOCTOR

It's a really useful phenomenon. There might not be a limit to its applications.

RACHEL

And he hangs up. I think about what he said a while and realize he was trying to teach me something. It's a message. No limit. Even his name, Kirshenbaum, is a clue. Cherry Tree, in German. George Washington chopped down a cherry tree, meaning I'm looking for a town outside of Washington DC. I check a map. Germantown, Maryland. Perfect. But what could be there?

RACHEL

I have no reason to stay where I am. I have nothing left here. I brew a supply of tea for the road and start driving. Maryland is only a few states away. I will be there by evening.

RACHEL

The Pennsylvania landscapes are stark and empty, but they are indiscernible from actual landscapes. They might as well be full of mountains and activity. I might be seeing something, but it is dark. It is always dark now. But it might as well be light.

RACHEL

When I arrive in Germantown, I'm not sure where I'm supposed to go. The city is all townhouses and condos as far as I can see. Office buildings and strip malls. It

doesn't seem like the destination for a spirit journey, but I remember what Dr. Kirschenbaum told me. No limit. You have to trick your brain. And I see through the veneer of middle class complacency. I see money and power all around me. This is the heart of government. This is the beating heart of humanity.

MORPHEUS

Congratulations, Ms. Lee. You're in an elite group of individuals now. You've broken the code.

RACHEL

I check my surroundings. I'm not sure where I am anymore, but it doesn't matter. Wherever you stand, the world rises to meet you.

MORPHEUS

Have a seat, Ms. Lee.

RACHEL

Who are you? How do you know my name?

MORPHEUS

We've been expecting you. I know all your life, you've felt there was something special about you, something different.

RACHEL

Yes, but everyone thinks that.

MORPHEUS

It's the fundamental lie. It is the lie we must believe to continue living, that our own lives mean more than any other.

RACHEL

If it's so necessary, what happens when you realize it's a lie?

MORPHEUS

Then either, you stop living, or it becomes the truth.

RACHEL

I see.

MORPHEUS

So which is it going to be, Ms. Lee? You have chased the white rabbit down its hole and now you stand at the gates of wonderland. Do you go further, or do you climb back out, your tail between your legs.

RACHEL

Am I Alice or the rabbit in this scenario?

MORPHEUS

That's up to you. You can be the Queen of Hearts if you want.

RACHEL

Can I be the Hookah-smoking caterpillar? I always liked him.

MORPHEUS

No, that's Through the Looking Glass.

RACHEL

Oh, but it was in the movie.

MORPHEUS

They put both books together.

RACHEL

What about The Wizard of Oz, does that play into this at all?

MORPHEUS

You've come this far, now you must make a choice. Before you, I have placed a red pill and a blue pill. The red pill will take you deeper into adventure. You will form an understanding of yourself that few have managed. Or you can take the blue pill, which is an inert sugar pill.

RACHEL

And he looks at me through his mirrored sunglasses. His eyes are empty, just a reflection of my own face. I watch him sizing me up, though I can't examine him with the same scrutiny.

RACHEL

Whoooo areeee youuuu? I say.

MORPHEUS

Think carefully. Which one is it going to be?

RACHEL

You make an interesting case, young scarecrow, I say, snatching the blue pill from the table in front of us. But you and I both know, it doesn't matter which pill I take.

RACHEL

And I swallow. It burns in my mouth. It burns my throat. The pain in my blood returns, worse than ever, and goes away again, as soon as I think about my chamomile tea. The man in front of me laughs, and the room between us becomes anything I want it to be, if I can just want something.

MOM

I'm really proud of you darling. Whatever you end up doing, I will always love you. Now hurry up and get to school.

RACHEL

And she hugs me. My mother hugs me. It is a sensation as painful as any other. It is worse. It is incomprehensible. It is nonsense.

DOCTOR

I hope you can complete your payment soon.

RACHEL

How much money do you want? What is money? Some kind of numerical evaluation of our place in society?

DOCTOR

I guess so.

RACHEL

Great, have all the money. I don't need it. I can form my own society. And I don't need doctors anymore. I don't even need tea.

DOCTOR

Thank you.

RACHEL

I start living, outside of my life. I can see the entirety of it from the outside, and I can go through it at any pace I like. Moments are stacked like paper, all on top of one another.

BULLY

I like your dolphin backpack. Everybody look at the dolphin girl!

RACHEL

I like my backpack too. My daddy bought it for me.

RACHEL

And the bully goes away. I don't have that moment anymore. I can't even remember it. No one ever called me Flipper. That was never my nickname. That show never happened. Neither did Lassie, or Mr. Ed, even. All the animal shows, gone.

BULLY

You're not really Chinese. Your eyes aren't squinty enough.

BULLY

Aw, somebody's sleepy! Or is your face just like that?

RACHEL

Gone.

TEACHER

Okay, Rainie Lee, your word is Barbecue.

RACHEL

May I have the language of origin?

TEACHER

It comes from Spanish.

RACHEL

May I have the definition, please?

TEACHER

A meal or gathering at which meat, fish, or other food is cooked out of doors on a rack over an open fire or a portable grill, or to cook in such a manner.

RACHEL

May I have the part of speech?

TEACHER

It can be a noun or a verb.

RACHEL

Can you use it in a sentence?

TEACHER

Even though Harriet was a devout vegetarian, she looked forward to barbecues with her family.

RACHEL

Oh, that's nice. Tell me more about Harriet.

TEACHER

After graduating with a biology degree, Harriet wasn't sure what she wanted to do with her life, but her family assured her that they would be equally proud of her whether she focused on research or medical practice.

RACHEL

She sounds really ambitious.

TEACHER

They encouraged her to take a year abroad, and offered to pay her expenses, but she thought she would learn more about life and what it had to offer if she abandoned her support structure and lived independently.

RACHEL

Harriet seems great. Can I be Harriet?

TEACHER

You may.

RACHEL

Great. Barbecue. B A R dash B dash Q, barbecue.

TEACHER

Correct. You've done it, Harriet! You've won the county spelling bee! You'll go on to regionals next week. Do you have anything to say?

RACHEL

Thank you. I couldn't have done it without the help of my parents, who helped me study all the words, and have always encouraged me to pursue my passions.

EX

You left the mayonnaise out again.

RACHEL

Oh sorry, I got distracted.

EX

I don't want to go through this conversation every day.

RACHEL

I'm sorry. It's not a big deal. We can get more mayonnaise. I'm dealing with a lot right now.

EX

I don't think I'd ever let you operate on me. You might leave your sandwich in me.

RACHEL

I should have gone into research.

EX

There's still time. What makes you want to be a surgeon, anyway?

RACHEL

I don't know, I guess it's just what my parents wanted for me.

KEN

You can be whatever you want to be.

RACHEL

But I want to make you proud.

MARY

Harriet, we'll always support you, no matter what you want to do with your life.

RACHEL

What if I don't want anything?

EX

Honey, did you get any toilet paper?

RACHEL

No, I'm sorry. I was too tired. I had a really long day.

EX

I understand, but we still have to have toilet paper.

RACHEL

I thought I saw some in there.

EX

Yeah, but that's single ply, you know I can't deal with that. I have texture issues.

RACHEL

Oh, I'm sorry.

EX

You're a doctor, honey. Surely you can afford a second ply.

RACHEL

I'm still in residency. I'm still a few years out from real money.

EX

What's taking you so long?

RACHEL

These things take time. You can't expect everything to happen overnight. It takes a decade of hard work, and a lot of luck besides.

EX

Did you at least get my tea?

RACHEL

Yeah, I got it.

EX

You should have some too.

RACHEL

I don't have time for tea right now.

MOM

You can be anyone you want to be.

DAD

You can be anyone you want to be, Natalie.

DOCTOR

Ms. Lee, we tried running your credit card, but it seems the payment was declined.

RACHEL

Try it again.

DOCTOR

Alright. Oh, okay. No idea what happened before.

RACHEL

It's okay, I'm sure you made a simple mistake. Happens all the time.

RACHEL

And I leave the appointment. I get into my car, an '98 Toyota Tercel. Why am I still driving this car when I could do anything I want? Why am I still eating rice and beans instead of anything nice. I don't even know what nice food is. Cake? What do people eat?

MORPHEUS

The only limit is your imagination.

RACHEL

I'm on call this weekend. My girlfriend wanted to go hiking, but I couldn't. She seemed upset. But she understood. Instead, we're pretending it's a rainy day. We're sitting inside, watching foreign films. I don't even speak German, but these movies seem more familiar to me than my own life.

EX

You have to look at the screen, silly. Get off your phone before I break it.

RACHEL

I have responsibilities, Karen. I can't just tune everything out.

RACHEL

She looks at me, hurt. I don't know what she sees in me. I don't know what I see in her. I think maybe we both prefer a relationship without strong feelings, because then we can make it into whatever we want.

EX

Would you like some more tea, my love?

RACHEL

Please. I say. I hate her tea. But I drink it, for no reason at all. My patients tell me it helps them with pain, but I've never experienced pain. I bet they haven't either. Pain is psychosomatic, a state of mind.

EX

Do you really not have any clean cups?

RACHEL

God I hate her.

Just rinse out one of the ones in the sink!

EX

Gross! Why are you still living like a college student?

RACHEL

Sorry, darling. I've been busy. I love you!

RACHEL

Pain isn't real. Pain is just your brain telling you to give up. Don't let your brain win.

EX

Thank you for loving me.

RACHEL

She says, doing the dishes,
cleaning the kitchen, while our Wim
Wenders sits paused in front of me.
Do you want some help?

EX

No, I got it. You just rest your
busy little heart.

RACHEL

And I wait. I hear her moving
crockery, I smell the bleach. She's
never cleaned this much. It's fine.
I feel my heart freeze. The blood
that flows from it is crystalline
and jagged. It should hurt, but it
doesn't. Nothing hurts. Pain is a
state of mind.

RACHEL

I check my phone, wishing someone
was dying so I had somewhere to go.
Someone is. Sorry honey, I have
purpose in my life. You wouldn't
understand.

AFTER SCHOOL

SONG

Huffin' and Puffin'
Huffin' and Puffin'
Everybody got their something
something
Huffin' and Puffin'
Huffin' and Puffin'
Everyone get some something
something

The kids are outside in the
schoolyard
Taking their turns at breathing
hard
They're popping inhalers, out of
control
Sucking down albuterol
Sitting in a circle waiting their
turn

All the cool kids have lungs that
burn
Have a cup of coffee, have a cup of
phlegm
If you ever stop breathing, you
might never start again

LIA

Thank you, everyone, thank you. How
we all doing tonight? No but
really, how are you? No, really,
I'm really asking, I'm not just
saying that idiomatically. I'm
really interested in your health
and your well-being. You can share
your feelings with me. I'm here to
help. The quality of your life is
important to me, and if there's
anything I can do to make it
better, just let me know. Whatever
I'm doing, I'll set it aside for
your benefit, even at the cost of
my own comfort.

LIA

Ha ha, not really, can you imagine?
I don't even know you. I mean, I
hope you're fine, I hope you're not
in too much pain, but other than a
certain intellectual curiosity, a
little study I'm putting together
about the relative amounts of
discomfort people tolerate in their
everyday lives, the only difference
between you and some idea of an
abstract person is that you're here
and almost everyone else is not.
For me to take a personal interest
in you is absurd. Your family
doesn't even do that. Though they
do wish you would call. I've got a
message here,

LIA

"Why don't you ever call?"

LIA

It's actually all they have to say.
I told them I would pass it on.

LIA

When you do end up calling, they'll ask the same question again. Why don't you call? And then they'll tell you about the people in the neighborhood, names you've heard from their other stories. Phyllis and Mark and Carol and Vera and Vera's boy Donovan, he's on a PhD track, you know. They don't actually know how to talk to you, now that you've changed so much and they're the same people you've always known. But you represent something to them, a chance at permanance in an ephemeral existence, and they've grown really attached to permanance. This is their last chance to infect you with some aspect of themselves, and they can't do that unless you call.

LIA

Oh right, so hi. I'm LiA. How is everyone doing tonight? Sorry I went off on that tangent. I'm going to run out of time before I've even said anything. These open mike nights, I don't know if you've ever been to one. They're nerve-wracking. I wouldn't go. I don't. I've never been, that's why there's just a tape-recorder up here. That's me, standing next to it. The tall trans girl, with the cheekbones. There she is, she's waving. I know you'd probably prefer if she was talking herself, but she's a little bit shy. I hope I'm not embarrassing her.

LIA

Oh no, she's definitely embarrassed. See, she has problems with crowds, and while there aren't too many of you out there, that makes it even worse, somehow. More personal. That's the root of a lot of social phobia, you know, the feeling that you might accidentally make a difference im someone's life. That we might form a connection. It's something we learn to avoid at all costs when we're

too young to know what we're doing. At least for me. I remember a certain point when I was probably six or seven and I was eating breakfast and I made a little six or seven-year-old joke about how I was a cereal killer, because I was chomping down Cookie Crisp or something and I saw this incredibly weary expression on my mother's face. LiA's trying to make that face now. Take a look at her. That's not quite it. Pretty close. It's an expression that says, "Am I really supposed to encourage this? Am I supposed to feign amusement and approval? I suppose I should, lest my child develop feelings of inadequacy, but what if they get the idea that the things they say are interesting or amusing without having done due diligence? I cannot make that concession. Oh well." It's a complicated expression. Seeing that face is the moment I gained self-awareness and shame. It's an important moment. I'm sure it happened to you, too. At a certain point in adulthood, though, some of us gain verifiable expertise in something, and we apply that knowledge any time we can.

LIA

So what brings you in to see me today?

LIA

Oh nothing doctor, nothing. Does anyone else do that when they go to the doctor? Most of the time in your life, you don't complain about your health problems because it's impolite somehow. It's unpleasant. No one wants to hear about the regularity of your bowel movements. No one wants to know that's something you keep track of. No one wants to remember the machinery of your stupid, ugly body that can't even speak for itself. So every now and then, you have to break that social contract, to forget the

person you're talking to is a person and tell them intimate details about yourself that maybe even the people closest to you don't know.

LIA

Doctors have to deal with this. People who underplay their symptoms, and the occasional person who says too much. TMI, miss, I don't need to know all the gory details about your cervix. I'm sure it's great, but honestly, take me to dinner first.

LIA

I'm sorry, I thought that's what I was supposed to do here.

LIA

You don't even have a cervix, don't try to pull one over on me.

LIA

And I'm getting the impression, going to doctors as often as I have lately, that maybe most of their patients say too much. They're very good at deflecting complaints.

LIA

It's perfectly normal to feel tired all the time. That's just part of getting older. How long has this been going on?

LIA

I don't know, ten, twenty years?

LIA

Well as far as I can tell, I can't see anything wrong with you. Maybe you should try seeing a therapist.

LIA

There's this really pervasive idea that so many problems are psychosomatic, and that psychosomatic means imaginary, and having imaginary problems means your don't have physical problems, and that since you don't have physical problems, you're just

wasting everyone's time. Doctors study a lot of things. They have to memorize all kinds of names and tables of what interacts with what, what the various signs are of various common or more interesting ailments. They have to learn all kinds of physics and chemistry and other things I probably don't even know about. But they don't have to learn statistics. Common diseases are the only ones that exist to doctors, and rare diseases are impossible. Here's the thing. Say a certain rare disease is known to affect 1 in 1000 people. Now, say a certain doctor sees 30 patients a day. Just for that one disease then, they are likely to see at least one case of it every month and a half. Now, say there are 1000 other rare diseases. There are. For any individual sickness, the incident rate might be rare, but when you take into account all of them, a doctor is likely to see a person with a rare condition every day.

LIA

I hear doctors complain about overdiagnosis. Everyone has ADHD now, I've heard, everyone just wants to take pills to make themselves happier and more productive. They don't value good old-fashioned hard work. No, they do, that's why they want the adderol. Almost nothing is overdiagnosed, except hypochondria. And Munchhausen's syndrome, and other factitious disorders. These people keep insisting they're sick, but I don't see anything wrong with them. They look fine.

LIA

I'm pretty sure that doctors get overwhelmed with the number of desperate people they see. Uncomfortable people, who are having difficulty coping with their bodies. You have to deafen yourself to the pathos of their situation

somehow. You have to sedate your empathy, just a little, just to work your long hours every day. You have to put your humanity aside and look at the statistics as you understand them. Everything is within normal range. You're probably just tired of the social contract and want a break from it. I know I do, but I can't. I'm too busy saving lives.

LIA

Alright, goodnight everyone, enjoy the bar! I'm LiA Lindsaychen. I make no pretention of caring about you. Goodnight!