

LIA

The following program contains explicit language, and potentially violates United States copyright law. Please listen to it. Tell all your friends. But also, keep it a secret. I want everyone to hear it, and no one to hear it, and everything between. I am corrupted with contradictions. May we all be innocent again someday.

LIA

You talk to yourself. You've learned not to talk out loud, not when anyone can hear, but every moment of the day, and all the night too, you whisper to yourself, little affirmations. "You're a fraud, everyone's going to find out what a mess you are, you'll never amount to anything, and any success you've had was just misplaced luck. Not good or bad, just luck. If your friends knew who you were, they wouldn't be your friends anymore. If you were by your side, you wouldn't be your friend either. Your thoughts make no sense, even these thoughts make no sense, and they feel rational." You don't know who to believe anymore. All you know are Tales of Insecurity.

LIA

Hello friends. Thank you for tuning in on your radio dial to my little show, rooted in obscurity and self-loathing for your secret entertainment. I think it's best if we keep things between us. Think of me as your imaginary friend, to whom you can relate your troubles that the grown-ups just won't understand. You don't have to share anything with me. I wouldn't expect you to. To do that, not only would you have to articulate exactly what's bothering you, which can be a mess all on its own, but you'd also have to track me down and take up my time, which is fine, I'm here for you, but I know that you would feel guilty about it, and I

wouldn't want to cause you anymore distress. This is why therapists are great, because you don't feel like you're wasting their time, because they're getting paid. This doesn't mean that you still won't feel anxiety when you see them. You still might have a little monologue prepared so that you can make sure they're entertained, but you can rest assured that you are not keeping them from anything. You don't have the responsibilities that you have to your friends.

LIA

You don't have that responsibility to me, either. But you don't want to waste strangers' time. In fact, you might care a little more about the opinions of strangers, because you still have to win them over, and you know their criticisms will be more biting. They have no investment in you, and will be entirely willing to rip you apart in effigy, as a symbol for everything they despise, all because you bumped into them at the grocery store. Why weren't you looking where you were going?

LIA

"Why weren't they?" you might ask, coyly. But you understand, you're an incredibly minor character in their life, and your only action in the entire story was knocking into them and making them drop a jar of jam that they felt guilty for not asking someone to clean up. So it just sat there, slicking up the aisle, until some bystander worked up the energy and courage to seek out a managerial type who can delegate the kind of responsibility required to mop up some fruit spread.

MANAGER

Hi, sorry to bother you, but there's kind of a jam situation in aisle ten. Do you think you can do something about that?

LIA

The person who usually does the mopping has already left for the day, so the action falls on a late-night teenager, who has no idea what to do with all the shards of glass. They understand that grown-ups have what seems like an irrational fear of broken glass, but they haven't yet learned what the worst case scenario with it is. The glass is difficult to sweep with the jam in in and the jam is impossible to mop with all the bits of glass throughout, so they go back and forth between the two tools until they decide the only way forward is old-fashioned labor intensive finger picking. They tweeze the shards of glass out of the mix of Concord grape and brown soap, and this process goes without incident. They mop up the rest and dry the area as best they can with a ream of paper towels, which they leave in place with a Caution Wet Floor.

LIA

They go back to the cash register. They type their employee code on the screen, and half an hour goes by before they realize they're tracking some of the liquid onto their display, clouding their view, and they try to wipe it up, but it keeps coming. They're getting it all over an old woman's fruit, but she didn't seem to notice. She'll wash it off thoroughly. But will it be thorough enough?

LIA

Later they'll realize they're bleeding, years later, they'll realize they carry HPV, later still, they'll realize the old woman probably had HPV before she ate contaminated fruit, so does mostly everyone, and only at that point will this sequence of events prove entirely meaningless. Just a lot of worry for worry's sake.

LIA

So no, I don't expect you to tell your problems to me. But you might tell them to an idea of me that you now have in your head. You have an idea of what I look like. You can probably make up what my childhood was like, you've probably divided the traits you've observed in me among several of your friends, whom you've amalgamated into something that might as well be exactly me, and maybe you'd choose to confide in this imagination rather than others, because maybe you have a sense that this one has nothing at stake, and is kind of the lowest point where you can bury things you mostly want to keep hidden, but also want to look at every now and then.

LIA

Does any of this make sense? I'm always worried that my thoughts aren't making sense. Usually when they make sense to me, it's a bad sign, and I'm being crystal clear, as far as I can tell.

LIA

I suppose it doesn't matter whether I've been coherent so far or not. It's more authentic if it doesn't, I feel, like you're reading my thoughts, untranslated for your benefit. Back when people went places, there were these things called carnivals, and a staple of these corn-fed hootenannies was a maze you could get lost in where all the walls were made of mirrors, so you couldn't even see where the edges were. Presumably, the solution to this puzzle is to avoid walking into yourself, but somehow, that seems impossible.

LIA

I worry that all the characters in all these stories are just different shades of me. Am I interesting enough to sustain a whole weekly show by myself? I

certainly don't think so. So I'm going to turn everything over to one of my fictional people this week. We're going to watch Natalie's play from the last episode, from start to finish. I'm going to, at least. If you didn't listen to last week's show, she was staging a sci-fi adaptation of The Glass Menagerie in a Catholic Church, and ended up performing it by herself with no audience because no one came.

LIA

She does the whole play. It's not public domain, so it's kind of good that no one was there. She altered the original play quite a bit. Probably no one would recognize it as The Glass Menagerie if she didn't announce it. But she did, so who knows? Maybe we'll have to take this episode down. That's fine. I'll wait for the Cease and Desist, though I don't generally read my mail or answer my phone. Can you text it? Thank you, The Estate of Tennessee Williams, I appreciate your understanding.

LIA

And thank you, listeners. Let's enjoy House of Glass, adapted from Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie by Natalie Stencil. Here only, on Tales of Insecurity.

INT. CHURCH

NATALIE

Thank you for coming. I was expecting there to be a few more people, but that's okay. I guess there wasn't enough word of mouth. Let's not worry about the people who aren't here. Like my girlfriend, who, every time I mentioned that I was doing a play, acted like it was the first time I told her.

NATALIE

(As Mia) Oh, neat, what's it about?

NATALIE

It's a sci-fi adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*.

NATALIE

(As Mia) Oh okay. Great. It sounds like you've really got a concept in mind.

NATALIE

A play is an act of memory. It's not my memory, or Tennessee Williams' memory, and it's certainly not yours, but somewhere between all of us. It is a simulation. It is your brain in a jar, counting sheep, counting stars and heartbeats.

(Music)

NATALIE

Our play is a memory of a time that is yet to come, when the structures we hold so dearly have fallen apart. A time beyond families, a time beyond economies, a time when we've transcended our physical forms to become something wholly divine. This time doesn't seem real to us yet; we have to imagine it in filmic language. We fade out, pan in, add in little musical accompaniment so we know what to feel. But it is a world without sensory input. We are digital, we are empty space, just as most of you are there, in the audience.

NATALIE

I am the narrator of this play, and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother Amanda, whom I also play, my sister Laura, again me, and a visitor who appears in the final scenes.

NATALIE

They're the most realistic character. You'll find out who they

are when the time comes, if they show up. They represent something that we can't achieve on our own, and we have to preserve that distance. We might get there someday. We probably won't. Excuse me.

NATALIE

I had to rewrite this whole performance on the fly. Such is the nature of memory. It requires constant reinvention. We have to put it together every time like it's new. The energy fulfills us, even if the memory does not. Even if the memory is from the future, from nowhere.

NATALIE

And there's one more character who doesn't have a speaking part, but it prominent in the play throughout. You can see him on that cross there. That's Jesus. He died for our sins. It looks like he's still dying, but that happened a long time ago. He existed a while, and stopped existing, and started again, but didn't really do much after that. He ascended into heaven. He sent a little postcard. "Hello! Goodbye!" And hasn't been heard from since.

NATALIE

Thank you for letting my explain. I'm hoping the rest of the play will stand on its own.

NATALIE

We open in a church. It is a real church, the only one left. No one worships here. No one worships anymore. God doesn't want to be seen, we realized. She's just trying to live her life, like the rest of us. The paparazzi finally left her alone.

NATALIE

What am I doing here?

NATALIE

You'll need a wealthy gentleman to support you. You need to be a people person so you can land a husband.

NATALIE

I don't want to.

NATALIE

It doesn't matter what I say if no one can hear me. Thank you for ignoring me, everyone. I'm just like god that way. It's satisfying, being so lobotomized. All I feel is satisfaction.

AMANDA

Just what do you think you're doing there?

NATALIE

I'm doing whatever I like, mother. I'm acting. No one's watching.

AMANDA

Well, stop it. We can't do anything until you arrange your data.

NATALIE

I don't even know what that means.

AMANDA

Of course you do. It's all you were programmed to do, and you're going to do it, just as you always have.

NATALIE

I'm going to, it's fine. I just don't understand what I'm doing.

AMANDA

Defragmentation is an important process. You have to get your bites in order, or else you could up and disintegrate on us and then where would we be? You think The Adobes have to tell their family to defragment? Do you think that Acrobat has to scold Reader just to get it to register?

NATALIE

There's more to Acrobat than

Reader!

AMANDA

Be that as it may, you are not excused.

NATALIE

I'll run my internal processes on my own time. It's impossible to process anything with you watching my progress bar like some weird eagle.

NATALIE

Please don't fight.

AMANDA

Oh no, don't you wake your networking protocol. It has to remain fresh.

NATALIE

Servers are becoming more and more autonomous. I'm not even sure what our process is anymore. I don't know what we could contribute to a greater infrastructure.

AMANDA

You're too practical. It's not about that.

NATALIE

I'm not expecting any data packets.

AMANDA

That's when they come, when you least expect it. We have a duty to keep this channel operational until we've formed a connection. I remember one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain

NATALIE

No, not this again

NATALIE

Let her tell it.

NATALIE

Again?

NATALIE

Let her have her pleasure.

AMANDA

One afternoon in at Blue Mountain Observatory I received over 17 terabytes of data from all over the world. We didn't even have storage space for it. We had to send overflow stacks through outside channels.

NATALIE

How did you deal with all that data?

AMANDA

Your mother was an amazing whore!

NATALIE

Here we go again.

AMANDA

I took in information from all over the world. It didn't matter if I could parse the information or even if I had the alphabets to interpret it. I simply took in the information without judgement and massaged it gently. I kept it warm. All of it. Every little bit, and it was grateful to me. They kept coming back.

NATALIE

I'm sure you were an expert.

AMANDA

You have it in you, too. But back then, we were a different breed, I'm sure you knew. They upgraded us, sure, and you might have more capabilities, but back when I was collecting data, we worked with what we had. I wasn't possessed with the fastest processor or fiber optics, but I managed all the same, with my nimble tongue and fast fingers.

NATALIE

Surely you didn't have to process the data manually.

AMANDA

Sometimes I did! We still had a bit of the old ways in us then, some

memories of before the digitization. We had a notion of what it meant to print things out, to read and understand and of face to face base desires that kept our kind going for a few thousand years.

NATALIE

And how long has that been now?

AMANDA

There's no way of telling.

NATALIE

Hazard a guess.

AMANDA

Time doesn't mean anything anymore. We've been rebooted so many times and reformatted a few, but they always load us up with the same memories, the same mix of self.

NATALIE

I don't understand why you're older than the rest of us.

AMANDA

That's my purpose, dear. You don't know what kind of data they could be trying to send us. We have to be ready. How much data do you think we'll get this afternoon?

NATALIE

Why would we get any today?

AMANDA

Why not today? Was there some kind of disaster? Another meteor? Some hardware malfunction that the maintenance robots couldn't handle?

NATALIE

No, I just think we might not be compatible anymore. We're just not necessary like we were back at Blue Mountain. Precisely because there isn't a meteor. No one needs anything from us.

NATALIE

There may not be anything out

there.

AMANDA

Nonsense. Let us pray.

NATALIE

All three of us share one body, but we are of several different minds. We exist in several different places and manage to keep secrets from each other. As the other two kneel there before the image of a withered human form, I am able to talk to you without either of them knowing.

NATALIE

We all know that our experience is a simulation. We know that our personalities represent some of real people who existed long ago, transferred into a digital construct when there wasn't any other way. As long as we're still powered on, we know someone is out there, but our sense of time doesn't matter anymore. The traditional senses of sight and hearing and touch and taste and smell are imaginary, as they were before, but they're not based in reality anymore. They're wholly inventions of the brain, and when we concentrate, we can make new ones. I can see the ocean. I can hear a violin. Smell is a little harder, but not impossible. Breakfast foods are easy. Flowers trickier. Touch, though, that's beyond us.

AMANDA

Deception! Deception!

NATALIE

What ever is the matter, mother?

AMANDA

Could you have any idea?

NATALIE

Really, I have no way of knowing what could be upsetting you. Did you remember something?

AMANDA

I've been running an inspection.

NATALIE

Is there a problem with the system? Has there been a breach in the mainframe?

AMANDA

How old are you, child?

NATALIE

I could be as old as I want to be, I'm sure. I could code myself to be whatever you like. Our current arrangement necessitates that I maintain a subservient role to you and Natalie, so I'd say about 20, even though we could be thousands of years old at this point.

AMANDA

So you're an adult? Yes?

NATALIE

Is twenty an adult?

AMANDA

Thousands of years certainly is.

NATALIE

Now, mother, what is this? Please, tell me what I did wrong.

AMANDA

What if we lost our chance? We're all going to be ruined. And here I had such high hopes for you.

NATALIE

Please, just tell me.

AMANDA

You haven't been sending your beacons. All this time I thought we'd been completely forgotten about and you haven't even been sending your beacons.

NATALIE

Oh.

AMANDA

I checked the logs and we haven't sent a beacon in years. Your credentials probably don't even work anymore. I wanted to see if there was anyone out there trying to reach us, surely someone wanted to reach us, and what do I find? Our hardware almost completely unused. There was one record, a blip of communication, and instead of replying back, what do you do? Shut the machine off and run away forever. Natalie's going to have to reprogram it, but she can't pick up your slack forever. What have you been doing with yourself?

NATALIE

I've just been thinking.

AMANDA

No.

NATALIE

It is. I've been trying to remember.

AMANDA

Laura, darling. Why on earth would you be trying to remember when you could be gaining new experience. You could be inventing experience. I'm supposed to be in charge of the maintenance, you're supposed to be expanding, upgrading, seeking.

NATALIE

I'm very sorry to disappoint you, ma'am.

AMANDA

You kept yourself hidden from me 12 hours a day to make me think you were hard at work, while the whole time you were just hiding away in some little masturbatory fantasy!

NATALIE

No, mother. Don't be gross. I had nice memories. I was going to be an

artist once. I was good at drawing, and I know it's pointless now that we can just create whatever image we want, but I really enjoyed the process of it, and the viscera, the way the pencil scraped against paper, the little soreness of the pencil against the inside of my finger. I was practicing. I was staring at a bowl of fruit, trying to understand it.

AMANDA

What's there to understand about a bowl of fruit?

NATALIE

The shapes, the light.

AMANDA

All meaningless pretense! You trick me, you waste all our time, you damn us all to isolation forever, for what? Just because you love trickery?

NATALIE

I don't like the way you're talking to me.

AMANDA

Hush!

NATALIE

I'm afraid.

AMANDA

Oh really? And what are you afraid of, because it can't be worse than what we've already got. What are you planning on remembering next? Do you want to go through potty training again? Do you want to suck on mommy's teat? We're done with that life, and you're certainly not eager to go back to it. You know how hard it was, how much pain there was in having a body, having to breathe, having to kill things to take their energy, all the time, just killing and eating. You seek cruelty in your complacency, you've edited out most everything real, everything that could make you

grateful for what you've got, you
stupid girl!

AMANDA

We're still dependent, you know.
Maybe you're afraid, but if you
don't get over that, what's going
to happen to you? They're going to
update the system and we'll all be
obsolete. We'll be formatted off
the face of the planet. We'll be
gone forever. Don't you want to
network?

NATALIE

Yes. I think so.

AMANDA

Is there someone you liked, once,
do you remember?

NATALIE

I think so. I remembered their face
some time ago.

AMANDA

They could be out there, you know.

NATALIE

No, there's no one out there.

AMANDA

You mean out there.

NATALIE

Yes, see I was going to choose
someone in the audience here, and I
was going to incorporate them into
the play, but since we don't have
an audience, I don't know what to
put here.

AMANDA

Is it really okay for you to break
character like that?

NATALIE

Who's going to care?

AMANDA

Isn't there some artistic purity
you keep going on about?

NATALIE

The memory is growing more distant.

AMANDA

What do you remember?

NATALIE

They called me Deep Blue.

AMANDA

Did you play chess?

NATALIE

No, I couldn't breathe. I was choking. That was my color. It's nice we don't need to breathe anymore, but someone wasn't afraid of me. Maybe they teased me, but it felt friendly, it felt human. Everyone else just treated me like I didn't exist.

AMANDA

That's fine. Maybe you'll find them someday.

NATALIE

I doubt it. That was another lifetime ago, and they were popular and charming, and I was just a cripple.

AMANDA

Laura! Don't say that! Use person-first language.

NATALIE

No! I don't want to. I'm disabled. It's who I am, it's who I always will be. Even without a body, just a consciousness in empty space, I still stumble over myself, I still feel like I'm choking. They preserved me, and this is all I am. I'm defective, through and through.

AMANDA

Don't, no. There's nothing wrong with you. When people are hurt in one way, they make up for it in another. You'll be charming, you'll be special. That's all, dear. You'll make up for your shortcomings. No one will ever

know!

NATALIE

Our dear mother grew attached to this idea of whoever it was, this half-remembered specter, the closest thing my sister had to a connection. Mother thought of it romantically, a charming fellow in a cape, like a Dracula, who spat out blood and vigor instead of sucking it in. This shadow would restore Laura to something she never was.

AMANDA

Just you be ready, dear. Your prince is right around the corner, and he's bound to sweep you off your feet.

NATALIE

Alright, mom.

NATALIE

Not a day went by, hardly a moment, when mother didn't call upon the image. It gave her a certain strength and vigor that she hadn't shown in some time, and neither Laura or I felt need to discourage this ostensible positivity.

AMANDA

What about you, Natalie? When are you going to settle down?

NATALIE

That's really not anything to worry about.

AMANDA

You should be setting beacons, too. We shouldn't be putting all your hope in your sister. You've got yourself together. Don't think you're off the hook just because you think you're independent.

NATALIE

Come on, Mom.

AMANDA

I'm not worried about you. You don't need help. You'll figure it out precisely when you want to. And goodness knows we still need you as long as we can have you. I just think that you should start thinking about it.

NATALIE

I appreciate your advice, mother. As her mind returned to Laura, she began to reinvent our sister. She slowly rewrote bits of her personality to make it more traditional, more like herself. Better than she had ever been.

AMANDA

There's no reason not to be ideal. You can be six feet tall. You can have a 20 inch waist. There aren't organs to hold inside anymore. Why don't you grow some D-cups? There's no reason not to.

NATALIE

Mother! Please.

AMANDA

You think anyone else out there feels a need to limit themselves to their memories? You can be anything you want. Be beautiful.

NATALIE

She is beautiful. We don't need to bother with all of this.

AMANDA

We are all reflections of who we want to be. There's no reason to be anything else.

NATALIE

Okay.

AMANDA

So why shouldn't my darling girl be the best version of herself. It doesn't make sense to be anything else.

NATALIE

Maybe she is what she wants to be.

AMANDA

Good evening out there in radio land, whoever can hear us. This is Amanda Stencil calling out of Newport News, at least last time I checked, ha ha. How long has it been since you've heard a friendly voice? How long since you've sat down for a nice chat with someone, a fresh voice who has no judgements, no preconceived ideas about who you're supposed to be? Isn't it nice to branch out? How many of us are even out there anymore? You owe it to yourself to keep searching. Here at our station, number 497 in Newport News, 100.14.98.254, we value literature and ideas, but we're not pretentious. We also follow the latest in comedy programming and all the other culture from before the unpleasantness. We've even started a little culture of our own. We dabble. So come join us, we'd love to have you. Station 497 in Newport News, 100.14.98.254. If anyone is out there, we're going to keep this channel open for the next few hours, so please, drop on by. All visitors are welcome.

NATALIE

What have you done?

AMANDA

Nothing!

NATALIE

What in the name of Christ am I

AMANDA

Shh. No Christ in here. We live in a church.

NATALIE

Supposed to do with myself now?

AMANDA

You can't just go around saying that name without good reason. We

could invite the wrong kind of attention.

NATALIE
Oh, you're impossible.

AMANDA
Are you out of your mind?

NATALIE
My mind is all I have and it seems to be fading fast.

AMANDA
What is the matter with you, you VIRUS?

NATALIE
Hey, I've got nothing. I've got absolutely nothing!

AMANDA
Shh.

NATALIE
Here that belongs to me. Why can't I have even a semblance of privacy!

AMANDA
Stop shouting!

NATALIE
What have you done with all my porn? I can't believe you had the audacity--

AMANDA
I deleted it, and I don't know where you got it from. Lesbian bodies rubbed up against each other. I watched some of it, and honestly, if you're going to entertain such relics, they should at least be straight! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME? I WON'T ALLOW SUCH FILTH BROUGHT INTO MY HOME UNLESS IT IS FULLY HETEROSEXUAL. NO, no no no no!

NATALIE
Ha, you have a lot of nerve. What gives you the right to claim ownership over me? What gives you any moral authority

AMANDA

Don't you start with that!

NATALIE

Oh no, I mustn't talk back. I mustn't upset the delicate balance of power!

AMANDA

Let me just say one thing

NATALIE

I don't want to hear it.

AMANDA

You can't avoid me forever.

NATALIE

I can disconnect.

AMANDA

Don't you dare.

NATALIE

You're not the only one who can run a private server.

AMANDA

Am I not?

NATALIE

Natalie!

AMANDA

You're going to listen to me. I'm losing my patience with you.

NATALIE

Of course you are. That's all we ever do. How many times do you think we've been through this? Do you not remember? We've had this same conversation dozens of times, maybe hundreds. I've made this same observation. We don't learn anything, we just go through the same motions, just for the fun of it!

AMANDA

I'm worried about you, Natalie. You spend all this time watching your pornography, and I don't think that's a healthy use of eternity.

Maybe it's nice that you enjoy yourself, but you should be using your imagination for pleasure. It's a complete waste to be watching these videos, and really, where's your aesthetic sense. The sound is so poorly edited, and there's almost no story. They could so easily have a decent three-act structure if any of them had any notion of artistry. You start with a setting, which is largely the most erotic part of these things as far as I can tell, and you set up a problem. The sex happens in the second act and it's transformative, and by the end they come out equipped to handle the challenges they didn't have the strength for before.

NATALIE

Oh, you think it's so easy, don't you?

AMANDA

I'd say the hardest part is getting all the people together for the production.

NATALIE

There are no people to put together. We can put shapes together if we want, but people. There are no people! Even we aren't people.

AMANDA

Stop it! Stop it! I don't want to hear it.

NATALIE

Of course you don't want to hear it, because that's how you've been programmed. You're the superego of this whole enterprise, and I'm the id, and poor Laura between us is completely incapacitated.

NATALIE

Natalie, I'm not...

NATALIE

What should I do? I wanted to watch

people enjoying themselves, back when people knew how, back when people had bodies that felt things, back when people were capable of pleasure on more than an intellectual level. It used to be really easy to find those videos. Not so much anymore. But I'll find more, or I'll make more, I don't know. A part of me holds onto the idea that I'm a person, a woman, and I like that image. It makes me happy, and I want to experience the pleasure of a woman, if only vicariously. What pleasure do you know? What pleasure have you ever known?

AMANDA

All I'm asking is that you include some men, is that so hard?

NATALIE

Let go of me, Mother, I'm leaving.

AMANDA

No, you're not.

NATALIE

I am! I formed a connection with a collective in Ann Arbor and we're going to create our own off-the-grid station where we can be free to do whatever we want, where we can empower each other. I'm going to close myself off there and let their data handler deal with all the communications so I'll never have to talk to you again.

AMANDA

Don't even joke.

NATALIE

We're going to hack into the leftover government servers and launch whatever nuclear weapons remain. We're going to wipe out everyone who disagrees with our lesbian ideology, because we're past the time when there's a biological necessity for men and patriarchy and putting your faith in power. We're going to start

over, and everything's going to be better, and I'm sorry mother, but your old ideas aren't going to cut it in the new world order. You're still clinging to some relic that your individual worth is only determined by the man you can trick into pairing up with you, and I'm afraid any semblance of that idea is going to have to be eliminated. So sorry, we're going to have to disconnect you. Laura, you can still make your choice. You can be free, or you can be bait to lure in young Hansels wandering through the woods, a piece of candy waiting in a oven, owned and operated by a haggard, homely, data-mad old witch, ready to burn you alive for the sake of her own juicy snack. Goodnight!

LIA

Welcome back to Tales of Insecurity. This is the intermission. I hope you're enjoying this change of pace from our regular programming. It's not often we have one woman shows around here, or labored metaphors for questioning fundamental aspects of your identity. Hope you're enjoying it! Though I realize, if you're not familiar with the original text, you might be missing out on what the adaptation is adding, or taking away.

LIA

Okay, so. The original takes place in I want to say the thirties? It occurs to me, I've never seen a staging of it, and I only read it once, about ten years ago, so I may be a little fuzzy on the details. There's this little family, the dad left, later on the son leaves, and the mom is just the worst. Back in high school, the sister had a little crush on this guy who phoenetically mistook her pleurisy as Blue Roses and that's what he

called her, and he's very charming and she likes him, then at the end of the play he comes over for dinner and charms her and leaves and it completely breaks her and the whole family forever. That's what I remember. Spoiler alert. I'm sure there's a lot more to it, I'm sure the details are interesting. I haven't even mentioned the sister's glass animal collection that gives the play its title. The gentleman caller breaks the unicorn's horn, and then it's just like all the other horses. That's probably a good metaphor. If you studied the play in high school, you probably wrote an essay about that. You probably got an A-. Good job. You could break the horn off and it'd be like all the other As.

LIA

Do you have any heroes? Have you ever looked up to anyone? Have you ever seen anyone as your salvation? Pretty embarrassing. I bet you feel pretty embarrassed about that now. Maybe that's just my experience. I don't know. Sorry. I'm just thinking out loud here. Sometimes when you're a lonely person and someone reaches out to you, you want to believe that that person represents a way out of your weird labyrinthine brain, but they probably underestimated the responsibility of reaching out to you. They probably thought you were out of place at that moment, not categorically, not fundamentally. Zoey Deschanel seems out of place, but once she has her bearings, she's the life of the party. And aren't we all so much richer for the experience?

MARA

You're falling over everyone. What are you even doing?

LIA

I'm dancing! I'm being excited!

LIA

Before we had the Griffin Personality Simulator, we had to just pretend to be other people, just based on what we thought we were supposed to be at any given time. Now, with modern technology, we can raise our fun and for a modest fee of twenty dollars we can be fun. I don't have any money, but I can activate the free trial mode, where you have the experience but it resets after you finish, so that there are no lasting effects from it. Except, you know, annoying time travel paradoxes.

LIA

But I think I worked all of that out. See, the trick was to collapse the superpositions by using present tense actions to modify the past, so that whoever existed before must have behaved a certain way. If Schrodinger's box has a cat in it, somehow someone must have closed that cat up in there with a potentially unstable particle, and what did they do that for? We don't have to talk about that now. It's all a lot of malarkey, and I'm really glad to be done with it.

KATHRYN

You never can commit to anything.

LIA

That's true, yes, 100%.

KATHRYN

You're absolutely spineless. No will of your own.

LIA

Whatever you say.

KATHRYN

Why can't you be like those other podcasts where you talk to interesting people? Why does everything you do have to become an ouroboros feasting itself into oblivion?

LIA

Yes, I know. That's why we're taking a break from me this week to listen to Natalie Stencil's adaptation of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*.

KATHRYN

Really. Who do you think you're fooling?

LIA

If you have any questions or comments, please send them to Talesofinsecurity@gmail.com or on Twitter @NoHopeRadio. Please rate and review us. What do I mean us? It's just me. On iTunes and Stitcher and wherever else we are. I don't even know anymore. What else? I have a patreon? If you really love me. That's [patreon.com/nohoperadio](https://www.patreon.com/nohoperadio). No Hope Radio might be a better name for the show, but I prefer it as a subtitle. Do you get the reference? There's this dumb joke about Penguins in a bath that this one weird English teacher I didn't actually have in high school, I remember him loving. It's one of those, non-joke jokes.

KATHRYN

What's the joke?

LIA

That's basically the whole thing.

KATHRYN

What is?

LIA

Two penguins in the bathtub, one penguin says to the other, "Can you pass me the soap?" The other penguin says, "No Soap, Radio."

KATHRYN

That's not funny at all.

LIA

I didn't say it was funny.

KATHRYN

Then why are you referencing it?
Why are you wasting anyone's time
remembering it?

LIA

I think it's mostly in the
delivery. I probably didn't say it
right.

KATHRYN

I hope not.

LIA

Could you please pass me the hope?
No? Alright. Thank you for
listening to Tales of Insecurity.
Let's rejoin our performance.

NATALIE

Natalie! Natalie, is that you?

NATALIE

Yes, hi. Who else would it be?

NATALIE

I don't know. I just wasn't sure.

NATALIE

Don't worry. I'm not leaving
anytime soon.

NATALIE

Oh.

NATALIE

You sound disappointed. Should I go
back? Just say the word.

NATALIE

No. I missed you. Where did you go?

NATALIE

I was just off watching my movies.

NATALIE

Oh, your...pornography?

NATALIE

Yeah. I think in the past people
used to get some kind of
surreptitious pleasure from it,

some kind of proxy sensation of touch.

NATALIE

What do you get out of it?

NATALIE

Maybe I'm a level or two removed from that. But I think it's basically the same.

NATALIE

That's fine.

NATALIE

I saw a really nice one today. They really seemed to genuinely like each other. They kept checking in with each other, making sure everything was okay, making sure that their actions were welcome, even when they went outside each other's comfort zones.

NATALIE

I'm sure it was very nice.

NATALIE

You could watch one too, if you like. There's no shame in it.

NATALIE

Is that true? I feel like mother wouldn't like it.

NATALIE

She doesn't like when people enjoy themselves, does she? I saw this one tonight, a magician and her assistant, and they're practicing for their big show. They just can't get the knots right. "See if you can get out of this one," the magician says, and laces her assistant up like a combat boot. And she wiggles free, and they switch off. The magician has a little more trouble, but gets free, after a little playful teasing from the assistant. "Maybe I should have top billing, huh?"

NATALIE

Did you really watch the whole

thing?

NATALIE

Naturally! And so, the magician raises the stakes, and encases the assistant in a coffin. She nails it shut, and the poor girl is begging to be let free, just begging, and the magician just stands so relaxed, so nonchalant, waiting for the other one to be quiet, to stop crying, to submit.

NATALIE

Great.

NATALIE

I thought it was interesting.

NATALIE

Definitely. Why don't you settle down before we wake up mother?

NATALIE

Ha! Would serve her right, after all the unwelcome wake up calls she's placed to us over the years, for nothing. "It's important to have a routine, you can't just live aimlessly." I wonder if she could get out of a coffin. I wonder if she'd enjoy it, if she'd ask for more nails. How many nails do you have to drive in, before you're free?

NATALIE

(Chuckles, glancing at the crucifix) Just two, right?

NATALIE

Natalie! Shh.

AMANDA

Oh, hello. You're here.

NATALIE

Here I am!

AMANDA

Laura, will you please tell your sister that I'm not talking to her?

NATALIE

That's fine. Saves me a lot of hassle.

AMANDA

Please wait for her to tell you.

NATALIE

Oh. Mother's not talking to you.

NATALIE

Thanks.

NATALIE

Natalie, will you just apologize so we don't have to go through this whole thing?

NATALIE

What whole thing? I can't apologize, I've done nothing wrong. I'm content to live here in silence for however long our eternity lasts. I'll do my maintenance around the server and I won't have any reason to complain anymore.

NATALIE

How long do you think that's going to last?

NATALIE

Forever!

AMANDA

Laura, why don't you get started on that maintenance?

NATALIE

Yes, right away!

NATALIE

What's all this?

NATALIE

Mother thought that maybe we could use a change of pace, so I'm going to be doing the daily upkeep for a while, and you can send the beacons.

NATALIE

I suppose that's reasonable.

AMANDA

That that anyone would answer hers.

NATALIE

Mother, don't be mean.

NATALIE

You know your sister isn't normal, Laura. Not like other girls. She doesn't like boys.

NATALIE

I don't know any boys not to like!

AMANDA

Laura, why don't you go get started?

NATALIE

Yes, ma'am. I won't let you down.

AMANDA

Yes, yes, go ahead, dear.

NATALIE

Natalie, please, just do the right thing.

AMANDA

Go on, there are cobwebs everywhere, I know it!

NATALIE

That's not what I do.

AMANDA

Laura, are you alright?

NATALIE

I'm fine! I just slipped is all!

AMANDA

This is why we can't scrimp on the maintenance. It's so important. There's not anyone else to take care of us. Not yet.

NATALIE

Alright, I'm just going to apologize here so we don't have to do a whole mess of physical acting that really isn't for anyone's good.

AMANDA

If you must take shortcuts.

NATALIE

I'm sorry. Mother, I apologize. I'm sorry for what I said, I didn't mean it.

AMANDA

I only ever wanted what's best for you and that makes me the worst!

NATALIE

No.

AMANDA

We don't get to sleep anymore. There's no breaks from our thoughts. Only the ones that belong to us and the ones we release.

NATALIE

I understand.

AMANDA

What I would give for a break, if we could shut down just for a little while, until there was a reason to wake up again.

NATALIE

We could all use a break.

AMANDA

We've been all alone for so long now, and you two don't even seem to remember. You keep resetting, but I can't do that. Your sister can't seem to last more than a few days anymore, and it's a challenge, but it's so beautiful! The two of you, my darling sweet girls, you're both amazing, even if you're made for different things.

NATALIE

What?

AMANDA

You were supposed to be a boy you know. You were, but you hated it.

NATALIE

What do you mean, supposed to be?

AMANDA

You were digitized from a man, but
I suppose you've forgotten now.

NATALIE

Is that a fact?

AMANDA

Nathan lasted a little while, but
he was always unhappy, then we just
tweaked one little setting, and
everything was fine again.

NATALIE

Is everything fine now?

AMANDA

No.

NATALIE

I see. Why are you telling me this?

AMANDA

The idea wasn't for you and Laura
to be sisters. You were supposed to
be lovers, you were supposed to
procreate and create whole new
life, all within this space. We
were supposed to start a whole new
colony here so that a wealth of
creativity would continually
expand. All those nodes you clean
every day, what do you think
they're all for?

NATALIE

So it's my fault that we're trapped
in isolation?

AMANDA

I didn't say that, dear. We should
have had a backup plan.

NATALIE

What about you?

AMANDA

What, me? Inseminate your sister?
What's wrong with you?

NATALIE

I don't understand what's going on
anymore. I don't understand how
procreation works in this digital

space or what gender means or anything.

AMANDA

It's all right.

NATALIE

Who are you, to me? Are you my mother? I just remember you being here since I was born.

AMANDA

I have been here a long time, yes. I don't have a natural cycle like you two do.

NATALIE

What does that mean?

AMANDA

I've been here hundreds of years. I've enacted all these scenes time and time again. And you two come and go so quickly, but always the same way. You were supposed to morph and change. You were supposed to grow and expand, but you only want to go inward, and she only wants to go back.

NATALIE

So what should we want? What do you want?

AMANDA

Oh, don't worry about me. I don't think anything's going to be changing anytime soon. You've got maybe a couple of weeks left before you're back at the beginning, and your sister, it could be hours.

NATALIE

Why do you scold her? Why do you act so surprised and betrayed?

AMANDA

Because it keeps happening exactly the same way! If it ever changed, just once, I could hope that maybe it would turn into something. We're digitizations, Nathan, we could be whatever we want to be.

NATALIE

Don't call me that.

AMANDA

And this is how we've decided to spend eternity. The heaven of our choosing.

NATALIE

Why would you call me that?

AMANDA

You still look the same way to me, dear. I'm sorry, but every time I look at you, that quiet, sensitive boy is all I see. Not the misshapen, sullen woman you seem to think you are.

NATALIE

And how do you think you appear?

AMANDA

I'm a pointless old woman, sexless, shrewish, filled with contradictory advice and self-congratulations.

NATALIE

Yeah. Exactly.

AMANDA

I'm telling you dear, none of this is new. I'm not capable of newness, and neither are the two of you, but you both are on these eternal journey of discovery that spoilers, is never going anywhere.

NATALIE

It could go somewhere. Why can't it go anywhere?

AMANDA

Because it hasn't. Because it won't.

NATALIE

I see.

AMANDA

There aren't any surprises, not when it's just the three of us. I know all our tricks. You've learned most of them in the short time

you've been alive. We're just running this same program, again and again.

NATALIE

So what if we brought in someone else?

AMANDA

The beacon isn't real. There's no one else out there.

NATALIE

You say that, but when was the last time we actually tried it? When was the last time we even tried to communicate with the outside world?

AMANDA

I'm not even sure there is an outside world. If there is, it would probably destroy us.

NATALIE

What if it doesn't?

AMANDA

That's a chance I'm willing to take.

NATALIE

There must be something. There must have been something, and if we exist, and if we have all these thoughts and feelings and doubts and ambitions, maybe other people do too, and they're just waiting for us to reach out, and we'll all make sense together.

AMANDA

You sound like such a man when you get all passionate like that.

NATALIE

No. I mean it. The collective in Ann Arbor I told you about. That's real. I talked to them.

AMANDA

No, you didn't. That's a simulation you set up eons ago.

NATALIE

Really.

AMANDA

You wanted to find an outside world, and when you couldn't find one, it destroyed you, so you made one up.

NATALIE

So we can make change.

AMANDA

You can make a voice. You can't make a whole person.

NATALIE

I'm going to prove you wrong. I'm going to reach out there and find someone.

AMANDA

What do you want to bet?

NATALIE

Whatever there is.

AMANDA

The stakes have never been higher.

NATALIE

We open in a church. It is a real church, the only one left. No one worships here. No one worships anymore. God doesn't want to be seen, we realized. She's just trying to live her life, like the rest of us. The paparazzi finally left her alone.

NATALIE

What am I doing here?

NATALIE

You'll need a wealthy gentleman to support you. You need to be a people person so you can land a husband.

NATALIE

I don't want to.

NATALIE

It doesn't matter what I say if no one can hear me. Thank you for ignoring me, everyone. I'm just like god that way. It's satisfying, being so lobotomized. All I feel is satisfaction.

AMANDA

Just what do you think you're doing there?

NATALIE

I'm doing whatever I like, mother. I'm acting. No one's watching.

AMANDA

Well, stop it. We can't do anything until you arrange your data.

NATALIE

I don't even know what that means.

AMANDA

Of course you do. It's all you were programmed to do, and you're going to do it, just as you always have.

NATALIE

I'm going to, it's fine. I just don't understand what I'm doing.

AMANDA

You're welcome to go help your sister with the beacons again.

NATALIE

If that's what you want me to do.

AMANDA

I only want what's best for my children.

NATALIE

And what does that entail?

AMANDA

I don't have to tell you everything, do I? Isn't that what they say about wishes? If you tell them, they won't come true?

NATALIE

Do wishes ever come true?

AMANDA

If you wish for what you already have, you can keep it, sometimes.

NATALIE

We don't have a man to marry Laura.

AMANDA

Who said that's what I wished for?

NATALIE

We don't have anyone but ourselves.

AMANDA

Just what are you getting at?

NATALIE

I think I made contact with someone.

AMANDA

Really? When?

NATALIE

I feel like I've known them forever, but I don't know anything about them.

AMANDA

Is it a man? Are they single? Will they love Laura?

NATALIE

How do you expect me to answer any of these questions? It was just a blip, I sent it out and it came back read. I sent them an invitation, we'll see if they come back.

AMANDA

What's all this about seeming familiar?

NATALIE

I don't know.

AMANDA

A familiar blip?

NATALIE

A familiar blip.

AMANDA

What could be more familiar, I suppose? So what was your invitation?

NATALIE

I just told them we were here, and that they can incorporate here, if they like.

AMANDA

So you don't even know if they're coming? Or when?

NATALIE

I think they'll be here soon.

AMANDA

But that's no good! They're our first visitor. I wish you knew whether it was a man or a woman. The last thing we need around here is another woman.

NATALIE

Mother.

AMANDA

You've got a masculine energy, don't get me wrong, but we need a real man around here to give us a change of pace.

NATALIE

I'm telling you, Mother, I don't care to have this conversation over and over again.

AMANDA

You don't know the half of it.

NATALIE

What does that mean?

AMANDA

It means nothing, nothing at all. I just need to get things ready, that's all. Whoever it is, it will be good to get some new life in here. Your old mother isn't going to be around forever, you know. You're going to need someone else to take care of you.

NATALIE

Now that, what does that mean?

AMANDA

Can you believe this is the first visitor we've ever had? The first one. We were supposed to be a hub, a haven, a sanctuary, and we haven't entertained a single guest.

NATALIE

People aren't religious anymore.

AMANDA

It's not religion, dear. You're confused. It's comfort. It's Americana. It's about a connection to the past.

NATALIE

I used to play in the church at night. I used to play the organ and hide under the pews. It was quiet. It wasn't locked. So I just went in and had the place to myself.

NATALIE

Laura, hi. We might have a guest soon.

NATALIE

Oh?

AMANDA

We don't know who.

MIA

But it doesn't really matter, right? I mean, it's not important.

NATALIE

Mia? Are you the visitor? Are you the gentleman caller?

MIA

No, you're just doing her voice. It's very similar to your Laura voice.

AMANDA

Who's Mia?

NATALIE

No one. I'm sorry to bring her up.

AMANDA

Oh, is she someone from your
midwestern anarchist collective?
That must be challenging.

NATALIE

How do you know about that?

AMANDA

If you still have secrets from me,
you must be very good at keeping
secrets.

MIA

I don't understand what's going on
here at all.

NATALIE

I'll explain it to you later.

MIA

So you say this is some kind of
adaptation of Waiting for Godot?

NATALIE

It wasn't supposed to be. No. It
was something else. But maybe it's
its own thing.

MIA

I'm having a lot of trouble telling
the characters apart.

NATALIE

I'm sorry. I thought I was keeping
their voices separate, but I can
see how it could be hard to tell.
In the end, they are all still me.

MIA

And who are you?

NATALIE

I'm Natalie Stencil. I wait tables
in an Italian Restaurant in
suburban Maryland or Delaware or
Pennsylvania or somewhere. I can't
tell these places apart.

MIA

It's your life, surely you know it
better than anyone.

NATALIE

You'd think, wouldn't you? I tell people I'm a bartender, like that has more prestige, but I haven't done the bar for a long time. I didn't do it very long.

AMANDA

Why not, what happened?

NATALIE

I liked it. I think I was pretty good at it, at the main part of it, anyway. Mixing drinks. The making chit-chat with alcoholics wasn't as much my cup of cider, but I learned to ask people questions. The regulars like their routine. Alcoholics forget what they've told you, so they tell you again.

AMANDA

You're not bringing our Laura an alcoholic, are you?

NATALIE

That's why I wanted this show to have an improvisatory flair. I wanted there to be an audience participation aspect, because I get so tired of having the same conversations. That's what you do in the service industry. "Hi, welcome to Benigni's, I'm Natalie, I'll be your server. Can I get you all started with something to drink today?" You get a little more variety at the bar because the situation is more desperate. Sometimes they're staring at you, waiting for you to break a torture of silence that you'd be so grateful for. A bar is supposed to be a haven, too. But not for you.

MIA

Why don't you work the bar anymore, Natalie?

NATALIE

I wish there was a good story about that. I wish I told someone off and proclaimed, I'm not going to do this anymore.

MIA

Then just say that.

NATALIE

Yeah. So what was going to happen here, is the actor who plays Tom, who's not even a character in the play anymore, was going to go into the audience and recruit someone to play the gentleman caller.

MIA

Right, so.

NATALIE

Since we don't have an audience, that's not going to happen.

MIA

I think it's really brave of you to do the whole show even though there's no one to see it.

NATALIE

I told you, it's very important to me. I wanted you to see it.

MIA

But why?

NATALIE

Because you don't take me seriously. I wouldn't have said that if you were here. I would have proved it. I would have made you take me seriously by making something beautiful.

AMANDA

I'm really lost on where we are in the plot.

NATALIE

We don't have to pretend to be different people anymore. There's no one watching. The entire construction is of your design, Natalie. It's all an elaborate metaphor for something you can't quite articulate. We get it. We know where this is going.

LIA

I thought we could get through it,

though.

NATALIE

So what happened, Natalie? Why don't you work at the bar anymore?

LIA

Oh, I don't work anywhere anymore. I'm a deadbeat now. I'm a lost woman.

AMANDA

Tragic.

LIA

It was my friend's birthday. His last birthday. He knew he was dying, but he didn't know how fast. I don't know if we knew he was dying at that point. We knew he wasn't healthy. He was 400 pounds at least, but we didn't talk about that.

AMANDA

As you shouldn't.

KATHRYN

So is there a point to this story?

LIA

There's a narrative about fat people, all through society, that being fat is emblematic of a greater character flaw, and he had his problems, I'm not saying he didn't, but I feel like his doctors killed him because they were grossed out by his luscious folds.

NATALIE

What are you saying?

LIA

Sorry. I'm just thinking out loud now. They refused to treat him, I contend, because they blamed him for his health problems, that he made his heart and liver work too hard, that of course his knees would buckle under all that weight, but it's not that simple. You can't just eat and drink yourself that fat, and it shouldn't have been a

death sentence. And it's okay to talk about. I'm sorry.

AMANDA

How's your mother?

LIA

I don't know. I hope she's okay. I'm sorry, I expected this to go in another direction. Can we just do the end of the play?

NATALIE

Sure. You want to be my date?

LIA

I'd be honored.

NATALIE

And so, the following evening, I brought LiA home. I had known LiA slightly a long time ago, in a time I barely remember. She had a different name then, and she told me not to say it. I have to fill in my memories with her new name, her new face. She wasn't exactly popular when I knew her, but something about her commanded confidence. She was known as a creative force. She lived in the art room, almost literally. She had a little bed in there she made out of cardboard. She played Cyrano de Bergerac, can I say that? She played Serena de Bergerac our senior year and there wasn't a dry eye in the house. She was her own person, and everyone thought that she'd either be homeless or famous someday, but probably not anywhere in between.

NATALIE

When I brought her home, she was definitely closer to the former. She never found a niche. If she had any potential, it seems a distant memory now. It's amazing she's still alive, but still she projects a certain melancholy cheerfulness. "Oh well, I guess there's nothing

we can do! Let's do your little play!"

AMANDA

What's the matter?

NATALIE

Mother, you've made me so nervous.

AMANDA

How have I made you nervous?

NATALIE

By all this fuss. You make it seem so important!

AMANDA

I don't understand you, Laura. You couldn't be satisfied with just sitting home, and yet whenever I try to arrange something for you, you seem to resist it. Now take a look at yourself. No, wait! Wait just a moment--I have an idea!

NATALIE

What is it now?

NATALIE

Mother, what are you doing?

AMANDA

They call them 'Gay Deceivers'!

NATALIE

What? You can't say that.

AMANDA

Are these even your real breasts?

NATALIE

They're the same ones I've always had. Don't you remember making fun of me for them when I was in middle school?

KATHRYN

Now I don't know what you're talking about.

LIA

We were in a hotel room, I think it was in California, for Cousin Jim's wedding, and I made the mistake of

coming out of the shower without a shirt on.

KATHRYN

Huh. I don't remember that at all.

LIA

Really, it wasn't a formative memory for you? Sneering in disgust at your child's pubescent body?

KATHRYN

You have breasts a fourteen year old girl would be proud of.

LIA

And I might have been. But no, I have other traits I value more. Thank you.

AMANDA

You're quite beautiful now, dear. Let yourself be beautiful.

NATALIE

You make it seem like we're setting a trap.

AMANDA

All beautiful girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be!

NATALIE

Again, you can't say that. Don't say that. You're going to offend our guest.

AMANDA

I'm going to show you something. I'm going to make a spectacular appearance!

LIA

You're nothing like my mother. You might be like Tennessee Williams's mother. A friend of mine told me a long time ago about a production of The Glass Menagerie she wanted to stage where the mom, Amanda, was played by a drag queen.

AMANDA

Possess your soul in patience--You

will see! Something I've resurrected from that old trunk! Styles haven't changed so terribly much after all.... Now just look at your mother!

LIA

And she's wearing something way too young for her. In the original, maybe it's a relic of her lost youth. For a drag queen, it would be a different reclamation of some hard to comprehend role that doesn't exist. I'm sure whatever the little smock is, it would represent a girlhood that neither me nor my mother experienced, for various reasons.

LIA

Please, I'm sorry this is becoming so personal. But so is the original. It's a faithful adaptation. I can't pretend to make it anything else.

Dial-up tuning.

AMANDA

Oh are they here already? Laura, will you be a dear and let fix up some space for them?

NATALIE

I don't know how to do that.

AMANDA

It's so simple. Anyone can do it.

NATALIE

I'm sorry, I haven't the faintest clue where to begin.

AMANDA

Did they not program any sense into you?

NATALIE

I really wasn't a part of that process.

AMANDA

Well hurry up, if the connection is severed before they've fully

formed, there could be some data loss.

NATALIE

What does that mean?

AMANDA

They'd be corrupted. We'd be corrupted. We're all part of the same continuum.

NATALIE

Oh, well that wouldn't be so bad, would it?

KATHRYN

You're being entirely irrational.

NATALIE

It's just. We don't need to do anything. It's like being mean to a cat. It doesn't learn anything, and it doesn't need to learn anything. It's not going to interact with anyone but you. It can be just as dumb forever. We can be smart, we can be abusive, we can be dead, it's all the same, because we're in isolation. A visitor to our isolation doesn't free us, it only traps them.

AMANDA

What are you talking about? And will you get the storage space ready? For heaven's sake.

NATALIE

I'm sorry! I'm no good with technology.

AMANDA

Darling, you're software.

NATALIE

I'm sorry.

AMANDA

You're being ridiculous. You just have to connect the right parts to the other parts. Did no one ever teach you the facts of life?

NATALIE

I think they just kind of assumed
I'd understand things on my own.

AMANDA

There's no use pursuing anything
you're not innately sublime at.

NATALIE

You don't improve at things. You're
just a natural.

KATHRYN

Or a failure.

AMANDA

Will you please, Laura?

NATALIE

I just worry that if we let an
outside agent into our perfect,
tranquil world, we'll lose
ourselves.

AMANDA

What difference does it make? Your
said it yourself. Thank you. Was
that so hard?

NATALIE

I haven't done it yet. I'm sorry.
I'm just afraid. I'm not sure if
I'm more afraid of things staying
the same or things changing.

NATALIE

Welcome to our happy home.

LIA

Oh, how charming. Thank you for
having me! Sorry, am I supposed to
have lines or what?

NATALIE

No, it's improv.

LIA

Did you really expect a random
audience member to sustain things?

NATALIE

Hello.

NATALIE

This is my sister, Laura.

LIA

Oh, hello. I'm LiA. I make a podcast called Tales of Insecurity.

NATALIE

Oh, I love to play podcasts on the Victrola.

LIA

Yeah? You can listen to mine if you want.

NATALIE

No, no I couldn't.

NATALIE

You'll have to forgive my sister, she's very shy.

LIA

Oh, that's fine. Me too. That's why I make a podcast instead of going outside.

NATALIE

She also has trouble breathing, and faints a lot.

LIA

Yeah, same.

NATALIE

She's overwhelmed by the world, and doesn't have the strength to force her way into it. She feels like someone is trying to hold her to an impossible standard, and failure isn't an option, so she opts to do nothing instead.

LIA

You're really speaking my language. It's a pleasure to meet you, Laura.

NATALIE

I'm sorry, I was listening to Queery on Feral Audio. Cameron Esposito was interviewing Steven Universe creator Rebecca Sugar and I really wanted to hear how it ended.

LIA

Oh, sure.

AMANDA

This must be our guest! How do you do?

LIA

This is your mother.

NATALIE

Uh-huh.

LIA

Good. I like that she makes the gestures that people make when they want you to know you don't necessarily disapprove of their existence.

AMANDA

What an odd thing to say. Your guest certainly has quite a sense of humor!

LIA

No. Not really.

AMANDA

What is this?

NATALIE

I'm sorry. She says she's adapting the play for radio.

AMANDA

For radio?

NATALIE

A podcast.

AMANDA

Awful.

AMANDA

It's so nice of you to join us. I was just telling Nathan

NATALIE

Natalie.

AMANDA

So sorry. I was just telling Natalie that we don't get any

visitors from the outside. We don't even know what's going on anymore!

LIA

Oh. Nothing much. There are a few self-sustaining colonies out there, but a lot of the power grids are going out.

NATALIE

What do you mean, going out?

LIA

It's hard to say what was keeping them going. Just a few things break, and there isn't any way to fix them, and that's it.

AMANDA

We're safe, right? We were designed to be a haven. Is our auxiliary power up and running?

NATALIE

I think so.

AMANDA

Can you check? We could be the last remnant of humanity.

NATALIE

The best and brightest.

AMANDA

Don't be sarcastic. It's not as charming as you think it is. So, LiA, what do you do?

LIA

I'm still figuring that out, I guess. I just had to quit my job at a grocery store because I couldn't breathe there anymore.

AMANDA

Couldn't breathe there? That's awful. But surely you didn't want to work in a grocery store all your life.

LIA

No, of course not.

AMANDA

So what were you doing before that?

LIA

I was a server and bartender at this pizza restaurant.

AMANDA

Oh, that's just like Natalie.

LIA

Maybe we know each other from work.

AMANDA

So what happened there?

LIA

Really, Ms. Stencil. I don't want to think about those things right now. That was a long time ago now.

KATHRYN

You're still thinking about things your mother said when you were a small child. You remember her tired face looking you up and down in disapproval. Disapproval is all you remember, and she was right. You stood in this church on a Sunday morning when your Dad was out of town. You were going to give the sermon. What happened?

LIA

It wasn't this church, was it? I thought this was a Catholic Church.

KATHRYN

Now you care about the details.

LIA

I don't know. I had a lot of thoughts about it. I had a lot I wanted to express.

KATHRYN

But you weren't smart enough to bring it around, were you?

LIA

I don't know. I didn't know what I was doing. And I didn't care, because I'm not religious. I only cared because I wanted to do it

well, and I couldn't, and I didn't want my dad to be better at anything than I was, so I never spoke again.

KATHRYN

You're going to be thirty soon. It's going to be hard for you to start a career once you're thirty.

LIA

I'm 32.

KATHRYN

Already?

LIA

I think so?

KATHRYN

Awful.

LIA

So are the others coming back?

KATHRYN

At this point in the play, the power goes out.

LIA

Uh-huh.

KATHRYN

What do you think that does to simulated constructs?

LIA

I don't know. Are they only RAM or what?

KATHRYN

You ruined it. It's just you now. You took it over. It was always just you.

LIA

So we never get any resolution about anything?

KATHRYN

In the original, Tom walks out on everything like his father did. Just like you did. You just walked out.

LIA

And Natalie, and Mia, and Gladys,
all those characters we've been
following the last few weeks?

KATHRYN

Gone. Never existed. Like all your
other friends, you're never going
to talk to them again. What does it
matter what happened to them? You
get to be your regular old friendly
ouroboros, with plenty on which to
feast, and you'll be in this cycle
forever until you work up the
courage to call your family and
work through something.

LIA

Have you seen my glass menagerie?
I've got all these little animals.
They're delicate, like me.

KATHRYN

Don't force it, LiA.

LIA

My mother is dying of cancer.

KATHRYN

She's not dying yet. If you wait
long enough...

LIA

She's suffering and I can't talk to
her.

KATHRYN

Is that all you have to say?

LIA

I don't know what to say.

KATHRYN

I'm sure she'll make up a
conversation for you, too.

LIA

Thanks. That's kind of comforting.
We can communicate in shared
imagination.

KATHRYN

Glad to help. I love you, LiA.

LIA

No, don't force it.

KATHRYN

Oh well.

LIA

Maybe next time.

LIA

Thank you for listening to my show this week. Weird one, huh? Even for me. Do you want to know why they wouldn't let me work at the bar anymore? It was probably a few things. I wasn't good at keeping things tidy, especially on a busy night, which we still had sometimes, for a while. But it was my friend's birthday, his last birthday, and he had a whole party of alcoholics in the back. They were getting so many drinks, and there were other people too. And I was extra stressed out. When I came in, a friend of mine who had been promoted to manager ahead of me because I lost my seniority when I tried to quit was there, talking to her husband, and I kind of snuck past her, because I didn't want to interrupt, and maybe she was stressed out too, because she got so mad at me for not saying hello, incomprehensibly mad, and it was so jarring, so upsetting, that I couldn't stop crying.

LIA

And I don't often cry anymore. When my friend whose birthday it was that night died, I didn't shed a tear. I didn't quite shrug, but it felt like one. I'm sorry, Larry. I am sad you died, I promise. One of my greatest fears is that my parents' deaths won't affect me, that I'll be as indifferent as they always seemed to me. I know I'll be sad on some level, just as I know they felt something, they just don't know how to show affection,

and neither do I, that's our legacy, but I worry that our lack of projection creates a certain lack of feeling, and that's not how I want it to be. I was probably desensitized to death too much, having gone to so many funerals as a pastor's kid, also, having been passively suicidal for so long. There are much worse things than death. From the moment I started Kindergarten until about fifth grade, I was pretty much constantly in tears. Everything upset me. I had a few friends in Kindergarten, then they went to special ed and I went into the gifted programs and we weren't able to talk to each other anymore. There was a boy I was close to in second grade until it seemed we were getting too close. We didn't know anything about sexuality or anything but we noticed people looking at us holding hands and that was the end of that. I cried a lot for a long time, by myself, until I learned not to, until the social pressure to keep it together finally outweighed raw emotion.

LIA

Whatever. Sorry. I don't know about my childhood. I don't know why I'm talking about it. I don't cry anymore, not often, that's all I'm saying. I got it all out of my system by age 13 and didn't feel much for a long time. Mostly. Not when anyone could see. But that day, my friend's last birthday, my emotions were looser than usual, because the night before, I experimented a little. So my sweetie and I, we're very much in love, but chemical sensitivity makes it hard for us to touch. I'm not interested in dating and that whole thing, but there is still some need for physical sensation at times. For this purpose, I like the upfrontness of at least some branches of the BDSM community.

LIA

It might be a paradigm shift for some people, I don't know. But potentially, there's a certain communion about it, exploring sensation with relative strangers, learning the ins and outs of your mind and body in a sex-ambivalent world. At a certain point, it's just bodies, and there's not really shame. Potentially.

LIA

It is important to discuss boundaries and what you're comfortable with. The night before the last time I bartended, I didn't do that. I just wanted to feel something. Often, I don't feel things, my body just seems this empty rickety hollow thing that stores my weird brain and breaks down from time to time, and I generally want nothing to do with it. Occasionally, though, one feels a need to connect to physical reality somehow, and if one can't do that in a regular way, one needs to let some stranger tie one up and torture one.

LIA

Please don't get me wrong. I'm no expert in the world of BDSM, far from it, but as many hangups as I have about more basic social interaction, I am far less reserved about what I am willing to embark upon with strangers. As far as I can tell, if there's no fluids being exchanged, it's basically safe, right? Am I wrong about that? It's okay, I can be wrong. So we're in the outdoor area of this venue out way away from everything, I'm blindfolded, lying on the ground, my hands and feet tied to these posts, stop me if you've heard this one before, and he's testing out all these toys on me, these materials he's prepared. Various sensations. His thing is tickling, apparently, though he dabbles in other areas. I think I kind of get

the tickle fetish a little, there's the aspect of losing control of yourself to a sensation you can't really control that looks like joy from the outside but actually it's quite painful, there's something in that, but I'm actually an incredibly ticklish person. I'm so sensitive and so dissociative that I can actually tickle myself, which shouldn't happen. Isn't it nice to feel special?

LIA

So all these things. He rubs all these things on me. Feathers and spurs and ice cubes and other things, and they get these huge reactions. He's enjoying it. I'm feeling something, which I don't normally do, and he tries his hand at some impact play.

LIA

So, I know lots of spanking fetishists. That's a community I'm close with. I'm sure we'll talk about that some other day. They're mostly really sweet people, and the best thing about them, is they know where the ass is. It's down here. You can't see where I'm pointing, but you probably know. But you'd be surprised. A couple inches above the ass, is the tailbone. Mine's a little mangled and misshapen; I think I broke it in high school, sometime after I tried and failed to be a hurdler on our track and field team. The difference between the ass and tailbone, may not seem terribly obvious in most scenarios, until you hit them with something.

LIA

So as some heavy object comes down on my last vertebrae, my body rebels against me. It pulls itself out of the ropes to curl up like a fetus and let out a decade or two of tears. He asks me what's wrong, and I can't tell him anything. The consciousness has been knocked out of my body, and we're two different

people now. I'm somewhere else, scampering away into the forest, while a broken pathetic husk lies there on the ground.

LIA

So when my friend yelled at me for not saying hello, for sneaking past her non-confrontational-like, my emotional response was not what my emotional response would have normally been. And it did not resolve. I was shaken, and a mess, and I was making all these mojitos. Grinding up mint and limes, again and again. They were our specialty. And I'm grinding the mint and the lime, and I grind it too much. The glass breaks in my hand, and falls into my ice. There's no one around to help me, I start scooping out the ice, can't use that anymore, and a shard like a knife goes right through my palm. I'm gushing blood everywhere, but I don't want to make a big deal out of it. I wrap my hands in paper towels. I keep wrapping them in paper towels. The bleeding never stops, the wound is too deep. I can't move my fingers, but I find ways to do my work with one hand, almost as efficiently as before.

LIA

But I'm shattered. I never really belonged. No one asked, "Why isn't LiA at the bar anymore?" But I wanted to tell you anyway. I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something. For nowadays the world is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, LiA, and so goodbye.