

Finding Avi: San Diego, 2022

Written by Elizagrace Madrone

Designed & co-created with Katherine Wilkinson

Developed & premiered at La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls Festival in 2022.

Special thanks to the queer communities of San Diego - young and old - for welcoming us in and sharing their stories.

Finding Avi is a series of site-specific intergenerational theater pieces celebrating and excavating the lives of queer communities in different cities. Each piece is based on documentary interviews, investigative research, and on the generous engagement of our host communities.

Elizagrace Madrone

elizagrace.siobhan@gmail.com

www.elizagrace.net

Cell: 707.601.8686

Note for the reader:

The 2022 premiere of *Finding Avi* was developed as a site-specific promenade experience for young adults as part of the La Jolla Playhouse's Without Walls Festival. That year, the festival was held at Liberty Station in San Diego - a large outdoor park and arts district that used to be one of the country's largest Naval Training Centers. At one point, the barracks had so many young recruits it was called the 'cradle of the navy'.

The text and installation design of *Finding Avi* was inspired by a series of interviews with queer folks in San Diego (ranging in age from 16 to 70), as well as archival research into the history of queer people and queer spaces in the city (including the . Many of our interviews were with retired navy and military personnel, many of them women. All of them were invited to see this show.

The experience was designed as a combination of live performance, installation art, and audio storytelling. During the second act, the audience was invited to wander through the installations (the queer histories Liberty Station seen through a fairy-tale filter) while listening to their radios - quietly sitting, watching or interacting with the dancers and performers, painting on the provided canvas, or writing letters for the Letterbox. By the time the experience closed, we had more than 30 letters.

For this record of the San Diego show, the written stage directions more or less reflect the path a single audience member took through the experience.

Cast:

Avi - A teenager or a child
Kass - A teenager
Check-In Church Lady - A grown woman
BBQ Matriarch - Over 55
BBQ Patrons
12 Dancing Queens & Various Fairies

Act 1: Missing Children

The audience arrives. At check-in, they're directed to wait in a group outside. Behind the check-in person, a TV is playing an appropriately local news story.

For example:

*static resolves into broadcast:
two people smiling at the camera,
performing heteronormativity so hard it's verging on camp. It's...
Ricardo & Kelly At Your Table!*

KELLY

...and after all, what woman *doesn't* want to see that in the morning, am I right, Ricardo?

RICARDO

I know my wife thinks so, Kelly! Now, our next item is serious. For all you alert early birds out there - this one's for you. The SDPD are asking the public to be on the lookout for a teenage *[girl / boy / static]* from *[static static]* -teen year old was reported missing just yesterday morning, when *[her]* mother and father told the local sheriff's department that Avi hadn't come home from school the day before. The family has been posting flyers all over.

KELLY

For our Hillcrest viewers, there is a chance Avi may be in the vicinity of Liberty Station. Her parents are concerned she's fallen into 'bad company' and may have been lured away. The teen is *[describe actor, but gendered]* and was last seen wearing **[costume]**.

*A picture pops up. It's just a silhouette of a
hyper-gendered little girl or boy. In San Diego, she had
pigtails.*

Anyone with information on Avi's whereabouts is urged to call *[static]*.

Oh, Ricardo, as a mother myself, this one just breaks my heart. If my little girl was out there, in the streets of Hillcrest, I would be inconsolable.

RICARDO

I know, Kelly.

KELLY

In lighter news, next up is Blubberbutt - wow! Excuse me! Is that right, Ricardo?

RICARDO

That's right, Kelly. The sea lion that's been stopping traffic is coming on the show! The picture you're seeing now is a familiar one to some of our audience - shout out to all our viewers who commute on the 805.

KELLY

Wow! That's what I'd call a pinup-worthy pinniped. Ricardo, what....

broadcast dissolves into static

The check-in person looks up from their phone, checks the time.

It's time.

CHECK IN GUIDE

Okay. It looks like everybody is here. You're a pretty small group, but I guess most people are too busy to help out a family in need these days.

*Begins handing out pictures of 'Avi' (the same silhouette from the news story)
with a number to call on the back.*

Thanks for volunteering for this search party. I'm also a volunteer, from a local church that still believes in taking care *for* others. The family is grateful for your help; it's been almost 48 hours and they're worried that their little girl has fallen into some bad company. You've probably noticed it's a pretty out-there neighborhood. I wouldn't personally trust anyone you meet.

If you do see this little girl, don't engage. Don't try to follow her. Don't interfere if she's in a group of - of - people. Just step back and call this number to inform the police.

Watch where you walk - there's apparently still some significant earthquake damage. Cracks everywhere. I guess SOMEONE near here was naughty!

Titters at their own weird joke.

I personally would also avoid the large - um - picnic over by the tower. It's very noisy and they don't look like very *helpful* sorts of people to *me*. I've made *several* noise complaints but apparently playing that awful music VERY LOUDLY isn't technically illegal. But if you see anything that looks *illegal* to you I'm sure the neighborhood would *appreciate* you calling in a complaint and helping clean the place up!

There's been some reports of - activity - near the [North Chapel], so I'm going to ask you to start there. Thank you for your community spirit!

The check-in person points them towards the North Chapel. Exactly on the way to the Chapel is a big, messy, impossible to avoid BBQ, music & people spilling out.

The audience sets out (usually sort of slowly & with a lot of hesitation, because audiences don't like to go places without a guide, but they don't have to go far). As they pass the BBQ -

Kass, a teenager in queer-fashion-grunge, crashes right through the group, knocking into at least one person -

KASS

Sorry!

- and seeing the picture on the flyer they're holding.

Wait, what the fuck [or a cuss word of the actor's choice] is this.

Grabs the flyer from someone.

You'd better come with me.

There's probably some hesitation, because audiences are hesitant beasts.

Well? Do you WANT to find Avi? Come on.

If it's comfortable, Kass grabs someone's hand to pull them along. If not, Kass just - herds them into the BBQ. On the way, they pass signs with [appropriate local public ordinances]. Among the various things they forbid are definitely BBQs.

NO GATHERING IN GROUPS WITHOUT A LICENSE
NO PUBLIC INDECENCY
NO LEWD BEHAVIOUR INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO
IMPERSONATION OF THE OPPOSITE GENDER

[Ex: [N.C. Gen. Stat. section 14-190.9](#), or [TN Bill SB0003](#)]

In any state or locality where a recent anti-trans, anti-sex worker, or other ordinance targeting queer communities, racialized appearance laws (i.e. the old anti-baggy-pants, etc. codes), OR targeting poverty (i.e. no gathering in public spaces, no street vendors, etc.), those should DEFINITELY be present on the signs.

If the ordinance has been repealed [i.e. [NY's 'Walking While Trans' law](#)] it should still be on the sign. But with a big line scrawled through it & the repeal date marked.

Here's the vibe: clowns in drag mooning a 'Be Polite' sign.

Kass pulls the audience into the BBQ. The music is loud, the underarm sweat is pungent, the vibe ranges from queer grunge to high camp, the genders are fluid, and the smells are mouthwatering.

The BBQ Matriarch is cooking. Or maybe supervising. With a beer. In a lawn chair. Next to a loud-ass radio.

BBQ MATRIARCH

You're late, kid. Get that plate of ribs and get moving. Auntie is hungry.

KASS

But I just *came* from -

BBQ MATRIARCH

Kid. Auntie's been hungry for twelve hundred years. Auntie ate the world and shat out the evening and went back for more. Bring her the damn ribs.

Why'd you bring me this crowd? They don't look like family.

KASS

They've got flyers. They're looking for Avi.

BBQ MATRIARCH

Avi's not here. Get out.

The radio blares music & then:

AVI ON THE RADIO

That was *La Muchacha Alegre* by Renee Goust and you're listening to K-AVI SAN DIEGO!!! The city of lovers! Um, no, that was weird, sorry, I just - No one has ever called it that. Liberty Station, the cradle of the Navy! You know, Letterbox Listeners, I went to summer camp right here at Liberty Station -

Kass panics & turns off the radio. In the sudden silence, they look desperately at BBQ Matriarch like - 'MOM! DO something!' – because you don't have to be blood relations for a teenager to glare at you, you just have to be family.

BBQ Matriarch sighs.

BBQ MATRIARCH

You take too many risks, kid. Fine. Go get the box.

Kass runs off, BBQ M turns to the audience group.

Why should I tell you anything? Are you family? You look a lot like ‘concerned members of the public’ and this is a private picnic. And you showed up empty-handed. Can any of you even describe who you’re looking for?

Either silence or awkward audience attempts. Either way -

BBQ MATRIARCH

Jesus, that’s a terrible answer.

Kass is back with a big cardboard box overflowing with janky headphones covered in stickers; old handheld radios with pink nail polish graffiti; & audio tech bits & pieces.

BBQ MATRIARCH

You sure? *(to Kass)*.

Fine.

But you all had better stay out there until you’ve learned to *listen*. And I’m keeping these.

BBQ M grabs all the flyers. Even the ones people shoved in their purse or pocket. Absolutely no one is left holding that phone number for the cops.

Don’t come back until you know who you’re looking for.

BBQ M shoves the flyers into the fire, if there’s fire. Trash if not. Sits back down on the lawn chair with the beer.

*Kass starts to hand out headphones and radios (**Production NoteL these are pre-set devices with the show audio prepped**).*

KASS

Don’t look so confused. It’s just a radio. You’ve got to twiddle the dial a bit before it comes in. Hear that static? Radio gets weird out here. It’s the planes. And the Navy. Turn off your phone. Messes up the signal. Listen again.

You hear music?

Yeah? Okay. Headphones down, let’s go. C’mon. I’m gonna bring you to a doorway.

Kass leads the audience off into the wide colonnade behind the BBQ. Behind them, in the BBQ, the radio comes back on:

THE RADIO

If you’re hearing our voices right now, remember to thank Auntie! They say Auntie births new stories every night because she eats up all the old ones. They say auntie eats lives and shits out myths. Brought to you by - Auntie.

Kass stops the audience where the Landscape begins.

KASS

Okay, everybody. Spin around. Go on. Don't start getting embarrassed now. Spin three times.

Kass stops the audience. Nothing looks different. Kass points everyone out into the Landscape.

KASS

Go that way. Go on. Hey - it's okay to be confused. You can't do this wrong, so stop trying. Just make a choice, go out there, and – listen.

Headphones up!

Kass gently herds the audience out into the Landscape.

After a moment, in their headphones, the gentle waves of static resolve into music on the radio. As they listen, the Landscape comes alive around them.



Act 2: Landscape

The Landscape is an open play space where the audience wanders freely while listening to snatches of K-AVI (Avi's radio station) on their headsets. Participants make their own decisions about what to explore and interact with, exploring a surreal version of the queer culture & history of the site.

In your headphones, the radio plays...

AVI

That was [XX] by [xxx] and you're listening to K-AVI San Diego!

Time for the weather! Looks like you can relax, stability-lovers, the chances of earthquakes today are well below average and as of 3:59 yesterday afternoon there are no uncontained wildfires south of Fresno. I'd give you more up to date information if I could, but the starbucks down the way changed their wifi password. Listeners, if you buy yourself a coffee today, think of your friendly radio host and slip your receipt into the Letterbox on your way by.

This isssss K-AVI coming to you mostly alive and it's time to dive into the Box - the letterbox, that is.

(sound of paper crinkling)

Let's see what our lovely listeners have for me today! This letter comes to us from...S, way up north in no-return-address.

Avi clears throat, reads the letter:

I've got a fairy story for you. It's not mine, but someone should give him some air anyway. If only for the brownies. Once upon a time there was and there wasn't a - a curmudgeon - who made incredible brownies. He handed em out to the whole neighborhood through the top half of that old dutch door of his. Even to the kids. And he didn't even like kids - cranky old bastard. But he always sent em home with sweets anyway. He liked being involved in things, I think. Having people come to him for something I read his obituary a few years back. I guess he'd moved back out somewhere to help take care of his mom, and ended up dying out there. Read like a nursing home obituary, you know, family names and not much else. Barren. Didn't mention any of his partners. Guess the family was still worried about embarrassing the Admiral. Didn't mention the brownies. They really should've mentioned the brownies. That was later, tho, up in the hills. San Diego was years before that - back when he was still in the Navy. A big, good-looking guy back then, but a pain in the ass already. He wasn't - he didn't hide well. Went out to the bars a lot, off base. The Bulc. The Cock 'n' Balls. Not the sneaky bars, you know. So when a few assholes decided to get mean outside on the street one night - Stuart got mean back and then got the shit beat out of him, 'cause he was big, but he wasn't five-guys-at-a-time big. He might've got away with a warning from the Navy, I don't know, I'm not military, but thing is - his uncle was an Admiral. You'd know the name if I told you so I won't. And an Admiral's nephew in the Navy getting the shit beat out of him for walking in San Diego drunk, belligerent, and homosexual was high-key embarrassing. So Stuart got quietly filed away, discharged, and buried under the great San Diego silence. Point is, though, he didn't disappear. He ended up out in the hills with the rest of us. Building chicken coops, baking brownies, and generally being a local crank. We're mostly cranks out here

anyway, though, in his defense, so he fit in pretty well. So here's me pouring one out for the grumpy old baker, a memory from me and us. Some's a lie, and some ain't, but that's true of memory anyhow and there's truth in it all the same.

Avi stops reading the letter

The...Bulc? I've totally seen that sign somewhere! I think – I think that's a Jamba Juice now. I think I used go to that Jamba Juice in second grade. I think I threw up an entire Aloha Pineapple smoothie on my Sunday dress.

Ahh - And that's all for today, letterbox listeners! And as always, inverters and extroverts, we know that you know better than to believe anything you hear on the air. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. All you're hearing here are fairy stories.

Music plays. Static shifts. A commercial:

COMMERCIAL VOICE

If you're hearing our voices right now, remember to thank Auntie!
They say that Auntie and the devil have a gentleman's agreement from
back before sins got names. Brought to you by - Auntie.

Music plays. Static shifts.

KASS

Kiss that envelope, lipstick-wearing listeners! It's time - to dive deep into the box. You seen one of these before, Avi? It's like an old-fashioned DM, you just / lick it. Like this -

AVI

/ I know what an envelope is, Kass!

KASS

Listeners, we have blushing!

AVI

Shut up!

(sound of paper crinkling)

KASS

Once upon a time -

Static shifts.



KASS

(Reading) Let me tell you how I met my wife. She was married to a Navy guy. At first. Then he left, and she stayed. Then she joined the softball team. Then she met me. And - well. She wrapped her hand right in my hair – I had hair curling down past my ass at that point – wrapped all my hair right around her arm and just yanked my head right back til I was looking her in the eye. This tiny little guera! That is a happy ending.

(sound of paper crinkling)

KASS

And that's the Letterbox, where we tell your secrets so you don't have to. Ready, co-host? Lips - locked! and Loaded!

AVI

That was so dumb.

KASS

You laughed.

"SWALK it out with those cherry-reds, girls, gals, gays, and guys, this is the time for - the peculiar ladies! The improbable girls, the backward-kissers, and the twilight-dwellers!"*

AVI

What does that even mean. What are you - where did you *find* that?

KASS

Don't you wanna be a backward-kisser?

AVI

Ohmigod. Is this REAL? It's hella dusty - Oh, no, no, no, gross, spiders.

KASS

I think so. Found it propping up the desk.

AVI

Check it out - **clears throat, puts on stupid old-timey newscaster voice** "The fairy fleet has landed and taken over the nation's most important naval base. San - Dee - Ay -go! Where the fairy dives roll merrily along. There is nothing anywhere as disgusting - waiters with marcelled hair in peek-a-boo blouses and even the bouncer, a six-foot 200-pound giant, looks queer. Fairy dives?! Fairy dives?!"

KASS

Don't you wanna go?

AVI

"The Sapphic lover is seldom obvious - but the truth is that sexual dee-vee-ay-shun is as great or greater among the fee-male of the species! The self-sufficient girl is push-over for a Predatory Lesbian. COMMUNISM actively promotes Sex Deviation to sap the STRENGTH of the new generation. Our youth is Unbridled, Hopped-Up, Sex-Crazy, and Perverted."

more laughing

KASS

You heard it here first, folks - on K-ASS San Dee-aygo!

AVI

More like San Dee Gay-Go

KASS

Wow.

more laughing

Music plays. Static shifts. A commercial:

COMMERCIAL VOICE

If you're hearing our voices right now, remember to thank Auntie!
They say that Auntie and the devil have a gentleman's agreement from
back before sins got names. Brought to you by - Auntie.

Music plays. Static shifts.



KASS

That was [XX] by [xxx] and you're listening to K-ASS San Diego going *all* the way in May!

AVI

I don't think I'm cool enough to be a twilight dweller. Actually, hold up. I don't want to be a twilight dweller. I like the sun.

KASS

Okay, California. Ready to dive into the Box, Avi?

AVI

Oh! Me? I mean. um - okay - um - Here's one from - um - O.

I've got one for you. It's – ah. It's about the time I got knocked out. So. Once upon a time, nowhere else but also definitely not here, there was and there wasn't an - ah - athlete. in college my rugby team - of those girls on that team, I'd say, you know, 40% of them were gay? Course I didn't know that then. Girls, I was green. When I joined up – I was just standing around one day and someone was like, you ever wanna hit anybody? and I was like, all the time. So they said, be here at 4 o'clock. And I went, and I was tackled. Hard. Knocked the breath right out of me. And when I finally blinked my eyes open one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen in my life swam into view. She was the one who'd tackled me. And I was like okay I will be playing this sport.

A pause.

Hey, does USCC have a / rugby -

KASS

/ I like twilight. A really hot day that's JUST getting dark...what do you want on a night like a that?

AVI

Um. Like a really excellent really cold earl grey milk tea with extra boba.

KASS

That is JUST sugar.

AVI

It is not! I get them at BobaTime after school and it's honestly mind-blowing. You'd like it if you tried it.

KASS

Okay.

AVI

Okay?

KASS

Okay, I'll try one. With you.

AVI

....really?

KASS

Yeah.

AVI

um. yes. let's - um. tomorrow? i mean. tomorrow is - is supposed to be sunny.

KASS

Yeah. I'll meet you at twilight.

AVI

I have - um. I - before 6?

my...my parents think I have journalism club.

KASS

you know you just said that on the air, right?

AVI

okay, I'm pretty sure my parents don't know how to hear this station!

KASS

Mmm, I wouldn't be so sure - you never know who's a...listener

AVI

KASS!

KASS

And that's all for today, letterbox listeners! And as always, inverters and extroverts, we know that you know better than to believe anything you hear on the air. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. All you're hearing here are fairy stories.



Music plays. Static shifts. A commercial:

COMMERCIAL VOICE

If you're hearing our voices right now, remember to thank Auntie!
They say Auntie's married ten thousand women and five hundred men,
and another three thousand who're neither. They say their skulls decorate
her walls and whisper dirty jokes in her ears at night.
Brought to you by - Auntie.

Music plays. Static shifts.

KASS

He-//o, listeners. The transmitter is working, Auntie isn't hungry yet, & the Navy isn't getting all up in our frequency - it's time for your favorite co-hosts to guess which words we're not allowed to say on the air.
Liiiiike -

AVI

oh! Um.

KASS

...go on.

AVI

I don't - um.

KASS

Like - nipple.

AVI

...ah. ...um..

KASS

come on! *Lesbian?*

AVI

I don't know!

....butt.

KASS

butt?!

AVI

uh huh. butt.

Kass is laughing too hard to respond.

CAN you say butt on the air?!

KASS

Who knows? It's not like I'm licensed. And can you imagine Titi Rose saying "butt"? Listeners - if you ever heard our own La Rosa Santa say / the word "butt" on the -

AVI

/ What do you mean, Titi Rose? Like my Titi Rose?

KASS

This was Titi Rose's show. I thought you knew. When I met you - when I was picking up the Letterbox from her house, after she - after the earthquake.

AVI

Oh. No. I didn't know. She never - we never talked about - Sorry. I. Um. I need a -

KASS

Hey -

Music plays. Static shifts.

KASS

Okay, Avi. Get your hand into that -

AVI

I've got it! I've got it. Here's one from - um - P

(sound of paper crinkling)

oh, I've got one to put out in the air. Once upon a time, there were two sisters. One was all things sweet and graceful, and one - was not. Stop me if you've heard this one before. Everyone is awkward during puberty, right, but I just - I could not get the hang of - 'girl'-ness. But I have a twin sister. Yup. That's right. And she was perfect. Identical twins! It's like having living proof that you've got no excuse for being - you know - you. Everyone staring at us, everyone comparing us, every single day. An actual nightmare. Except - no one gets us like we get us. 15 years later, she's still right next to me - skirts and pearls and femme as hell - and fuck their comparisons.

Music plays. Static shifts.



AVI

once upon a time, there was a

Static

frog

Static

And so there was this tiny person inside behind my eyes thinking 'you all know I can HEAR you, right? I'm right here. I can HEAR you.' I'd go to church group, and it's 'Father Dolan doesn't think gays are going to hell - should we protest the archdiocese?' I'd go to school, trying to keep my head down, focus on classwork, just be a - a good teenager - and we're assigned shit like "Is gay marriage the first step on an inevitable slide into polygamy and bestiality? Please debate."

Static

you know that nickelodeon show? with the green slime? This little me inside my head staring out and all of this shit they say clouding up the air and raining down green, nasty slime all over me.

Static Static

KASS

This is K-ASS coming to you from all up and under San Diego! Do you have some dirty laundry you want aired out? You know what to do! Write it down, fold it up, say Auntie's name 3 times in the mirror, and then... hope she's not hungry.

AVI

And don't forget to get that envelope nice and wet, listeners!

KASS

Avi!

AVI

So the - so the letter doesn't fall out!

Music plays. Static shifts. A commercial:

COMMERCIAL VOICE

If you like what you're hearing, remember to thank Auntie!
They say Auntie gave the 12 dancers the shoes they danced into rags &
then she sucked the princes' bones dry -
- um - I don't know if that's a euphemism? ah.
- and the princes were never seen again. And some of the dancers kept
dancing, and some didn't, and some ended old, and some died young,
but Auntie remembered every one of them at the end.
Brought to you by - Auntie.

Music plays. Static shifts.

AVI

Hello hello and welcome to K-AS - I mean K-AVI San Diego, coming to you alive and well and probably on 108.3 unless I accidentally hit the dial again trying to start up this rusty piece of junk – sorry, Kass – It's a dusty day today looking at a high around 30% above what used to be Climate Normal – so that's...great. No fires burning in California at the time of this recording and chances of earthquakes today are less than 10% as long as nobody makes Auntie mad again – sorry, Kass, not blaming you. Um. Time to dive into the Box! The uh. The Letterbox!

(sound of paper crinkling)

Here's one from out of town:

Hey. I've got a happy ending for the Letterbox. .Once upon a time, neither here nor elsewhere but somewhere in between, i was your age and everyone around me was dying and we didn't understand why. everyone around me was dying because i was surrounded by young gay men, you understand. i ran a cheese shop at the time. mostly young gay men, not as many young gay women. not as many as i'd've liked. i had long beautiful dark hair and i ran a cheese shop and i lived in the apartment above the cheese shop. the building stood up on a hill with a city of lights spreadeagled below but my windows faced the other way and i mostly watched the lights on the 24 hour donut deli across the intersection. by the time i was 33 i had taken care of fifteen young dead men and i left the city to re-grow my hair. i went up the coast road. i found a town under very large very green trees and decided that this looked a lot like a church but - and this is important - but it was not in fact a church and i settled in to re-grow my hair. there was very little sunlight but a lot of rivers. i idylled. then the trees started to look too much like a church when everyone started dying.

And it was hard. That much loss all mashed together. Just black-hole-ing individual griefs down in a big sucking wound of tragic. But knee-deep in the dirt the love of my life was planting things. And we worked in the sun together and we idylled. For decades together we idylled.

And when she was ill - well, i'd gotten very good at ill people, and when she was dying, i'd gotten very good at dying people. i don't know that - I had the muscle memory, you know, the muscle memory of how you deal with the dying, and then - well, i didn't have the muscle memory of how you deal with death. death took - took all my muscles by surprise. I - flopped. I sat down. For a long time. I still sit

down, often, with the warm, empty space next to me. I don't need to fill it up, most days. we expected tragedy, you know. I guess we didn't know what else to expect.
I think we expected tragedy. And you know what, honey, that's not what this is.

Pause

AVI

I - Um. Thank you, listeners! That's - actually - um, thank you. Really.
Next up is [XX] by [xxx] and you're listening to K-AVI San Diego! Music plays. Static shifts. A commercial:

COMMERCIAL VOICE

If you like what you're hearing, remember to thank Auntie!
They say Auntie gave the 12 dancers the shoes they danced into rags &
then she sucked the princes' bones dry -
- um - I don't know if that's a euphemism? ah.
- and the princes were never seen again. And some of the dancers kept
dancing, and some didn't, and some ended old, and some died young,
but Auntie remembered every one of them at the end.
Brought to you by - Auntie.

Music plays. Static shifts.



AVI

Well, listeners, the planes are loud, the wind is soft, my parents think I'm at an after-school journalism club, and it's a good day to....

(sound of paper crinkling)

dive elbow-deep into the letterbox! Here's one hot off the presses from...D, down south. Once upon a time, there was and there wasn't a very, very queer-ass little kid.

I grew up in San Diego - and now I'm back. I'm at home with family, with extended family, and my mind is constantly saying I'm not in danger I'm not in danger I'm not in danger this is safe. this is home. so this is safe. They love me. This is worth it if I'm safe. This is what love looks like. Is this what love looks like? They know that there is a "deviance" - but as long as we don't acknowledge it or talk about it, everything is fine. for a while it was - the silence - easier than forcing them to deal, but

Silence with military cannons in the background is really, really loud.

I used to sneak out and go to the Hillcrest youth center - as an 'ally'! - and so many of them were kids whose parents lived and worked on base. And later, in my "oh wait I'm not an ally I'm straight-up queer" support group - 80% of the group were active duty, enlisted soldiers - who were trans women. Like, 'today, I wore a bra under my uniform, and I hoped no one saw' active-duty.

And I hate the military - but it gave them a way out, and a way to be. In 2012 when the military finally went to pride OFFICIALLY - instead of filling the same damn street but hiding their faces - the front page was - this uniformed pride parade. Of white people. Of course. And knew what it meant to them - but that is not my body.

So here I am, in my childhood home, where my mother sees me as an adult but not as me - because I keep leaving any chance I get - because in all the same places I grew up I have to - to re-write my own - everything. rewriting is exhausting.

So this one isn't a memory, I just wanted to say it on the radio: fuck silence. I mean, fuck - at the point at which I have a whole-ass beard and a receding hairline, you look real stupid calling me 'she'.

(sound of paper crinkling)

As always, inverts and extroverts, we know that you know better than to believe anything you hear on the air. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. All you're hearing here are fairy stories.

Ah. Also - listeners, if anyone knows of a really, really cheap room for rent near SDCC, post that listing in the letterbox! Soon. Please. Starting May 1st. Next up is [XX] by [xxx] and you're listening to K-AVI San Diego!

Music plays. Static shifts.

AVI

Now - drop what you're doing! It's time for your Mandatory Minute of Meditation! Remember if you don't breathe, the earth won't breathe, and YOU might just get tense shoulders and anxiety-vomit but the earth clenches up and anxiety-vomits MAGMA ALL OVER and you don't want your anxiety to trigger the Big One do you? So relax! Aaaand - go! Inhale.... Exhale.... Inhale.... Exhale... [REDACTED]

AVI

Inhale.... Exhale.... Inhale.... Exhale...

This may not go for the full minute, but it feels like it.

Okay! Back to today's central theme: vulnerability, anxiety, bigotry, and fucking up in truly irredeemable ways!

The Box is wide open, listeners. Let's get in there. Here's one from E:

I hope I'm not too young to – count. Sorry. I should have thought more about – it's not a big story. It's – the first time I got to – wait. Um. Backing up.

Once upon a time, there was and there was not a problem.

My parents are – they try really hard. They were really – like – unexpectedly low-key when I came out as queer. They almost – it was almost not enough of a thing? like I'm telling you who I am, and this was a big – thing – for me to figure out, do you not have any reaction?

My mother said well, sure you are. All your friends are, right? Of course you're trying it out, honey. And then went back to drinking coffee.

But obviously I'm really lucky. honestly.

um. sorry.

It's fine. this is fine. it's like - it's fine. Like - is this what puberty is always like? Like running around going -is this puberty or the apocalypse? I keep telling myself like - the world isn't ending and I'm feeling too much but how exactly do I prove to myself the world isn't ending?

Seriously. Like am I trying to get into college or avoid rising sea levels in some kind of hand-made raft. What exactly am I supposed to think is important.

um. Sorry. I'm sorry. It's okay. it's okay. I can handle this. Don't worry about it. I can - do - everything - and it's fine. it's fine.

So. This one time I cut off all my hair at a friends house. and when I looked in the mirror, I was just – this is IT, you know? My face with this – this sharp, buzzed cut – I couldn't stop grinning. And when I got home, my dad just – he looked at me and his face just crumpled. And he walked out of the room.

So they don't – I – hate seeing their faces crumple. So I usually, you know, just –I

The point is. Last month, at school, a friend of mine – they gave me this – they had an extra chest binder. And they let me keep it in their locker. And every day, at school, for the past month, I go to the bathroom first thing, put it on, and go through the whole day with this sharp, buzzed hair and feeling – I hadn't been posting on social for like. A long time before that. I just - never liked what my - body was doing? And this past month t – my friend pointed out –I'm posting like every day. And I'm smiling. In all of them.

So. um. That's my memory. And this is a photo of me smiling.

(phone dings)

Thanks, letterbox-ers! Nope, that's a - that's not a good name for our listeners. And technically this one's a DM. Kass – are you giving out my handle?

Music plays. Static shifts. A commercial:

COMMERCIAL VOICE

If you're hearing our voices right now, remember to thank Auntie!
They say Auntie slurped down youth with both hands and went back for
seconds. They say when her thighs smack the dirt the bones come
dancing out shouting their names.
Brought to you by - Auntie.

*Music plays. Static shifts. When the radio voice returns, they sound less...polished. More
like a voice memo.*

AVI

Hi hello how are you this iiiiiiiis K-AVI coming to you live from San Diego you're listening to Letterbox
Les –
Um. Dammit.
Maybe...Once upon a time – no, I feel very stupid saying once upon a time because I'm not five years
old. Kass makes it sound – Ah.
Ahh. Ahhh. I can't do this!

static shifts, pops -

I can do this. I'm going to talk into this thing. out loud. until the sweating stops.
talk. talk talk talk. Kass says I can guest host Letterbox. And I said yes. Like an idiot. Like an idiot who
goes so red I catch fire whenever I talk in front of people and then I start reeking of that really,
disgustingly strong sweat you get when you're massively anxious and freaking out, just to make sure
that everyone else can smell that you're having an anxiety attack.
and if I smell like terrified gasoline in front of Kass I will actually walk into the ocean.

static shifts, pops -

um. I don't have anything to – say. maybe I'm boring. i don't want to be boring. what do you say to
strangers who can't see you. hi hello are you gay I'm – gay?
nope. nope nope. Not - maybe - queer? I don't know what it is but that's not it.

static shifts, pops -

great I just checked and oh god I've reeked up the whole tent. – wait Kass – if you hear this, this is
my practice tape because I need to hear what I sound like and I can't figure out enough of these dials to
delete it yet, so please don't listen if you find it. Stop listening. Now.
last year I got rides to school with Consue - with a girl I know. And one day she was laughing so hard
she snorted and fell over on my shoulder and breathed on my neck and I – I had a panic attack.
Luckily her mom stopped at a gas station. But then my whole mouth was filled with this horrible sour
smell and I couldn't – I thought the gas was leaking - I was freaking out about my own freak-out anxiety
sweat maybe being a leaking explosive -
Nope. No. I do not want to say this on the air.



static shifts, pops -

This is stupid. It's just talking out loud. I don't know why I can't. Talk. Okay. I'm just going to – Okay. Kass invited me on the air. Which means Kass thinks I can talk on the air. So I AM GOING TO TALK LIKE A HUMAN.

static shifts, pops -

Okay. I was on the radio. And I think I did - okay. I must have done okay, because Kass asked me to cover Letterbox next week. Except that means Kass is going to be listening to the first broadcast I make and I really really really really don't want to mess – Urgh. There's not enough air in here. Breathing. Okay. Breathing. I should - I should listen to the show. For practice. Right?

static shifts, pops -

I do not sound like Kass! Is my voice always this high? Is this how I sound to other people? Um. Oh, god, I never realised how often I say um. How do you stop saying um?! AGghhh I'm not – Kass is – Kass's voice is so – I could listen to Kass for hours. I guess technically I have listened to Kass for hours – oh, fuck, it's recording -

static shifts, pops -

Practice Story! Which I guess means it's about me. Um. I met Kass the day after the earthquake - the day after Titi Rose - died. Um. I forgot my backpack there the day before she - it was really sudden. Um. I realized I left my backpack and I ran next door and the - actually her house felt - exactly the same. It was really - anyway I grabbed my backpack and there was this - ahah. Kass - I guess I didn't know them yet - so um - a stranger? around my age was outside the fence. In um. In these cutoff shorts and - looking extremely - cool. With Titi's big old-fashioned mailbox in their arms? And they saw me and said - are you gonna call the cops? And I said no. And they - Kass - they looked at me for a minute and then said - do you wanna be on the radio? Oh CRAP I forgot to start with once upon a time.

static shifts, pops -

Once upon a - no. When I was – No. First time caller, long time listener – no, nope, definitely worse, I sound like an idiot. Okay, this is going to make me feel very stupid. Kass, you had better not be listening to this!! Ahem.

This is K-ASS - nope - K-AVI coming to you live from San Diego with Letterbox Les – nope. no. Okay, I hate talking to myself. I'm going to try reading one of the letters

sound of papers crinkling

I've got a memory for the radio. Once upon a time there was and there wasn't - that's how it goes, right? - a badass young recruit. This isn't from Liberty Station 'cause even I'm not that old and I wasn't ever a teenage recruit. Well, not a boy, anyway. That hadn't even crossed my mind as a possibility. 'Tomboy' was the closest I ever came. And I was a hell of a tomboy, back then. I'd been wrestling with anyone who'd take me on since I was bout 8 years old and my muscles were golden – let me tell you, I was small but I was built like a brick shithouse and just about as hard to knock down. And a smart little shit, too. Posted out of town for a year for advanced training, way the hell away from home and family

and my high-school boyfriend, lifting weights at sunrise and studying all night – I was living my absolute best life as far as I was concerned. I had no idea what the rest of the women did in their free time. Hah. I guess I wasn't so smart about everything. One weekend, I was sitting on my bunk trying to drown out the barracks chatter enough to study when one of my bunkmates came in and told me she was going camping for the weekend to get some quiet. So I asked if I could join her to grab some quiet, she grabbed a tent, I grabbed my books, and we headed out into the desert. It was perfect – quiet, serene, gorgeous – we studied until the sun set in the evening. And. Ah. She was this fit Lance Corporal with blond hair down to her ass and legs longer than her hair, maybe the smartest person I've ever met.... Well. Turned out she was looking at my muscles like I was looking at her legs – and we both crawled into the tent, and I figured out what some of the women on base were doing with their free time. And the sun came out in the middle of the night. So here's a thanks to that long-ago long-legged Lance Corporal, from me and my wife.

sound of papers crinkling

Um. Oh. Okay. That went okay. Kass's legs are... I wonder if Kass is grilling with Auntie today. Oh, shit. Stop recording – stop – is it this dial? Why can't this stupid thing just have a touch screen?! Music!

Static shifts. Music plays. Renee Goust's 'Soy Mi Propia Diosa' blasts.

In the center of the Promenade, the BBQ Matriarch clangs a huge dinner bell. The Dancing Queens come from the corners of the promenade and gather in a circle around the guitar player, sweeping audience members up as they go.



As the dance ends, the radio in your headphones crackles back -

AVI

That was Renee Goust and you're listening to K-AVI San Diego! The city of lovers! Nope. No one has ever called it that. Liberty Station, the cradle of the Navy! You know, Letterbox Listeners, I went to summer camp right here at Liberty Station one year and let me tell you - it didn't make me want to join the military, but it did make me want to get into one of those uniforms. Um. Hah. I guess in...in both ways.

Ah! Today is a special edition of the Letterbox: myths and memories sent in by the family - er - friends - er - loved ones of La Santa Rosa, our Lady of the Letterbox - pictured here in -

Oh.

That's -

That's Titi Rose.

What. The. Fuck. That is Titi Rose.

And she's - Mom and Dad would NEVER - Mom and Dad always had me be so careful when I was at Titi's house. They wouldn't let me say damn. I thought - and she was - Titi Rose had a WIFE?!

Kass. I can't do this.

Kass. Kass!

static shifts, pops -

AVI

I hate crying in public. I hate it. I hate it. I haven't cried since Titi Rose died. Not at all. I didn't - I wasn't trying not to cry. I didn't feel like I had to. Like I never got that burning feeling. Which is awful, it's - am I not sad?

KASS

You know, Titi Rose is who let me hang around the station. She ran the Letterbox for years. Once upon a time, like, a few months ago, there was a huge earthquake. The earth shook, the ground cracked open, and Auntie -

Auntie arrived.

Auntie sent me to get the Letterbox from Titi's house. That was - the day after Titi Rose died. Avi - there was a picture, once, in the letterbox, of Titi Rose when she was young, in this totally over the top REALLY short white mini dress, holding flowers, hand in hand with this....seriously hot, big-boobed woman in a suit. And then later...I saw the same picture on Auntie's altar. I think they had a - thing. Like a really long time ago.

AVI

I - I keep forgetting to miss her. Like - everything is normal, like I'm walking along this - normal old concrete sidewalk, solid and sun-warmed and - and - pop! my ankle twists right through and - and then i miss her so much in that moment. and i feel so guilty for forgetting to miss her in all the other moments. and it all mixes into this sour, salty, nauseating - static.

it's not about Titi's death - oh, god, that's awful of me, isn't it. I mean of course death is - is about death. Her death is obviously about her death. but I don't think it actually is what I'm - what - I don't think Titi's death is what's making me sick to my stomach. It's - I can feel time passing - and I've still never - and it makes me want to - to - to puke.

I don't think I can stay at home

I think - I need to go talk to Auntie.

static shifts, pops - transmission cuts out and in again -



Act 3: Landing

KASS

This is Kass coming to you from now til it's all over

We are here with the myths, the memories, and the miracles of our own La Rosa Santa, Queen of Queens - Our Lady of the Letterbox, Mother to the Dying. Dancer in the Desert. Pillar of our Community. When she died, Auntie cracked open the dirt to break out her bones.

Raise a glass, shake your hips - and remember.

Music plays. Static shifts.

In the center of the Promenade, the Dancing Queens dance and disperse.

Music plays. Static shifts. A commercial:

COMMERCIAL VOICE

If you're hearing our voices right now, remember to thank Auntie!
Go to the middle of the maze. Follow chewed bones and empty candy wrappers down the streets. Look for the old beast in the center with bbq sauce drying in her wrinkles, so ancient she's nothing but a delighted hunger. They say don't ever meet a hungry old beast empty handed.

Brought to you by - Auntie.

Music plays. Static shifts.

Kass comes up to you & motions for you to take your headphones off. They take your radio and hit a button.

KASS

Hey. I'm Kass. You want to come meet Auntie? She's this way.

You're led through an arch you haven't been through before, across the promenade from the Chapel. It opens onto a small courtyard, divided by clumps of tall pine trees reaching upwards. The cracks are everywhere in this patio. It looks like a cracked egg. You follow the teenager along the largest crack and out the other side.

In the center of a mass of cracks, perched off-center in a street parking space like a bird in a shittily-built nest, sits a rusty, banged-up old trailer. In front of it someone lounges in an old lawn chair with giant bedazzled sunglasses and a huge plastic margarita glass.



That trailer definitely has feet. Chicken feet.
It's unsettling.

KASS

You can't go empty handed. It's rude. Got anything to give her?
Ah.

(Kass hands you a butterscotch candy)

Here. Bring her this. In case she's hungry.

walk over to the trailer, where the Sunbather is chillin'

KASS

Hey. The kid wants to see Auntie.

Turns to you.

Good luck in there. Be polite. Try not to die.

*The BBQ Kid runs off, back to the party. The SUNBATHER
lowers their sunglasses and stares at you over them.*

SUNBATHER

Gimme the radio.

Okay.

You can go in. Be polite. Try not to die.

*You enter the trailer. The inside is walled in tinfoil, gleaming
in candlelight. The walls are covered in The walls are papered
with photos, articles, memorabilia of queer San Diego -
portraits and snapshots of the 12 Dancing Queens, the BBQ
guests, among the rest. Pictures of Titi Rose.*

*The lights snap off. It's very, very dark. A warm breath of air
curls around you. Out of the dark -*

AUNTIE SPEAKS

Let me see your face. Mmmm. You got a good face. Tasty. I like faces.

Breathe, child, I haven't bitten you yet.

Paloma tells me you've been out looking for my little Avi. Tells me you saw and heard some shit, hmm? Don't interrupt me, kid. I can't abide rudeness from others. You gotta be my weight before you can be this rude.

So what did you bring me? Can't just be all that anxious sweat you're wearing. I don't like it. Makes my tongue curdle.

i don't want your story, child. don't be stupid. you're not done eating it yet. I didn't eat theirs until they were dead.

what did you bring me to eat?

Yeah, that earns you an answer.

I collect faces. Look at around you. They're all heroes. By which I mean they're all dead. I never forget a body. Are you here to get your picture on my walls? Are you here to be remembered? I remember everyone I consume. Like my Rosa. Oh, yes, we were sweet when we married. Soaked in sweat and ripe with juice. Mmmm. My Rosa's marrow flowed from bone to bone.

When i knew my Rosa had died, I landed in San Diego. Shook the place up. All the tectonic plates get sucked between my thighs when I come to town. Gravity is weight plus age - and I've more gravity than an elephant so i remember longer. I remember longer than forgetful old Soledad and nearly as long as the Anza-Borrego. And much longer than my auntie pacific. Liquid old thing can't hardly remember who she ate yesterday.

I expected to leave town after I ate up my Rosa's lovely old bones. Thought I'd be bored, with all the speakeasies gone upscale and sun-bleached. Thought I'd head back out to the desert with my lizards, maybe shoot missionaries on sight, for old time's sake.

But that kid found me before I'd half-finished chewing and they were MAD. Avi came knocking in an old ratted hoodie, grey as a donkey. smelled like a donkey, too. I like them. Tiny, polite, and stubborn as a goat.

There's your answer. There was and there was not a child - and it makes no difference whether that child was a boy or a girl, because what that child was, was brave.

Turns out there's still secrets in San Diego after all. Nothing like the taste of joy squeezed through against the odds. Whets the appetites.

I'm getting hungry, Temporary Child.

Time for you

to

get

out

The door behind you opens. You step out of the trailer into the sunlight.

On the sidewalk, a sweaty, 70s kid on rollerskates leans against the wall, waiting for you - ROLLERBABE. A beat-up boombox is strapped to her back, radio beats playing.

She's holding your radio.

ROLLERBABE

You wanna go see Avi?

Rollerbabe hands you back your radio & hits the button.

Stay close, let's go!

Rollerbabe skates off just in front of you, leading the way. You follow along - up the street, around the corner, and then across the street towards what looks like a busy skate park.

On the radio...

static shifts, pops -

AVI

Once upon a time... there was and there wasn't an old woman who lived alone. She'd mostly stopped taking in daycare kids, but - my parents worked late, and she was right next door. I did my homework on her plastic-covered couch for the next ten years. I called her Titi. This isn't the story though. Um.

static shifts, pops -

Once upon a time there was and there wasn't a little girl who lived really close to the ocean. Sometimes under the covers she imagined swimming and sometimes she imagined drowning and sometimes she imagined breathing under water. Her parents - tried really hard. No. That's not fair. They really - Okay.

static shifts, pops -

Once upon a time, there was and there wasn't a little girl whose parents loved - their little girl - very, very much and gave her honestly the best that they could manage. When they were busy - and they were busy a lot cause adult life apparently sucks - they dropped her off with her - Titi. She - no.

static shifts, pops -

Once upon a time, there was an old woman who had always lived alone except apparently she HADN'T. Um. Titi Rose's house smelled like coffee, and her kitchen never had anything normal in it, but she never made me give her a hug if I didn't want to, and -

static shifts, pops -

Once upon a time there was a very old woman and a very small - child. And the child grew up, and the very old woman grew - well, died - and - and -

static shifts, pops -

Once upon a time, an old woman taught a small scared - person to drive. Way too young, probably, but it was so exciting. We got my permit early cause Titi got too old to drive at night and she wanted me to drive to the store.

static shifts, pops -

After Titi died I found out she left me her old Subaru. My parents won't let me drive it, but I sit in it with my headphones on and I just - like having a place where nobody's looking at me. Which - okay, wait, backing up. The radio hadn't worked ever. That car is old. But in no world was I ever going to get any car that cost money so I was hanging onto this one as long as I had to – no, this isn't the story.

static shifts, pops -

Okay. Once upon a time, there was an old Subaru with an extremely broken radio. Which was just fine by me. Didn't need a radio. Just needed wheels and doors that closed with me on the inside and everybody else out there. And then Titi Rose died. And the earthquake cracked the driveway. And I -

static shifts, pops -

Once upon a time, there was a kid who was curled up in an old car feeling very much alone. And then the earthquake cracked open the driveway - and the broken radio came on. Like - barely-there voices, just-out-of-range voices. through the static. Like -

static shifts, pops -

This is dumb. I know this is dumb. But sound was just trickling out of the car speakers and it sounded - like a door just opened for a hot second and I could hear – happy people? - and then it closed again. Sound like the greatest party I'd ever heard, like - not a party I'd ever been to, but a party I really, really wanted to...find.

static shifts, fades...

Rollerbabe spins around and stops.

You're at the base of a big palm tree, next to an old, green metal staircase leading up the outside of the building.

She motions for you to take off your headphones and hand them over.

ROLLERBABE

Go on up.

Rollerbabe spins off, heading back down the sidewalk.

You begin to climb the stairs...they lead to the roof of the building. Cords and wires hang over the railings. As you reach the roof, you see Avi, sitting in one of a pair of old red velvet movie theater seats.

Avi sits, looking up at the airplanes. Avi is in their late teens, 20 at the oldest - not femme, not masculine, just a teenager existing.

AVI

Hi. I'm Avi. Do you want to sit with me for a minute? I've got one more to do.

Avi turns to the microphone in front of them and clicks a button. A red light snaps on.

AVI

Once upon a time, not up & not down but somewhere in between, no body at all was lost. I'm not missing. I know where I am. I'm not a little girl. I don't know. Maybe I was born with my left foot forward. Maybe the tide was out and three starfish died that night and right the moment I was born the last fairy shrimp hatched in San Diego. I don't know. Maybe everybody's something and some people never find it. Or maybe we find it because we're off-balance where we are - off-set and off-rhythm and out of tune - so off-balance that we're gonna fall somewhere and we'd rather fall forward than fall over.

My parents know where I am. Well – they know I'm okay. But I'm not going home. They wanted me to be something that wasn't the right shape. It gave me blisters. The shoes didn't fit. They didn't want to hurt me. But they wanted me to hurt myself. So now I'm trying to repair the harm I did to me. I'm trying out different shapes. I want to know what doesn't give me blisters.

This isn't an ending. It's just - a place, in the middle. That's okay, for now. That's enough. Right now ...the planes fly in, and the planes fly out, and I've got a place to sit and watch them. And breath.

Avi clicks the button again. A red light snaps off.

AVI

That's all from me, really.

Avi offers you the mic.

Do you wanna be on the radio?

END OF PLAY

