

STORY PER MY THERAPIST'S REQUEST:

A Story By Rachel Yoder

Rachel Yoder

Rachel Yoder had a bad attitude about reality.

"I have a bad attitude about reality," Rachel said, knowing this would make her therapist laugh. Her therapist laughed. Rachel shook her head ever so slightly in a mixture of disgust and disappointment. Everything around here went according to plan, Rachel thought, here being Planet Earth, continental North America, United States of America, Southwest Region, State of Arizona, approaching the USA/Mexico border, in the central precinct of what is commonly referred to as Tucson. Everything was so predictable: her own proclamations and neuroses, her therapist's responses, the uncomfortable self-consciousness Rachel felt after every session while writing a check to her therapist, the awkward gesture of handing the check across the coffee table—too long of a stretch, really, to be accomplished gracefully—in addition to that quick surge of resentment at having to pay this woman in the first place to listen to her problems and then give her advice, and let's not leave out the predictability, too, of seasonal allergies.

"Why do you think you have a bad attitude about reality?" her therapist asked. Rachel shrugged, slouched forward and looked at her palms, then leaned back again, exhaling.

"I just don't want to accept that this is all there is," she said. "This is all we get? Reality is stupid."

"Perhaps you should write a story about your bad attitude about reality," her therapist suggested. Rachel felt this was a cop-out. Her therapist, knowing Rachel was a writing student,

could always make this suggestion in a pinch and had before. The thing was, Rachel admitted to herself with a roll of the eyes, the only good stories she'd ever written were prompted by assignments from a therapist. "Write about your soul," had been her therapist's first corny, corny mandate. What emerged was a story with a character who kept trying to amputate her legs, which was eventually published in a small, un-important journal about which most people had never heard. Then, "Perhaps you could try writing a story about forgiving your father." That had seemed like an even more cringe-worthy idea, yet the subsequent story won a departmental award and the accolades of her disagreeable manuscript advisor.

And so that afternoon Rachel tried to write a story per her therapist's instructions. It began, "Rachel Yoder had a bad attitude about reality."



What Rachel hadn't told her therapist, however, was that beyond her feeling that reality was stupid (in a crabby, adolescent sort of way), she also found it absurd and ultimately meaningless (in a depressed, nihilistic sort of way). Rachel did not tell her therapist she had come to believe love did not just fade, it disappeared, and that love was the one thing she had really been pulling for to give her life some sort of meaning. She didn't tell her therapist she was disturbed not so much by her loss of faith in God, nor by her conclusion that He had never existed in the first place, but more so by the fact that her aging parents, reclining on their sofa in Ohio, still believed in Him. And she did not explain to her therapist that her "bad attitude about reality" was her way of saying that she was throwing an admittedly ineffectual, foot-stomping, hair-pulling, screamy, snotty, loud and obnoxious tantrum in the face of bemused, smirky Death. She didn't explain this because she knew her

therapist would say something like, “Death is out of your control so I wonder why you waste your time worrying about it.” Something asinine like that, as if it were a matter of just deciding to stop worrying, of *choosing* not to have an existential crisis (“An existential crisis is a *choice*, Rachel.”), a matter of completing exercises and willing oneself back into the world of meaning.

Write, “I am not having a existential crisis” fifty times in a notebook upon waking.

Recite, “Life is meaningful” in the mirror along with other daily affirmations.

Journal.

Punch a pillow.

Scream into a pillow.

Take up a new hobby (ceramics, gardening, macramé, etc).

Call a friend.

Take a bath.

Treat yourself to a movie.

None of these exercises had, nor would, change anything, change reality, change the facts that there was no love, no God, no meaning. She would have laughed at her sorry, dramatic state had she not been so tired, so uniformly down, so not in the mood for even a self-aware, situation-in-perspective chuckle.

At her next session with her therapist, long periods passed with Rachel saying nothing and staring, glassy-eyed, at the wall just above her therapist’s frizzy-haired head. Rachel had begun the story that began, “Rachel Yoder had a problem with reality,” but had stopped somewhere right around where her therapist offered the observation, “You seem depressed,” and decided she had not written anything of substance in the last two years during her graduate writing program; she could not even create fake, meaningful realities to make up for her real, meaningless reality. Thinking about all this made Rachel dizzy and caused her eyes to water.

“Maybe it’s just that my allergies have been really bad this past week,” Rachel said, grabbing another tissue from the box on the coffee table, “but all I want to do is stay in bed and sleep.”
“You seem depressed,” her therapist said.



It is at this point one must wonder why Rachel was having an existential crisis to begin with. Sure, an existential crisis was a problem, but what had precipitated it? Why now? What was it, exactly, she not merely wanted, but yearned for?

And why hadn’t Rachel revealed her specific fear of death to her therapist?

Speaking of fears, why did Rachel have such a clichéd one? (i.e. “death”) Couldn’t she come up with a more interesting problem?

What, exactly, did Rachel do aside from visit with her therapist, write, and go to school? Was it conceivable (believable) her life was so small?

And what about her parents reclining on the sofa in Ohio? They seem to have something to do with her unclear problem; knowing more about her parents might help to elucidate the heart of her dilemma.

Finally, had Rachel been reading Woody Allen? It seemed like Rachel had been reading Woody Allen, and she was, obviously, no Woody Allen. Maybe she should try reading something else.

Obviously the story Rachel had set out to write wasn’t quite adding up. She imagined, were she to show the story to her disagreeable manuscript advisor, he would say something like, “Your attempt at self-referential, meta-fictional cleverness gets in the way of me caring about the protagonist and leads to extended passages of directionless exposition,” followed by the comment, “This isn’t a story,” followed by a pause, rub of the eyes, and deep sigh, followed by instructions to read *this*

Mary Gaitskill story and return next week at which point her manuscript advisor would, no doubt, still be wearing black jeans, white tennis shoes, and a Hawaiian-print shirt; would still seem unbearably, inconsolably weary; and would want to know what she had thought about the Gaitskill story to which she would respond, “I didn’t really buy the moment where the guy admitted to raping the girl, but it was a good story anyway.”

Then Rachel would go to the computer lab and check her e-mail only to find that the chubby, married, church-going, heckuva guy writer in her program who she really, actually, truthfully liked had again e-mailed not just her nor a handful of his closer friends, but the *entire creative writing program* a good-natured, “Hey guys!” sort of message about his most recent national win in one writing contest or another, the tone of his message perfectly friendly, perfectly un-self-satisfied, decidedly non-gloaty, but perhaps the most annoying thing she had ever read in her life nonetheless, not in spite of but because of its unassailable, lily-white wholesomeness.

Then she would walk home, eat dinner, throw her whiny cat outside, write a paragraph on her computer, *save*, grow mind-numbingly tired, force herself to type another sentence at which point she would feel like crying, then relent and watch celebrity news shows, *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson*, let her cat back in, and fall asleep.

Rachel knew all this. She could see it as clearly as she could see the smudged black eyeliner beneath her therapist’s eyes, her therapist who was sitting across the room from her and had just, ever so astutely, said, “You seem depressed.” Her therapist paused, thoughtfully, then added, “You know, this is a highly transitional time for you; you’re finishing school, considering a move, looking for a job. It’s normal for people to find times such as this challenging.” Rachel knew all this, of course. This was standard, common sense insight that could probably be garnered just as readily from the slouchy kids hanging out at

the 7-11 with Big Gulps if you paid them ninety dollars an hour for advice.

The next day when Rachel told her weary manuscript advisor she hadn't written in weeks, and felt thoroughly uninspired to do so, he raised his eyebrows then sighed. His office was depressing, with the drawn shade on the single window, the office furniture that dated back to the Nixon administration, his novels that also dated back to the Nixon administration, now long-forgotten, their dust jackets push-pinned to the wall.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and said as nonchalantly as possible, "Have you ever written anything about being Mennonite? Why don't you write about being Mennonite?"

Woody Allen, in *Annie Hall*, told that Groucho Marx joke, "I wouldn't want to be a member of any group that would have me," and that's kind of how Rachel felt about being Mennonite. Her manuscript advisor, in a previous conversation, had called it "the ultimate of self-hatred, self-loathing, Rachel, do you see it? That you wouldn't want to be in any club that would have you? You can never win. That's self hate." He'd actually said that, pointing his index finger at his own heart when he said the words "self hate" and then twisting it as if to signify the self-hatred corkscrewing into his very core.

Now, again in her manuscript advisor's gloomy office, Rachel responded, "It doesn't really interest me," to which her manuscript advisor raised his eyebrows, leaned back in his chair, placed his hands on his head, and let out a long exhalation of air.

"What do you think *that's* all about?" he asked.

Frankly, the only thing Rachel could think to write "about being Mennonite" would be a compendium of the liturgical, well-meaning rants of her one-time-Mennonite-minister father, entitled something like: "Because We're Mennonite, or Why You're Not Allowed to Get Your Ears Pierced, Say the

Pledge of Allegiance, or Go to School Dances, by Wayne Yoder, as remembered, recorded, and related by his still very beloved daughter, Rachel, no matter what she may write about him, either fictionally or non-fictionally.”

The whole Mennonite thing Rachel thought was, frankly, very un-sexy. They were all about peace and baked goods, and she didn't even know if she was really Mennonite anymore. Sure, her last name was Yoder—inescapably Mennonite—but she hadn't been to church in years. There was also the small matter of her Major Life Crisis, as her family referred to it, during her early 20s during which she fell in love with a rich, So Cal Svengali who convinced her she was a bad person (due in large part, he claimed, to her arcane Mennonite upbringing); subsequent to meeting him she dropped out of college, stopped talking to her family, and finally flew to Arizona and checked herself in to rehab. While she would eventually separate from the Svengali and reunite with her family, the whole question of her Mennonite identity would indeed be raised by young Rachel while in rehab, considered briefly, and then idly shoved to the back of her mind so that she might instead be able to apply her mental capacities to more important matters, such as supporting herself and finishing school.

Rachel has always liked to think this was merely inconsequential back story, but her therapist, not too unlike her manuscript advisor, kept bringing up the Mennonite thing. Her therapist, however, when trying to explain to Rachel the ramifications of her separation from the Mennonites, talked about horses.

“It's instinctual to want to stay with the herd,” her therapist would say. Then she would start in with the rhetorical questions. “What happens to the lone horse, the one that leaves? What is its fear?” Here her therapist would pause and Rachel would raise her eyebrows. Her therapist would continue. “Of course the horse that leaves, well, the fear is it will die, right? Away

from the herd. That primal instinct tells us we'll die. It's very strong, Rachel."

And this made sense to Rachel, sure. But what did it mean? What did it have to do with her existential crisis, with her feeling that nothing mattered, that reality was unbearable?

"All good questions," her therapist would respond, glancing at the clock on the wall. "We'll start there next time."

But sessions had come and gone and Rachel still felt forlorn. Her life still lacked meaning. Her writing lacked meaning. Against her better judgment, she asked her defeated manuscript advisor about all this. Did he have any advice about what she could do, she wanted to know.

"I know this may be an odd thing to say as you think about your graduation," he said, "but if you can, become a person of action. Sure, it's one thing to be a writer, sitting in a room with a bunch of other sensitive people, talking about stories and your feelings. But to be a person of action, you know, a paramedic or pilot or, I don't know, even a performer, like a lounge singer. I mean, that's something, to be out there actually doing something."

"Are you saying I should become a lounge singer?" Rachel asked.

"I mean be a person of action," he said, running his hand through his silver hair. He looked like he needed a mid-afternoon nap.

So here was Rachel's manuscript advisor telling her, really, she should have been a person of action. And all Rachel could think of was how actually, yes, it would be nice to be a person of action, not a lounge singer or paramedic or pilot, though. Something even more awesome. She wanted her life to be like genre fiction for a change, science fiction or even a spy thriller. Her life seemed inescapably to be like literary fiction, the kind of story where nothing really happens, but by the end the main character has changed in some subtle, internal way, even

though her life still basically sucks. Rachel was sick of subtle, internal change. She wanted submarines to blow up, to evade poison darts, or have an alien encounter. And she wanted, by the end, not necessarily to have changed, but simply to feel alive and feel like it actually mattered she was alive. She wanted, in the end, for all her readers to slap the book of her life shut and clutch it to their chests.

“Wow,” they would say. “That was so good.”

And they wouldn't be book critics or professors. They would be paramedics and pilots and lounge singers.

It was then and there Rachel decided to do something, anything really. She was sick of talking, of blah blah blahing to her therapist and to this manuscript advisor character, who was by this point staring at his office ceiling as Rachel sat silently, resolving to do something. She was going to leave his office, and become a person of action. She just wasn't sure what to do.



She thought karaoke might be a good idea. She'd heard the Best Western on Stone Avenue just south of Speedway put together a good sing-along every Friday night, so that's where she went. The Best Western bar was dark and loud with off-key singing. There was a bubble machine blowing large soap bubbles toward the bar where she went and asked for a water, at which the buxom bar tenderess rolled her eyes.

A white guy with small muscles on small bones made eye contact with her, and she knew she was fucked. His hair was greasy, and he wore a Jackrabbit's Casino t-shirt with cut-off sleeves.

“I'm singing ‘Paradise City,’” he said, sidling up beside her and then putting his fist in her face for emphasis. He smelled like vinegar and Skittles.

She smiled at him sickly, hoping this would make him go

away, but instead he pulled down the edges of his bottom lip to show her DANGER tatted in navy blue on his mottled inner-lip skin. The word was emphasized by a violent canker sore punctuating its end.

“Gaaaaar,” he said as wiggled his lip back and forth. He turned and staggered over to watch a lady with a visor styled into her curly blonde hair sing “I’ve Got You, Babe” all by herself. The back of DANGER’s shirt said MILLIONAIRE.

Despite Rachel’s hope for something action genre or extraterrestrial, despite the soap bubbles and karaoke, she was still preoccupied with her existential crisis which was in no way being aided or eased by the low-ceilinged Best Western bar clogged up with meth heads and former inmates, insane house wives with hats hair-sprayed into their hair, Team Karaoke in matching teal polo shirts, leftover 1990s people with pleated jeans and silk shirts, and the unmagic of lonely people trying to be less lonely. She wished she drank. She wished she drank a lot and could at least get sloshed and take the edge off of caring or worrying or knowing one day she would die. But there was the whole rehab back story—it would be a “thing” if she drank, she’d have to tell her therapist, sessions would need to increase as would payment—so she didn’t and instead went outside to avoid DANGER and get some air.

Outside, a spot flashed in the sky and then, as Rachel watched, began to fall, growing larger and larger until a silver plate the size of a children’s merry-go-round slid soundlessly out of the sky and sliced an edge right into the hard dirt of the parking lot meridian. It made virtually no noise upon impact other than a high-pitched squeak and then hiss as smoke or steam shot from a pipe pointed up into the night.

Great, Rachel thought. Just great. For some reason she wasn’t surprised. The center shield of the plate flipped open, and inside a small, round, blue alien fussed with his complicated snarl of seatbelts, trying to free himself with his nubby little hands. Once

unbuckled, he climbed from the plate, slapping his sticky hands and feet against the side of the metal like a fat gecko. With one hand he held a small bag of Cool Ranch Doritos and a brown bottle of what appeared to be cheap, domestic beer.

Somehow, even aliens do not seem cool, Rachel thought. Even after all her wanting to do something, her pledge to become a person of action, her hope for aliens, the alien in front of her dressed in suspended shorts not too unlike lederhosen, a short-sleeved white and wrinkled button down shirt, and silver bow tie was somehow ordinary.

“Hi,” he said, eating a chip.

“You speak English,” Rachel said.

“Sure,” he said.

“And I don’t freak you out,” she asked. He looked at her sideways, chewing.

“A little,” he said.

“I’m harmless,” Rachel said, and meant it. She was harmless. She was nothing. “I’m nothing,” she said. The alien crunched and then beeped. His ship was still steaming, wedged diagonally in the meridian. “Did you mean to wind up here?” Rachel wanted to know. “I mean, you just crashed that thing, right? Flew in and wound up here, the stinking desert. It’s hellish. It’s hell, Aw, Jesus. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to make things worse but it’s always sunny here, the sun is incessant, and after a few months it starts to bore into your head through your eyes, right like this...” She was pointing two fingers at her eyes. “It bores in and just goes straight to your brain and somehow takes all the hope right out of there...” She could hear herself talking and feel the shape of each word as it left her mouth. She was trying to edit what she said as she said it, but the words departed too quickly for her tongue to split and scatter them. She had a clear sense of herself then as both a character in someone’s shitty ass story and as a real person in a real unmade-up shitty ass reality. She had a sense of this, and it was short-circuiting her

brain. These things really happened, she kept thinking, these breaks, these moments where something inside you that you didn't know about takes over and sets you on a wobbling course toward some distant, unknown point.

The alien was just looking at her. She felt he was waiting for her to say more.

"My thesis director says he thinks we're all here because we've been in horrible car crashes and are actually dead now."

The alien nodded.

"Are you okay?" Rachel asked suddenly. "I mean, that was a bad wreck. And alone. How long have you been all alone in that ship? For light years? Christ. Light years alone in outer space..."

"Look," he said, holding up a palm to silence Rachel. "Whenever I show up, you people..." She stopped talking and waited as he pried open a flesh flap on top of his head with his thick fingers and then poured in the bottle of beer. He burped. "You people always want to turn us into metaphors. Oh, poor me! I'm an alien! Sad little lost alien rocketing through endless space and all that. Give me a break," he said, hands on hips, squinting at the sky. "Sometimes the poignancy just makes me want to lose my intergalactic lunch."

Were this in a good story, the kind of story she was incapable of writing, Rachel knew this moment would be one in which she began to encounter herself, her own disappointment and estrangement, her own anger. However, presented with the actual, real-life scenario—her in a parking lot behind a karaoke joint, a blue, buzzed alien nonchalantly munching Doritos in front of her—it felt nothing like a metaphor, nothing like a symbolic meeting of the self and the alien. He was more like an animated walnut. He smelled like an iguana cage. And she didn't see how he was supposed to illuminate her very real existential situation.

And it was at this moment she became aware she was critiquing her very life as if it were a story, something she could

mold and direct as easily as penciled words on a page. And it seemed it should be that easy, that she should be able to story her way out of her own great sadness, that she should be able to turn herself into a character and walk around in a world of her own creation. That she should have choices and that she should make decisions. That things should happen. That things should change.

But, little human, life was nothing like a story, and coherent narrative structure was never a promise. Point of view changed at whim. Different voices came and went as they pleased. Cause and effect? Try entropy. Who told you one day it would all make sense? Who claimed there was meaning?

And Rachel thought this out of place voice sounded very much like God—she actually looked up at the Tucson sky—but the voice was her. Everything was her. That was the problem.

But who was she really? Rachel, the character in the story, or Rachel, the author of the story who is also a character in the story, or Rachel, the real real author of the story in the real world of unbearable reality? Exactly how many Rachels were there?

And did it really matter?

Suddenly it was getting all genre on her. She thought that was cool, cool enough at least. She thought it would do, for the night, or for this story. The little blue guy was doing something questionable with a tentacle and his ear.

“Do you want to do some karaoke?” she asked.

“Yes,” the alien said.

And many years later, somewhere in Reno, a lounge singer named Trixie will finish reading Rachel's memoir, entitled *Singing with the Aliens*, one Thursday afternoon on the crooked piano bench of a bar called STARDUST that saw its heyday in the fall of 1976. Trixie, her corona of hair-sprayed brunette curls backlit by a lone stage light, will take a long drag from her silk cut, then slap the book shut with one hand, bending her wrist

and folding the book against her chest. She'll exhale two white streams of smoke, staring at the rows of empty tables, then sigh. After stubbing her cigarette in an orange glass ashtray on top of the piano, she'll adjust a shoulder pad under her silver lamé shirt with her free hand and idly touch her hair.

"Sweet chocolate Jesus," she will say to no one in particular as she rises from the piano bench. "That was so good."