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The Artist and Her Muse: a Romantic Tragedy about a Mediocre and Narcissistic Painter  
Named Rachel Hoffman

By

Rachel Hoffman

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of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Prologue

Imagine a theater. Build one in your mind. I do not care if it is the largest theater in the universe or if it is the size of a shoebox. The theater can be an elaborate construction with gilded cherubs and priceless jewels. If you would prefer the theater to be a minimal design, imagine it that way. Maybe the theater is made out of glass or crystal. You can be all alone in the theater or maybe you are seated next to an alien, a cave man, or a robot.

As the curtain rises an enormous pipe organ is spewing out J.S. Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor*. The sound is colossal. The stage is designed to look like a filthy and bleak art studio. Sculptures that look like decaying flesh hang from the ceiling. Papers and dirty painting rags are scattered all over the floor. A roach crawls towards some moldy food in the wastebasket. A piece of beef jerky sits next to a pile of paint tubes and paintbrushes. Canvases are stacked against the wall. Dried paint is splattered everywhere. A woman enters stage left. As she begins to speak, the music fades...

"My most recent paintings are meant to serve as gateways between daily life and an exotic utopian fantasy. These strange psychological spaces function as portals into a new frontier inhabited with the most stupendous creatures. Active volcanoes, carnivorous plants, terrible lizards, pink Chihuahuas, flesh-eating insects, unidentified flying objects, and a host of other amazing things coexist in this cruel tropical paradise.

"Everything I do is a self-portrait and a disguise. I imagine the characters in my paintings to be mutant clones. The act of painting is like looking in the mirror. I like to spend most of my time doing one or the other. I am driven by an insatiable urge to see what I truly look like. I suffer from an unfulfilled desire to meet myself. I am frustrated with impressions and reflections. These confessions reveal my work as possibly the most disgusting display of narcissism in the entire history of art.

"The act of painting is an absurd and self-indulgent enterprise. I paint with the ridiculous and frivolous purpose of delighting the eye. Nevertheless, my hope is that my paintings capture an important aspect of my utopian fantasy with their sumptuous surroundings embellished with rainbows, natural disasters, butterflies, exotic grasses and bizarre costumes.

"My paintings can be read on many different levels from surface to deep allegory. The finished product is the result of hours upon hours of painting, pondering, and dreaming. Below the surface lies a nauseating abyss.

"My work is a delicious feast for the aesthetic consumer. I am a villainous mad scientist with a hunger for immortality. My eyes are gluttonous fools. I am a mystery and a deception. Vermillion is my opulent fetish. Lemon yellow is my nemesis."

The music grows louder again. The woman begins to cackle. She then takes a deep breath and a deeper and more dramatic bow. She exits stage right--you find that you want to applaud--but unfortunately, this story is not over. I suggest that you get yourself a snack like some popcorn, chocolate, or gummy bears before reading any further.

The curtain slowly and elegantly comes down.

Act I:

The Studio Visit or The Visiting Artist

I would like you to remind yourself that this story is an imaginary tale and the characters in this story are fictional. When I use the word fictional, I mean totally contrived. The conversations that take place in this story NEVER HAPPENED and probably NEVER WILL HAPPEN. It is only a coincidence if you happen to recognize any of the names that I have given the characters because this story takes place in a far away and imaginary parallel universe. This is not a true story. The characters in this story are not very likeable. It is for this reason I hope that you would not confuse anything or anybody in this story with anything real. It is pure happenstance that the main character in this story is named Rachel Hoffman. Nothing in this story is based on anything factual.

Now try to get comfortable...but not too comfortable...because I do not want you to fall asleep.

You may find that you would like to reconsider this imaginary theater that you have built in your mind. Maybe you are tired of the old one. Maybe you would like to erect a bigger and better one in its place. It will not cost you a thing to destroy your old theater. You will not have to hire any architects or look at any blueprints. Another good thing is that you will not have to hire any contractors either. That means that you would not have to worry about any of those architects or contractors making a mistake and ruining the whole thing. When architects and contractors make mistakes, they usually blame each other. That can be a real mess because when architects and contractors blame each other, everybody involved has to hire an attorney. Luckily, you can enjoy a brand new theater without the help of any architects, contractors, or attorneys.

Anyway, imagine that old theater exploding into a magnificent ball of fire. Or, if you prefer, make that old theater melt like chocolate ice cream. Now build yourself a new one. I do not care what it is like as long as it is more amazing than the last one. If you would like, this theater can be made of solid gold. If solid gold is too garish for you, you can make it out of ice crystals. If you hate the cold, and want to feel relaxed and casual, make it out of denim and corduroy. These are all just suggestions. I am sure that you can come up with something better. Anyway, just imagine a theater.

You realize that the curtain in the new theater is made out of lots and lots of long, messy brown hair. Some of this hair is in knots. Some clumps and strands are stuck together with paint. You begin to recognize that hair. You know it as the very same hair that was growing on the head of the woman that was cackling on the stage in the old theater.

As the curtain rises, you hear a violin playing a very sad song. Imagine the saddest song you have ever heard. Suddenly you feel overwhelmed by the scent of painting varnish. You realize that you are looking into the depressing studio...the very same studio as in the old theater...you know, the one you tore down. Florescent lights come on and suddenly you are feeling uneasy. The studio has changed a bit. It is thoroughly polluted with foul yet mediocre art. There is a plastic sandwich bag filled with dead rats on a table next to some sculptures. These things probably seem strange to you, but what is even stranger is that this time the floor tilts downward. This causes it to look like many floors that have been represented in German Expressionist paintings. Tilting the floor is

a device that German Expressionists sometimes used to make the spectator feel uneasy or nervous or restless. This time I am telling you to imagine a tilted floor so that you feel apprehensive. This apprehensiveness is only a vicarious apprehensiveness. You feel apprehensive for the characters that you will be meeting.

The paintings in the studio have been shuffled around. Some new ones have been painted. You notice that a painting is being painted right now. The person doing the painting is a woman with very long and messy brown hair. Her hair is so very long and so very messy that you cannot see her face very well. It is almost as if she is hiding. Suddenly, you find that you can read the woman's mind. This is not a stretch because this whole story is taking place in your head. As you have suddenly become clairvoyant, you realize that the woman is expecting somebody to visit. Just then, you hear a knock at the door. The woman flings it open. A man is behind the door. The man smiles. Standing very straight, the man introduces himself, "Hello, my name is Allan McCollum and I am a visiting artist." Then the woman replies, "Hello, I was expecting you. My name is Rachel Hoffman and I am a graduate student."

You realize that the man and the woman are horrid at acting. Allan—let us call the man Allan—asks Rachel if he may take a photograph of her—let us call the woman Rachel. Rachel agrees to let Allan take her photograph even though she would rather not pose for a photo because she knows that her hair is messy. Plus, she has had very little sleep. Some food also may be caught in her teeth. Additionally, she feels a bit goofy in front of a camera under fluorescent lights.

Rachel finds a place to rest her paintbrush, which is still loaded with a shade of green paint that comes from mixing oxide of chromium with lemon yellow. She then goes in front of the painting that she was working on when the curtain was lifting. This painting is a self-portrait. To be more specific, this is a painting of Rachel's head on the body of a two-foot version of Van Eyck's *Eve* from the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Rachel is self-conscious of this painting, and it shows. She is very embarrassed because the painting is remarkably absurd.

Allan is not exactly sure how his new camera works. After some fumbling, he takes Rachel's photograph. He catches her with a foolish smile on her face. You find yourself wondering what the photograph will look like when it is printed. Unfortunately, you will never know because this story is fantasy and the people on the stage are just imaginary actors. Plus, that was not a real camera. It was just an imaginary stage prop. Additionally, there was no film. However, you know that somewhere in the world of ideas, there is an imaginary photo of Rachel Hoffman looking like an imbecile in front of a really moronic painting, which happens to be a self-portrait. That photo is floating around somewhere. If you ever find yourself in a bad mood, think of that dumb image and you might feel like giggling a bit.

Anyway, back to the story. Rachel begins to show Allan her paintings. He recognizes that they all seem to be paintings of a girl about the same height as Rachel with long, messy brown hair. He wonders if the hair would look like Rachel's own hair if Rachel

were a better painter. Unfortunately, this is not a story about a better painter. This is a story about Rachel. If you would like to read about a better painter, there are many great books that I could recommend. My favorite is [A Picture of Dorian Grey](#) by Oscar Wilde. However, if you like stories about not-so-good painters, this is the right story for you.

Anyway, Allan is too polite to point out Rachel's problems with rendering paint. This works out great because Rachel is already aware of the rendering problems and would rather not discuss them because she is so frustrated. As Allan is such a polite man, he decides to skip over the rendering problems. Instead, he decides to ask Rachel to explain what her paintings are about.

Rachel has been talking very fast. She is feeling more self-conscious than ever. Allan is a famous artist. Lots of people in the art world have a Hollywood mentality. Rachel knows this. Rachel also knows that tons of people have been sucking up to Allan all day. She also knows that plenty of other artists are being very nice to Allan even though they do not know him. Rachel thinks of the number of people sucking up to Allan as a sort of barometer...you know, to measure Allan's suck-sess. Rachel is thinking that Allan must be very suck-sessful. Those facts are compounded by the fact that nobody sucks up to Rachel. In fact, Rachel and her paintings are not too popular in the art world...or even in art school.

Anyway, Rachel feels really tense around Allan.

This is what Rachel tells Allan: "I am painting my self-portrait again and again because I am hoping to produce a perfect copy of myself—so that I will finally see what I truly look like and I will finally meet myself and we (me and myself) can be united. I am working towards a Utopian extreme. As I get better at painting myself...myself will get better and better...I will grow smarter and more beautiful. I am also interested in the evolution that takes place. I like watching me and myself mutate. I am becoming a mutant." As she finishes speaking, she realizes how dumb she sounds...and then you realize how silly she feels.

This is what Allan asks Rachel: "Have you seen that movie with David Ducovney called *Evolution*?" Rachel says no. Allan tells her that she should see it.

Allan asks Rachel why she paints. Rachel answers with some nonsensical reason. Allan says, "It is interesting that you seem to keep trying to paint a beautiful woman, but in the end you cannot seem to stop yourself from doing something to ruin her...and to make her...uh...well..."

Rachel finishes his sentence, "ugly?"

"Yes, ugly." responds Allan. As Allan is so considerate, he has a real problem using the word ugly. Rachel, on the other hand, does not have a problem with this word. In fact in a moment of swollen hubris, she answers proudly, "I paint ugly because beauty fades. Ugly lasts FOREVER!"



The curtain that is made of lots and lots of long and messy brown hair grows back over the stage until your view becomes completely obscured.

Act II:

Venus in Fake Furs

Now that the curtain has closed, hopefully you have had a chance to digest what you have just read. Maybe you are feeling a bit restless and bored. After all, nothing all that interesting has happened in this story. You might be thinking, “why bother to make up a story without any sex or violence in it?” After all, who wants to read about a mediocre painter and a suck-sessful artist having some boring and absurd conversation in some filthy studio? Not you? Maybe your restlessness and boredom is turning to anger. If so, I have just the right solution.

Imagine a horrible monster. Make it ugly and huge. Cover it with horrible, filthy, smelly, tangled hair. Imagine the monster’s greasy, wrinkled face covered in drippy, sticky, goo. Imagine pimples and vomit. Let your anger feed this monster. Give it horrible teeth and disgusting breath. Imagine the scent of that breath creeping into your theater. Imagine that the monster is coming for someone. Imagine a piercing scream. Imagine Rachel Hoffman and Allan McCollum being eaten alive by this foul creature. Imagine them being torn to shreds. I bet that feels good...until the monster turns to come for you.

The curtain opens and you are surprised to see yourself on the stage this time. The stage is set like a theater and there you are sleeping in your chair. You see yourself wake up from a horrible dream about a giant Yeti eating Rachel Hoffman and Allan McCollum. Luckily, you wake up before the monster has a chance to get to you.

Now imagine looking at yourself on a stage quietly watching a play. The curtain comes up. You hear some psychedelic, Sitar music from the 1960’s. Once again you see the studio. You notice that things have degenerated even further. Rachel Hoffman is working on a painting. She seems to be in a trance. She is talking to herself. “This will be called The Painter and Her Muse,” she mumbles. She is painting another self-portrait. This time it is confusing. In the painting, Rachel Hoffman is represented twice. On the right, Rachel Hoffman is depicted as a painter in the act of painting. On the left, Rachel Hoffman is depicted as the model in the act of posing.

“How dare you,” screams a voice.

Rachel is startled. She jumps.

“I thought I was alone,” answers Rachel.

“That is because you are a fool,” replies the voice.

“Who are you?” asks Rachel. Rachel’s heart is racing. Her face blushes. The palms of her hands begin to sweat. She realizes that she is talking to a beautiful statue. She recognizes this statue.

“I don’t believe it,” Rachel says as she covers and uncovers her face, “it can’t be. Venus?”

It is Venus. Rachel is talking to a marble sculpture from Antiquity. The sparkling statue is standing in the middle of Rachel’s dirty studio. Glorious Venus eclipses all of the mediocre paintings. This probably seems strange to you, but you notice something stranger and more disturbing. Venus is covering herself in fake furs.

“How dare you!” repeats Venus.

“What are you doing here? Why are you dressed that way?” asks Rachel.

“I am here to punish you because you dressed me this way,” booms Venus.

Then Rachel asks, “How did you get in here?”

Then Venus tells her, “You know the answers to these questions. You brought me here. You, with your Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch.”

Then Venus spits on the floor.

“Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch?” Rachel said, “What does HE have to do with this?”

Rachel spits on the ground.

“Don’t play stupid with me you fool. You only make me angrier with your questions.

Do I have to spell it out for you? Fine. Masoch conjured me from my Pagan setting. He dragged me from my Mediterranean utopia up to frigid Germany. He dressed me in furs because I was freezing in his Protestant setting,” explained Venus.

“Well then you just admitted it. I didn’t dress you this way. Masoch did it. Punish him,” Rachel pleads.

“He wishes. Anyway, he is dead now. I am immortal. Masoch did not dress me this way, you did. And these furs aren’t just any furs. These are fake furs.

You...you...cheap Capitalist...Jew...bringing me to your cheap, state-funded college...in your ugly, suburban, Capitalist environment. You have turned me to kitsch. You are a terrible artist. You suck!” bellows Venus. This time Venus makes the room shake with her voice.

Rachel is shaking. “You’re wrong. I don’t suck, that is the problem. That is why I am so unsuck-sessful.”

“Give it up. Who are you trying to convince? Me? Or you? How dare you dress me like this?” I look like I belong outside of a trailer park,” roars Venus.

“Oh Venus, don’t be such an elitist. I did this for you. I did this for beauty. I did it for love. I didn’t want you to die. I couldn’t let you. And besides, if I would have dressed you in fur, all of the vegetarians and animal rights activists on campus would hate us,” admits Rachel. “Real furs would never fly here. And if I let you stay nude, the feminists would have my head.”

“Feminists, HA!” Venus spits again, “Fuck that. Now you have really done it. You need to learn to keep your mouth shut. I am immortal you fool. I cannot die. Love? What do you know about love? And beauty? Mediocre painters know nothing of beauty. Besides, I heard what you said to Allan McCollum about beauty.”

“Am I hearing you correctly? Did you say ‘fuck feminism?’” Rachel asks, “Venus, how could you?”

“Fuck that,” Venus repeats. “I know what you were doing. You weren’t worried about me dying, you were worried about you. You foolish woman, you were the one afraid to die. You wanted immortality. When I get through with you, you are going to wish you were dead,” screams Venus.

“No. Please. Don’t put a curse on me,” begs Rachel.

“It is too late for you, I curse you,” Venus replies.

The curtain drops like a falling piano.

Act III:

Poisoned...Intoxicated

As the narrator of this story, I would like to apologize for some things that I have kind of been feeling guilty about...I mean, I know that you probably don't want to be my psychologist and this is not supposed to be a confession...and I am not trying to be a Saint...and I am not Catholic...and although I really want to resist quoting Oscar Wilde in The Picture of Dorian Gray...quoting him is just so irresistible for me...You see, there is this part in the story when the main character, Dorian, tells his friend, Lord Henry, "Oh, I should fancy in remorse, in suffering, in...well, the consciousness of degradation." And then Lord Henry shrugs his shoulders and says to Dorian, "My dear fellow, mediaeval art is charming, but mediaeval emotions are out of date. One can use them in fiction of course. But then, the only things that one can use in fiction are the things that one has ceased to use in fact. Believe me, no civilized man ever regrets a pleasure, and no uncivilized man ever knows what a pleasure is." Much like Lord Henry, I know that self-flagellation is probably not so charming or even remotely attractive but I just can't seem to stop myself because for some odd reason...self-flagellation is a kind of pleasure for me...so I am going to indulge...and I don't know if that makes me uncivilized or civilized...and I don't care. Like most people, I think that I am a little of both. As I am apologizing, imagine that I am also thrashing and beating myself and enjoying it tremendously...

For one thing, I am feeling remorse for being rather bossy. Sorry. I am starting to think that I have been ordering you around too much. It is a nasty feeling. I hate to think that I have been controlling you and telling you what to imagine or how to dream. I detest the idea that I might be this ugly little fascist voice in your head. Sorry.

For another thing, I have insulted your intelligence. I mean, everybody knows that there is no such thing as a Yeti, an artist named Alan McCollum, or talking marble statues. It is foolish to write about these things and it is a waste of time to read about them. You might be thinking to yourself, "what is the point of all this nonsense? What do I have to gain by reading about a mediocre and self-centered painter? What do I care about Rachel Hoffman? So what if she loathes herself? So what if she loves herself?" Unfortunately, there are no good answers to these questions. There is no point to this nonsense. You have nothing to gain from reading this. You will be a bit older when you are finished. You will have wasted precious moments of your very short life. All that I can tell you is what I know for certain. All I know for certain is that one day you will die. I hate to tell you that...but it is true. One day you will die. Sadly, like this story, your life will end and it probably will not make any sense either. Sorry.

Maybe you are thinking that if you knew more about me, this story might be less absurd. After all, I have written a lot about this mysterious Rachel Hoffman, but what about me? Well, I will tell you a little about me. Aside from occasional guilty feelings, my life is more or less idyllic. Much like the main character in this story, I am a painter. I love to paint and I love to look at paintings. I fetishize everything associated with painting. For example, I am obsessed with paint right out of the tube. I cannot seem to keep my fingers out of it. I do not feel alive without this substance...and other slimy gooey substances that resemble paint are incredibly attractive to me. I adore snot, gravy, chewed-up bubble gum, chocolate sauce, earwax, and smelly cheese. But unlike the

painter in my story, I am not mediocre. I am a brilliant painter. My talent amazes most people. It is because of this that, in most art circles, I have been elevated to goddess status. All over the world, people worship me, love me, and adore me. I am constantly being showered with gifts and compliments. I have even had a couple of stalkers. I have a nearly unblemished life because not only am I talented and suck-sessful, but I am also extremely attractive and fabulously wealthy. Every morning, I wake up in my opulent princess bed. Then, after a lazy yawn and stretch, I walk over to look in the mirror to spend a few moments admiring my flawless beauty before taking a little time to groom myself and enhance this unrivaled loveliness even further. I spend the rest of the day creating paintings of indescribable magnificence and sophistication in my enormous and well-lit studio, or sitting under an oak tree feeding or singing to the squirrels and bluebirds. Butterflies follow me everywhere I go. I am happy to tell you that my life is almost like the happy ending in a fairytale. It is approximately perfect.

After learning this, you may be wondering why I have a compulsion to write a story about such a pathetically flawed and mediocre artist. Understandably, you may be curious as to why I would want to describe such a wretched studio filled with such vile degenerates. You may feel the need to know what I am trying to communicate with my work and this story. Unfortunately, it is not in my best interest to answer those questions. My artistic obligations are to serve only myself. I do it because I have urges that need to be satisfied. It feels good to do it. Admittedly, my artistic endeavors are not much different than masturbation...

While we are on the topic of masturbation, it is time to bring you to the climax, and conclusion, of this story. Now that I have apologized and explained a little about myself, I will not order you to imagine that you are in a theater. However, I will humbly and politely suggest that you do so. I ask you to do it as a gift to yourself. This is something special...only you can see your theater because it is inside your head. It is a unique treasure. It is your wondrous secret. Even I, the narrator, cannot see it. Just as you cannot exactly see my theater. No matter how well I describe things, there will be details that you change. You will fill in the blanks in your own rare and extraordinary way. So go ahead, if you would like, imagine the theater again. Imagine the chaotic hairy curtain rising...

Once again, the stage is set like a filthy studio. The artwork has been rearranged again. The trashcan is filled with dirty painting rags and empty coffee cups. At first, it seems that the studio is empty. Everything is uncomfortably quiet. Upon further inspection, you realize that Rachel Hoffman is curled up in a dusty corner under a painting. Rachel is sleeping with a sticky paintbrush in her hand. A puddle of drool connects Rachel's face to the grimy floor. She seems to be having a bad dream.

"Fuck that...no...too late...I curse you...no..." she mumbles.

Rachel Hoffman's long hair is also sticking to the floor. It is difficult to distinguish between paint and drool and snot. Rachel is not embarrassed because she is deeply engaged in a bad dream.

You probably have seen tons of paintings of women sleeping and reclining. If you go to a fancy museum like the Louvre or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, you will see a whole butt-load of paintings of reclining women. I guess people must like to look at reclining and sleeping women. Otherwise, there would probably not be so many paintings of ladies in supine positions in fancy museums. Anyway, hopefully you like sleeping women. If you do, you can enjoy this moment...because Rachel Hoffman is a woman and she is slumbering. She is much less threatening that way. You have all of the power in this situation. You can watch her and she will not know. You could spit spitballs in her hair and she will not notice. You could tape signs like “kick me” to her back and she will not know who did it. Rachel is vulnerable. You most likely like her better this way. I like her better this way and I am not ashamed to admit it.

Suddenly, you notice something strange happening. The painting on the wall behind Rachel Hoffman is being painted all by itself. A peculiar and eerie music is coming from the painting. If musical notes have a color, these musical notes sound like the color green. Rachel Hoffman begins to stir. She gets up and turns to the painting without bothering to wipe the drool from her mouth and face. The painting begins to look like a mirror reflection of Rachel. Rachel gets closer and closer to the painting. She puts her hands on the painting. The reflection mimics her in reverse. She tries to caress it. She reaches in to kiss it...

Then, suddenly the music stops. Rachel Hoffman shrieks! She has paint all over her face. It looks like olive and lime boogers and chocolate turds. The illusion in the painting has been lost. It no longer looks like a mirror reflection. It just looks like an abstract expressionist piece of crap. The painting is ruined. Rachel runs to the sink in the corner and turns on scalding hot water. She scrubs her skin until it turns red and purple.

“Poisoned!” she cries out desperately, but nobody hears her except you.

“Poisoned!” she repeats.

“Intoxicated” she bellows. She then pukes into the sink.

As Rachel Hoffman is screaming and puking and freaking out, some hair grows over the stage obscuring your view of the mediocre painter and her below average studio, thus marking the cheap and unhappy end to another worthless and dismal scene. The curtain closes.

Fin