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Don't Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth

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“Don't Look a Gift Horse in the Mouth”

by

Thomas Dolan

FOUR OF THE EIGHTEEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RACHEL NYGAARD
(IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER):

1. Rachel Nygaard will not tell you her favorite book. Or her favorite artist, or Italian restaurant, or season, or medical innovation of the Islamic Golden Age, or, really, what her favorite anything is at all. According to Rachel Nygaard, the word “favorite” demands the superlative of its category, and so to assert any “favorite X” is to prefer it above all other like things, which means that any such declaration carries with it the social consequence that you are—if not defined by that thing alone—then at least surely characterized as being whatever kind of person would openly prefer said thing over all other like things, a fact that raises the stakes of any What's-Your-Favorite-Blank question to something like an identity crisis, which—if it's all the same to you—she'd rather not have in a Jamba Juice interview of all places. Or meeting her boyfriend's parents for the first time. Or really any time or place she might've been forced to answer a dumb question like that. Kindergarten was especially difficult. Logically, she knows there should be one thing of each type that she really does like the best, but imagine how much sifting and critical evaluation and Venn diagrams and Pro/Con charts would be involved to figure something like that out. And what the hell is she supposed to do in the meantime? Have you go around all day thinking she's got posters of Ibn al-Nafis up on her walls?

2. The most common pejorative words used to describe Rachel Nygaard are as follows, listed in alphabetical order: bitchy, capricious, cerebral, disloyal, fickle, hyper-self-conscious, mercenary, mercurial, sociopathic, totally impossible to fucking be around sometimes, and traitorous.
3. Rachel Nygaard has never been outside the city. After high school she got a scholarship to the city's fourth most prestigious college and said what the hell. She was assigned Cynthia as a roommate, a pre-law student whose either second or third complete sentence to Rachel Nygaard was, "Sometimes I turn the oven on for no reason at all and I always forget to turn it off." Three years later, even though they don't really like each other all that much and even though she really does forget to turn the oven off, they still live together because Rachel Nygaard figures the college's algorithm was just as good as any decision she would've made.
4. Ever since an emergency city ordinance closed the gates to all civilian traffic, Rachel Nygaard has really, really, really wanted to be on the other side of the walls—if only for a second—and she's not quite sure what she'll do if she can't.

EXCERPTED TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE — MAYORAL PALACE

BRIEFING ROOM — JAN 29, 9:03:01 AM — W/ PRESS SECRETARY & USUAL PRESS
CORPS

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: Of course the Mayor's heard the rumor. From your newspaper, if I'm not mistaken. The suggestion that the tent city outside the walls isn't a homeless encampment but a besieging army is just ridiculous. Unless the reporter from the *Herald-Tribune* thinks the "War on the Homeless" is literal.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: Homelessness. What did I say?

Q.

Q.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: Let's raise our hands, huh? Listen, this is the bottom line: Don't you think we'd know if we were being besieged? Don't you think we have someone on staff whose job it is to peek their head out every once in a while to see if there's a siege going on? Don't you think your taxes pay for that sort of thing?

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: The gates are closed for regularly scheduled cleanings.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: I'm sure the transient community has perfectly good reasons to cover their shopping carts with wet animal hides.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: How do you know those citizens are starving? Maybe they just like the taste of feral dog. I didn't think I'd like falafel, and look at me now.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: Like the downtown wasn't already filled with craters and generally on fire. You guys at the *Herald-Tribune* raked us over the coals for not supporting the Urban Revitalization project but I bet you're glad we didn't waste the money now. Jesus. Can't we all just be happy that there are less feral dogs running around and move on?

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: I won't confirm or deny anything. We've got a bipartisan committee looking into it. In the meantime, the Mayor requests that everyone stay calm. There's a reason our walls have been on the cover of *Walls & Palisades* more than any other defensive system except the Great Wall of China. No one can get in! Sometimes it's even hard to get out.

EIGHT OF THE EIGHTEEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RACHEL

NYGAARD (IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER):

5. Rachel Nygaard used to go to the city wall's public observation deck and look out over the enemy's camp. This was back before the city had officially declared a state of siege, and the deck was still open. She liked how in the black of the plains the camp's fires burned in perfect grids, like orderly constellations. She could hear the lowing of their pack animals and the shouted orders in foreign tongues and the clash of bronze on bronze, practicing for flesh. She oohed at the flares. It was so symphonic and beautiful that sometimes it was hard to think of them as an enemy at all. She didn't even flinch when the shells hit.
6. Rachel Nygaard can't say that it was Fate she wasn't in HIST-301: Women in Antiquity on January 30, because she hadn't been there for the past three weeks either. Why should last Monday have been any different? Rachel Nygaard had been halfway to class before she was hijacked by the totally crippling thought that Cynthia had probably left the oven on again. This thought struck her pretty much every morning she knew Cynthia would leave the house after her, and though she only had a vague sense of the danger an unattended oven posed, she knew she wouldn't be able to relax. So she went back home and wasn't in class when a shell hit Arnold Hall, killing everyone inside, including her boyfriend. When the newspapers compared the class rosters with the body count, they remarked how impressive it was that

only one student hadn't shown up for class that day. They interviewed the Dean of Admissions for the Northeast: "We're proud to have one of the highest attendance rates in the nation," he said.

7. Rachel Nygaard, in increasingly desperate attempts to jumpstart what she perceives as the shamefully stunted and inconstant promptings of her interiority, has tried the following remedies: staying awake for 72 hours straight; vegetarianism, veganism, Pythagorean veganism (no beans), and even the Atkin's diet; three different kinds of psychedelic drugs; political activism; hypnotism; pilates; and a very seriously considered conversion to Zoroastrianism. But to no avail—no inner promptings to be found. She only seems to know herself from what she hates in others.
8. Rachel Nygaard, like everyone in the city, refers to the enemy's particularly large and destructive piece of artillery as "Agamemnon." It sounds, in one memorable coinage, "like the murderous burp of God," and every time it fires and Rachel Nygaard stops shaking she tries to picture even one face from HIST-301: Women in Antiquity, but she can't do it. Not even her boyfriend's. She can only picture the oven in her apartment—which, as it happens, Cynthia had turned off.
9. Rachel Nygaard's bar is The Hole, a cash-only sort of place whose fourth wall is the thick-cut stone of the city wall itself. It opens early, which Rachel Nygaard likes because with classes cancelled there's not a whole lot for her to do and she can't stay in the apartment too long without Cynthia asking her to "open up." Plus she likes the electric hum of the PBR sign. And the soothing regularity of the pool tables in the back—the noise of cue to clack to pocket. She thinks that this is how cause and effect must sound.

10. Rachel Nygaard says it's totally to be expected from her experience of life so far that it's only by having done something so conventionally assured to guarantee future failure such as missing class that she's alive today. No, she won't repeat that, and yes, that's all she has to say, and no, she doesn't have any particular desire to share her Inspirational Story for the *Herald-Tribune* and the widest newspaper readership in the city, nor does she care to comment on the supposedly insensitive comments of a certain Dean of Admissions, and no, this is hardly first time she's been at The Hole during what, yes, she supposes most people would consider to be breakfast time and, yes, for the love of God he should please leave her alone.
11. Another thing Rachel Nygaard likes about The Hole is its tradition since the siege started that every time Agamemnon fires the conversations will stop and the drinks will shake and slosh onto the table and a glass or two will break and everyone will look everywhere except each other's eyes, and after thirty seconds have passed and the wall's still standing, there's a big cheer and a free round on the house and Rachel Nygaard almost feels like she's a part of something.
12. On February 14th at The Hole, with her feet on the rail and a vodka tonic on the way, Rachel Nygaard finds herself not totally hating a conversation she's having with some guy named John Sobieski.
- “Not *the* John Sobieski?” she asks. “The one in charge of the defense of the city?”
- “Guilty.”
- “What are the odds? I imagine it's real great for morale to see the Minister of the Defense of the City drinking in a bar.”

“I only got promoted a few days ago, so the only way someone will recognize me is by my name. No one’s morale will be weakened.”

“But what about my morale?”

“You’re right. I’ll buy your next drink.”

“That’s not gonna work.”

“Boyfriend?”

“A dead one.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. Two years and I could never manage to decide how I felt about him. And then he died.”

“Recently?”

“He was in the college.”

“You say that like it’s my fault.”

She shrugs. “You’re the one responsible for our defense and still trying for end-of-the-world sex.”

“That’s not fair. If you read the papers you know I’ve only been in charge since Tuesday. And you know how the city let me know? They didn’t. I read it in the paper, same as everybody else. Figured maybe it’s gotta be a different John Sobieski, right? But then I get a voicemail from the Mayor’s office: ‘It’s your problem now. Congratulations.’ That’s it. But now no one in the Mayor’s office will return my calls, and obnoxious reporters keep hounding me for interviews. It’s unreal. You have to understand that before this I was just the Assistant Manager to Gate 43-B right next door. All I had to do was Remember to Close the Gate. That’s the extent of my siege-defense expertise. Go ahead, ask me if the gate’s closed.”

“Is it?”

“Of course. It’s a siege! Why would we open the gate at all?”

Before Rachel Nygaard can respond, Agamemnon booms, and for half a minute the whole city is listening, waiting.

Then the patrons cheer. The bartender rings a gong he has brought out for the occasion. John Sobieski exhales. When Rachel Nygaard has control of her face she looks at him.

“So. Are you really John Sobieski?”

“Unfortunately, it seems.”

“So you have total clearance, right? You can go anywhere?”

“Yes.”

“Then take me to the top of the wall. Instead of the drink.”

EXCERPTED TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE — MAYORAL PALACE — FEB
10, 1400 — W/ PRESS SECRETARY, USUAL PRESS CORPS, & SEVERAL JOURNALISM
MERIT BADGE HOPEFULS FROM BOY SCOUT TROOP 235

PRESS SECRETARY: Alright. We admit it. We really dropped the ball on this one. The report of our bipartisan committee did, in fact, seem to possibly suggest that maybe the tent city outside of the walls could be, or at least very closely resemble, a besieging army, and might not be—as the office of the Mayor has previously suggested—a harmless community of transient persons. If the reporter from the *Star* will please let me finish. Thank you. I can tell already that this might be a rough briefing, so please, if you can’t be civil for my sake, then do it to keep these young Boy Scouts from becoming all chewed-up and jaded. Cut the Mayor some slack. So what that we’ve actually been under siege for several weeks now? We thought they were

homeless people like anyone would've. And it's not like the high and mighty reporter from the *Star* doesn't also try to avoid eye contact with them at the long stoplights. Yes, the incident at the college was unfortunate, but the Mayor's office would like to point out that—technically—since the besiegers are living in makeshift shelters around a city, they are kind of homeless. So we were right! What difference would identifying it differently have made? Let's take some questions. And I wanna see some new hands today!

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: What happened at the college was a tragedy. But while inevitable in times of war, the frequency of such tragedies can be limited—thus the Mayor's office has already switched over to military time. We're court martial-ing anyone who says AM or PM.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: The Mayor has much better things to do than worry about who stands on which battlement. He's got the best men and women possible working on it. Just this morning, John Sobieski was appointed in charge of the defense of the city.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: John Sobieski is the Polish king who broke the Ottoman siege of Vienna.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: I didn't realize the esteemed reporter from the *Star* was going to give us a history lesson. How about tackling algebra for us next? That's a joke, everyone, you're allowed to laugh. But if nothing else you do raise an interesting philosophical question. Don't you think that the seventeenth century's John III Sobieski, the Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland, a.k.a the Lion of Lechistan and Savior of Christendom, thought of himself as *the*

John Sobieski just as much as our own John Sobieski, former Assistant General Manager of Gate 43-B, thinks of himself as *the* John Sobieski? And what of Johns I and II Sobieski? Weren't they *the* John Sobieski? I mean, who's to say our John Sobieski isn't *the* John Sobieski, and every other John Sobieski is/was just "a" John Sobieski? The truth of the matter, ladies and gentlemen, is that this is the only John Sobieski we've got.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: Well, technically, he's *still* the Assistant General Manager of Gate 43-B in addition to his new duties as Minister of the Defense of the City. We're rather short-staffed, as you can imagine.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: We took a big personnel hit because of the whole Is-this-actually-a-siege delay. So by the time we were in full siege-mode, we were down to something like our 154th link in the chain of command. Yikes! But there's always a learning curve. Now does anyone other than the reporter from the *Star* have a question?

Q.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: Look, it's not all bad. We just received word today that a relief force has arrived. They haven't been able to break through the enemy's lines yet, but they've forced them to erect a series of contravallations. That is, walls to defend against our relief force. So the besiegers are stuck between walls now too, just like us. Kind of makes you wonder, doesn't it, that maybe this whole siege thing is just a matter of perspective. Like, who's besieging who? Or whom? Anyway, since Troop 235 came all this way, I think we should let

one of the kids have the last question for their dumb merit badge or whatever. What's the question, kid?

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: No, not all of us. Our models predict a 30% casualty rate, max.

THREE OF THE EIGHTEEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RACHEL NYGAARD (IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER):

13. Rachel Nygaard was sure John Sobieski was the real John Sobieski when, before taking her to the top of the wall, he opened his gate for her. Gate 43-B is small—no more than an iron grate and room for one person at a time, but he still only risked opening it a foot. In the process she learned, according to John Sobieski and made evident by his example, that the Assistant Manager Training Program to operate his gate was indistinguishable from learning how to turn a key and press a button.
14. All Rachel Nygaard wants is to take one more breath outside the city walls. Just the one.
15. As they leaned against the wall's battlements, looking out over the city, John Sobieski had said, "You can see the Mayor's Palace from here."

"I've always thought it looks like how they'd do the Hagia Sophia in Vegas."

"I think you might be the most beautiful woman in the city."

"What does that have to do with anything? Don't talk like that or they'll blame this whole thing on me."

But she doesn't care that he's not too bright because she really does like being up here and it's not like he's hideous. The scene isn't without its romance, either, what with the view, and the flash of the enemy flares on their faces. A diseased cow catapults overhead.

“Make a wish,” says Rachel Nygaard.

“I wish you’d tell me more about yourself than just your name,” says John Sobieski.

“No thank you. I’m too self-conscious to have a self to tell about.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“When you say ‘self-conscious,’ people think of this jittery, nervous little wreck with social anxiety. But that’s not me—that kind of person is really just a disguised narcissist, always saying they ‘can’t turn themselves off’ and using their supposed inability to talk about themselves as a way to talk about themselves. The problem with me is that I can’t turn myself on. The only thing I’m conscious of self-wise is the hole where my self should be. I feel like one of those target silhouettes at shooting ranges. And before you think that maybe I really am just one of those people using this to talk about myself, let me say that I know there’s probably a drug for whatever my deal is, but what kind of solution is that? Wouldn’t I and everyone else just be confirmed in thinking that the sum of identity is a series of chemically alterable reactions? You’re looking at me like I just said I have herpes. Like, take my dead boyfriend. He was constantly asking me whether or not I loved him, or loved him as much as he loved me, with about a dozen or so variations. He’d really ask me that: ‘Do you love me?’ What an impossible question, right? It’s worse than, ‘What’s your favorite food?’ but he thought it was the simplest thing in the world. So anyway I’d tell him that sometimes, when we were at a diner and he’d do something weird like use a french fry to stir his coffee and if the lighting was just right then, sure, I could love him, or maybe even love him commensurately. But other times, I’d have skipped lunch and he’d take a call, and whenever talking to a stranger on the phone his voice would jump to the register of a castrati and I’d swear I’d never hated anyone more. I know that when people talk about love they mean something beyond that kind of fickleness, but my point is

that if I can feel totally irrational love and totally irrational hate within minutes of each other, and have part of me know that what I'm experiencing are two equally irrational states and be completely ambivalent about either, and when the difference between these states is often little more than a sandwich, well then neither of those two emotions seem like anything worth listening to, and his question 'Do you love me?' is totally useless. A better question would be whether or not I've eaten."

"He'd stir his coffee with a fry?" asked John Sobieski.

And Rachel Nygaard, thankful there weren't any flares at the moment, said, "If my roommate wasn't the stupidest person I know, I'd be dead too."

EXCERPTED TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE — MAYORAL PALACE — FEB
13, 1500 — "BRING YOUR CHILD TO WORK DAY" — W/ PRESS SECRETARY, USUAL
PRESS CORPS & QUALIFIED CHILDREN

PRESS SECRETARY [*from a prepared statement*]: The Mayor spent the day consulting with his advisors and various city interest groups. After careful consideration, and in light of the gravity of this situation, the Mayor... Would you like to read this part, Suzie? Start here.

SUZIE: ... has declared a state of martial law. [*She pronounces "martial" with a hard-T, to a collective "Aww" from the Press Corps.*] A mandatory curfew is imposed at 1600 hours. Violators will be shot on sight. Any and all depictions of horses are prohibited indefinitely. The maximum age for selected service will be raised to 55. End message.

PRESS SECRETARY: Thanks, Suzie. Cute, right? Now I know this all sounds serious, but "martial law" doesn't mean what it used to mean. It can even be fun! Nor, I might add, does it indicate that the conduct of the siege is going badly—quite the opposite: We're winning!

[*Agamemnon fires in the distance.*]

PRESS SECRETARY: Well. I'll admit that was poorly timed.

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: I was hoping you wouldn't ask about that. It turns out that after seeing our relief force, the besiegers called in one of their own, so our relief force had to construct its own set of contravallations. But don't worry—another relief force is on the way! I'd like to see them try and contravallate that! Or would it be circumvallate?

Q.

PRESS SECRETARY: Does the reporter from the *Star's* kid have a question? Because I have a question for his father: Doesn't he think teenagers are a little too old for Bring Your Child to Work Day? Although I will say I'm glad to know that the marijuana smell wasn't coming from me.

THREE OF THE EIGHTEEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT RACHEL
NYGAARD (IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER):

16. Lying next to John Sobieski in the 43-B gatehouse, it occurs to Rachel Nygaard that she did not check whether or not they had closed the gate.
17. Rachel Nygaard goes to his key ring and after awhile finds the one for 43-B. She slips out of the gatehouse and goes down to the gate. It's closed. She lingers. She analyzes. Then she moves to the control panel in the tiny kiosk, inserts the key, and lifts the glass case off a conspicuously red button beneath. No wonder we're losing the war, she thinks.

18. Rachel Nygaard presses the button. The little gate creaks upwards in the late night quiet. She momentarily fears someone will be alerted by the noise, and stop her before she can get through, but then she thinks: Quiet?

The gate clangs and she walks through the narrow passageway and outside the walls. Of the fires, the flares, the guns, the bronze, the noise of a besieging army—there is nothing at all. She can't believe that they're gone. She can't believe nothing.