

Wonderful! 172: Rachel Beef

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[theme music plays]

Rachel: Hi, I'm Rachel McElroy.

Griffin: Hello, this is Griffin McElroy.

Rachel: And this is *Wonderful!*

Griffin: Do we do enough preparing of our bodies before we start recording the show? 'Cause I just did the biggest stretch I've— You saw me. I just did the biggest stretch I've ever stretched in my life.

Rachel: Saw that little belly.

Griffin: Oh, well—

Rachel: When you did your stretch.

Griffin: Yeah, I mean, you saw my cute little belly.

Rachel: [giggles]

Griffin: But now I feel like I'm full of podcast energy, I'm full of jokes. I don't think— I think I had too much lactic acid and too much, uh, sweat build up on the inside.

Rachel: I have always told you to stretch and I am grateful now that you have had an additional person who is a medical professional tell you to stretch.

Griffin: That's true, I have seen a medical professional for my terrible, terrible body and its various aches and pains and he was like, "Do you even stretch, dog?"

Rachel: Yeah. I, uh, I slipped him a fiver.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: I said, "Talk to him about stretching."

Griffin: Rachel bribes all my doctors.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I feel like, ooh. I feel like I'm back at my fighting weight, you know what I mean?

Rachel: Oh, yeah?

Griffin: Yeah! Look at my wingspan right now.

Rachel: You've got a very good reach.

Griffin: Imagine a basketball in each hand. Ooh, shit.

Rachel: A flaming basketball?

Griffin: A flaming basketball. I have a friend named Tanner who, that was one of his senior pictures, was him holding a basketball in each hand and they were on fire.

Rachel: I can't— [laughs]

Griffin: So amazing.

Rachel: I have to imagine that was his vision and I wonder how it was executed.

Griffin: Um, I don't know.

Rachel: Did he have a face in the photo like, "Oh, oh, oh, hurry, hurry, hurry!"

Griffin: No, he looked pretty stone cold. I mean he looked badass, he looked cool. I don't know what else to say.

Rachel: Was he like the star of the team?

Griffin: He was quite tall.

Rachel: That is a way to answer that question. [laughs]

Griffin: And I can't really cast any aspersions here, because Dad did send my senior pictures in, uh, in the post and hadn't laid eyes on these bad boys in a long time and let's just say I would have killed to have some flaming basketballs!

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Would have killed to have something that unironically cool in these photos, but no dice. Um, do you have any small wonders before we really, uh, start pounding the pavement here?

Rachel: Um, I'm gonna say, just in keeping with our general hockey report, that I am excited that Tarasenko's back.

Griffin: Yes. Vladimir Tarasenko was sort of the— Would you say he's like the biggest name on the blues?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Or at least was for a while there.

Rachel: For sure.

Griffin: Uh, he is just good— He's just extremely good at hockey.

Rachel: He was instrumental the year they won the Stanley Cup, which was 2019, and then he's been more or less injured since then.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: And he just came back and he's seeing how— He's still getting his ice legs.

Griffin: Right.

Rachel: But uh, it's exciting to think about, you know? Him back on the ice court.

Griffin: Yeah. I really like talking about hockey now, because I am so not a sports fan...

Rachel: I know, it's fun, right?

Griffin: ... but I feel like we have watched so much hockey now that I understand kind of what makes it cool and what makes sports fun to watch sometimes. And it's like, this man coming back to this team who has suffered, like, a tremendous amount of injuries this season, and it's basically like, "I'm on reserve. Like, they wanted me to sit on the bench at our last game because they had just run out of people."

But now they have this dude back, it's very exciting. I'm gonna say, uh, on *The Besties*, we're doing a two-part series where we're talking about the best *Zelda* game and it's got me going back and playing some old *Zelda* games and it's just good, man. It's good stuff.

Rachel: Yeah! I always— I'm familiar enough with Griffin's game systems that when he gets out an older one, I think, "What's going on? That's an old guy."

Griffin: Henry's started to display some interest in it, uh, which is great. I'm playing *Link Between Worlds* and the gimmick there is you can turn into a painting in the walls and like, move around, and he was just like, "Do that again. Do that again. Do that again."

Rachel: Yeah, he was real excited.

Griffin: He was very excited about it. Um, let's get it going. What's your first, uh, first big ole thing? Rachel's big ole wonders.

Rachel: [laughs] New segment. Rachel's big ole thing.

Griffin: Jumbo-sized wonders. That is a sneak preview.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: We are trying to figure out how to fill time for when we have the baby and—

Rachel: And when we say fill time, we mean provide exceptional content.

Griffin: Yeah. But also, you know, feed the beast, so to speak, and the beast is you, the listening audience. So, we're talking about doing double-stuff episodes where we just do like, a couple *big* segments.

Rachel: [simultaneously] We find one— Yeah. We find one exceptional topic that can last the duration of an entire episode.

Griffin: Yeah, if you have any ideas for fun and, let's say, easy to produce episodes that we could do maybe four of in a single day in the next, I don't know, week? Hit us up!

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Let us know!

Rachel: Uh, my first thing is the backpack.

Griffin: Alright!

Rachel: Did you know, like, the backpack is a pretty new thing. Like, our parents didn't have backpacks when they were kids.

Griffin: What, did they just take a briefcase to school?

Rachel: I mean, yes, there was like a variety, but, like, the nylon zip-up backpack is like, real recent.

Griffin: Huh. Interesting.

Rachel: I was thinking about this because we got a new diaper bag and we very quickly found out that the backpack, kind of, variety is the easiest for travel because you can have both of your hands free and not all the weight on one shoulder.

Griffin: Got to have that. Yeah.

Rachel: Yeah. And I got real excited about the new diaper bag, 'cause I think I love a backpack.

Griffin: I love a backpack, too. I am amazed we have not talked about this before.

Rachel: I know!

Griffin: Because like, whenever I had to, especially when I was travelling for podcasts and Polygon, like, video game conference stuff at the same time, I researched backpack brands, like, for a month until I could figure out my personal jammer.

Rachel: I feel like I've heard Griffin talk about backpacks.

Griffin: I have, yeah.

Rachel: Maybe that's just the two of us in our lovers' embrace.

Griffin: I remember giving out my, uh, recommendation for like, which one I settled on. It's been so long, I cannot remember what it is. But definitely, I have talked about backpacks before, but we've never really dove in.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: I'm still reeling from the revelation that our parents didn't have back— Like, were all their books just at school already?

Rachel: It was primarily an outdoorsy thing, it was like a hiking thing. It was like, if you were gonna go camp, you had a backpack, but if you were gonna go to school, you either had like, the leather strap that went around your books...

Griffin: [groans] God.

Rachel: They also made the little, like, leather— I mean, they were basically backpacks, but they were like, square, leather bags that, like, fasten shut with buckles.

Griffin: So a backpack, then.

Rachel: [laughs] But not the nylon ones!

Griffin: Not the— Yeah.

Rachel: [crosstalk] ... and the zipper!

Griffin: It was before JanSport came in and changed the whole game.

Rachel: Or the, like, the kind of the canvas, like, you know. Side shoulder.

Griffin: A tote, right.

Rachel: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Uh, yeah, it wasn't until the 80s, really, that you saw...

Griffin: Damn.

Rachel: ... backpacks exclusively being marketed for school children.

Griffin: Huh. I mean, wow. That was a lot of money they left on the table, then, before that because... [sighs] Oh, man, I was all about it.

Rachel: There's even, like, as I looked into it, there's even, like, a west coast, east coast approach to the backpack.

Griffin: Tell me everything about this.

Rachel: [giggles] Uh, so, the first backpack with a zipper, 1938. And that was for, like, hiking, camping.

Griffin: I mean, that was probably around the invention of the zipper, right?

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: I said that, I have no idea when the zipper got invented.

Rachel: No, that's true!

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: Uh, so there's a, uh, a store that was called Gerry's Outdoors that invented the first backpack with a zipper.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: And that was primarily camping. 1967 is when they switched to nylon, a stronger, more durable, lighter—

Griffin: Right, better in every way.

Rachel: And I didn't realize this, but, uh, there was a guy, Murray Pletz and Skip Yowell who had an outdoor gear company in Seattle and Murray was dating a woman named Jan who had a home sewing machine...

Griffin: Oh, my God.

Rachel: ... and when they got married, JanSport was born.

Griffin: Is it Jan's Sport?

Rachel: [laughs] JanSport. It's as if her name were Jan, space, Sport.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: That's amazing, I had no idea that Jan— It was an actual Jan.

Rachel: There was an actual Jan.

Griffin: It makes sense! But that's wild. It's like, if I started up a, you know, a butcher shop and called it Rachel Beef.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: It's not— It's a strange—

Rachel: That's a little different, honey, than a sporting goods. You know, that's like, a consumable, what you're saying.

Griffin: I guess that's fair. Rachel Beef is not...

Rachel: [laughing]

Griffin: ... a sort of, pleasant image in my mind, actually.

Rachel: Yeah, no, I don't like that.

Griffin: I don't like thinking about you as beef. 'Cause you're not. You're a person.

Rachel: [sighs] Such a feminist.

Griffin: That's me!

Rachel: I love that about you.

Griffin: Yep. Happy International Women's Day. You are not beef.

Rachel: [continues laughing] Uh, so, as I mentioned, JanSport opened up their store and they were actually attached to a University of Washington bookstore. And so, when the weather got real bad, people would buy these backpacks to put their books in.

Griffin: Clever.

Rachel: Uh, and then all of a sudden, it was like, "Hey, you know what? Everybody should have one of these for their books."

Griffin: "Yeah, these are incredible!"

Rachel: They started making them specifically for books after that. They took some, like, bus seat vinyl and sewed it to the bottom, to like, make it more durable.

Griffin: I definitely had some JanSport backpacks growing up that were made out of toilet paper. That were made out— They were made to last exactly six-week periods of schooling.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: They were made to last one fall to the end of the next spring and then they dissolved.

Rachel: [laughing] What are you putting in there?

Griffin: Books and lunch.

Rachel: A lot of books. I remember just a tremendous amount of books.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: Like, you would prioritize, "Okay, well, these are the classes I have today, so I'll put the rest of the books in my locker so I don't hurt myself."

Griffin: See, I never used my locker. I just carried around all my— That's probably why my back is so fucked up.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Mm.

Rachel: Mm.

Griffin: Oh, well.

Rachel: Uh, so 1982, L. L. Bean featured the book pack and then in 1984, JanSport released the spring break. Uh, so, on the west coast we had JanSport, on the east coast, L. L. Bean.

Griffin: Okay. Alright. I feel like JanSport won that hands down, though.

Rachel: Well, L. L. Bean is always like, I've always seen that as more of like, a catalogue...

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: ... option? Whereas JanSport, you go in the store, you pick it up.

Griffin: Right.

Rachel: Seems like that's easier, you know?

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: But you can get that nice little monogram with the L. L. Bean.

Griffin: [emphatically] I do like that, damn it!

Rachel: The little initials.

Griffin: That's actually— I never had one of those and I thought the people who did were the biggest douches in the fucking world.

Rachel: [laughs] Monogramming is like, a big thing the further south you go. Like the idea of putting your initials or your name on something.

Griffin: [groans, retching sounds]

Rachel: It's like a southern thing.

Griffin: Why?

Rachel: Maybe a little too popped collar for you?

Griffin: "Actually, that's *my* backpack. As you can tell!"

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: "From the letters that are on—" Who's...? Anyway.

Rachel: Um, so yeah. So this is the 1980s, this is like, very recent for the backpack. It's so— It just blows my mind a little bit.

Griffin: I love a good backpack. I love a— I loved a sleek backpack that I could fit, like, my laptop and iPad and, like, a game system into and that was it, that was all the space. And it slid perfectly underneath the airplane

seat. And now, like, that I also need space for 10 kids cliff bars and a plastic bag with some un-diarrhea'd kid pants in them.

Rachel: [laughing]

Griffin: Uh, that is no longer an option for me.

Rachel: So, I wanted— So, speaking of, like, the sleeker backpack, I wanted to show you a picture of something. Backpack companies are beginning to sell accessories that supplant backpack for students in the digital age. Such as JanSport's digital burrito, designed for students who just aren't carrying many books.

Griffin: It's a digital burr— JanSport has made—

Rachel: They literally made the packaging look like a tortilla and then you unroll it, and then you can slide your little cords and stuff in there.

Griffin: Oh, okay. Yeah, they just made a big burrito. JanSport's having fun with it, huh?

Rachel: [laughs] Just an \$18 burrito package.

Griffin: Just an \$18— Yeah. Inedible burrito. People need to stop making things that look like food that isn't food, 'cause that's a trick on everyone.

Rachel: Whoa, hot take.

Griffin: I'm just saying, they got the— What's the— We talked about it on *Munch Squad* and then, uh, our friend Ariel actually got one and—

Rachel: Oh, the bread mug from Panera.

Griffin: The Panera Bread mug, but it's also a hand warmer, but it looks like a bread bowl.

Rachel: But you can eat that, can't you?

Griffin: No.

Rachel: No?

Griffin: I think it's like, made out of like, rubber and stuff.

Rachel: [sadly] Oh.

Griffin: That's— It's a trick on me. I don't like it.

Rachel: [giggles]

Griffin: Um, can I talk about my first thing?

Rachel: Yes!

Griffin: Uh, talking about things that keep your hands warm and looks tasty in the cold air, I'm talking about that steamed bun! The bun that is steamed!

Rachel: Oh, yeah!

Griffin: God, I love a steamed bun. And it takes many, many forms. We'll get into those forms, um...

Rachel: Do you remember your first steamed bun?

Griffin: Yeah! The first steamed bun I ever ate was in Tokyo, when I went there with Polygon in 20— God, that would have been 2013, uh...

Rachel: I had one in Chicago. So that would have been 2006, maybe? And then basically not again for, like, a decade.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: Just 'cause it's not super easy to find them.

Griffin: Yeah, um. Yeah, I was in Tokyo, I remember I hadn't necessarily done my homework on, like, getting around Tokyo and how to, like, find a restaurant that would have— That I would be able to, like, get into. So I sort of subsisted on 7/11 steamed buns. They're called nikuman there and they have so many varieties, and that's what I am going to talk about later.

But man, when you are cold and a little bit peckish, the ability to just walk into any convenience store and get one of these tasty little, just like, hot little nuggets that's gonna fill you up on the inside and warm you up on the outside? It is the perfect food delivery vehicle.

Rachel: I agree.

Griffin: I cannot think of anything better. Um, so the steamed bun has taken many, many forms, many permutations, across so many different, like, north and south east Asian cultures and cuisines. It's kind of tough to track its exact origin. The big, sort of, thing that it derives from are baozi which is a Chinese steamed bun.

And apocryphally, it said that it was created by a Chinese military strategist named Zhuge Liang and that he was the first one that just started stuffing chopped up meat inside his buns so that their soldiers could get, you know, bun power. Steamy bun power.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Um, but it's hard to tell. Like, there's so many things we talk about on this show, specifically food things that are like, a food idea, a food structure that is iterated upon across generations and cultures and stuff like that, so that it's kind of impossible to figure out like, who was the first one who steamed up a beefy bun? It's—

Rachel: Yeah, and the important thing of the distinction to make, like, better than the sandwich, right? Because you've got full enclosure.

Griffin: Absolutely.

Rachel: You know? Like, nothing's leaking out the side.

Griffin: Cuter than a sandwich.

Rachel: That's true.

Griffin: And it's a mystery! When you look at a sandwich, you know what you're about to bite into.

Rachel: It's true.

Griffin: Steamed bun, who knows? Um, so, like I said, there's a ton of things to put inside of a steamed bun and a bunch of different ways to kind of prepare it. Uh, and, you know, across a lot of Asia, they have sort of iterated on all of these different things.

So, common fillings include cha siu pork, rich soup that you drink with a straw. I remember seeing that for the first time on Bourdain, on an episode of *No Reservations*, like a big-ass steamed bun that you poke a straw into and you drink the rich soup inside. And I was like, "That's the fucking best thing I've ever seen!"

Uh, they got sweet bean paste, kaya, which is a jam made out of coconut and eggs, they also sometimes put custard up in there. Sesame paste, pickles, lamb and potatoes, and the bun itself can be steamed, it can be pan-fried, it can be grilled, uh, it can be sort of left open, like a taco. Uh, I feel like that's kind of popular in a lot of Asian fusion places here in Austin.

Rachel: Yeah, it's true.

Griffin: Uh, and yeah, like I said earlier, nikuman are a staple food in Japan during, like, festivals and for, uh, you know, street food vendors. And then, they just take over convenience stores in the winter time from, like, September to April. Kind of like how we have gross-looking weird cheesy corn dogs on those rollers in every gas station.

Rachel: [laughing] Yeah.

Griffin: Like, that is the equivalent there, except their shit, like, actually slaps so hard. Uh, and they also go so hard on the different flavors. So, it's not just pork and beef in the nikuman that is sold in convenience stores in Japan.

Here's just— I'm gonna go down the list here. Uh, Circle K has got a white curry man, a squid ink seafood man, deli chicken man with mayo-style flavor. I'm— okay. I like the flavor mayo, so I'll enjoy a mayo-style flavor.

Rachel: I mean it sounds like, maybe just kind of like, chicken salad.

Griffin: That's true. Ministop has got a few. They got a boiled pork cube crunchy curry man, a crunchy cheese lasagna man, and a Belgian chocolate man, okay? Family Mart's working with that cream cheese man, the choco man, the chestnut man.

There's a Hatsune Miku man, which is just a sort of salty green onion steamed bun? But it looks like Hatsune Miku, the blue haired hologram Vocaloid.

Rachel: And when you bite into it, she pops out.

Griffin: It looks gross. It looks—

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: By which I mean it doesn't— It looks like a weird homunculus of a— It got dragged when it was introduced, because people were like, "This just looks like a blue haired, like, gopher. This looks terrible." Uh, let's see. Lawson has a milk caramel man. I'm curious about a dessert steamed bun.

Rachel: I mean, I'm into it.

Griffin: I'm into it. I can't see anything wrong with it. 7/11 of course, comes at you with the pizza man. Which... wow.

Rachel: [giggles] You know what this is reminding me of is, uh, kolaches.

Griffin: Kolaches! Yeah, sure. I would see that.

Rachel: I mean a kolache is definitely, like, a more, like heavy—

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: Because of the bread.

Griffin: There's something about the steaminess of it that makes it for me.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Because it is a little wet and it is extremely hot and steaming, it almost disperses heat in a way that is just pleasant to hold.

Rachel: You know what? We've also talked about the tamale recently. I feel like there is something about a—

Griffin: A steamed food.

Rachel: A steamed vehicle that we are interested in.

Griffin: Yeah. I mean, we do talk about this a lot. We enjoy a good food delivery vehicle sort of genre, and I feel like steamed bun is huge.

Rachel: And we hate getting our hands messy.

Griffin: [emphatically] Hate it.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Um, also, this is one of those segments that while I was preparing for it, it made me the hungriest for steamed buns I have ever been in my entire fucking life.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: So we need to acquire some today.

Rachel: Yeah, let's do it.

Griffin: Okay, good. But, for right now, let's fill our bellies up with, uh, advertisements. Can I steal you away?

Rachel: Yes!

[music plays]

[ad break]

Griffin: Oh, there is a live bird. I mean, we've been leaving the door open in the studio, and I suppose our listeners will tell us if they don't like the bird noises. But, uh, I like the good air inside of the room.

Rachel: I honestly forget with those headphones on that you can hear all of the, uh—

Griffin: The foley? Yeah.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Uh, yeah, let us know, audience. Vote here, in the poll, we're gonna put it up right now. [makes electronic noises]

Rachel: [giggles]

Griffin: Please click thumbs up or thumbs down, do you like the bird noises. But for right now we do have some Blumpo-proms and I want to read the first one...

Rachel: Please!

Griffin: ...'cause it's for Rio and it's from Oppy who says, "Dear Lisa of 2021, I don't know where you are right now or what you're up to as you listen to this, but no matter where this Jumbotron finds you, know that I am thinking of you, that I love you very much, and that the whole world is still out there waiting for you to discover it. This is your sign! Go get it!"

Is a sort of *Manchurian Candidate* style activation code for Rio?

Rachel: [laughs] I feel like one of the things you worry about the most with these Jumbotrons is activating...

Griffin: Yeah. You got to. Because we can't be held accountable for that. We can't be held accountable.

Rachel: Can I read the next one?

Griffin: Please.

Rachel: This is for Amy Kathleen, it is from Wade. "Amy Kathleen, I'm proud of you and all the work you're doing to grow. It's an honor to have you in my life. After seeing how much ice cream you can stack on your palm without touching any fingers, I'm confident you will do reasonably well on *Taskmaster*."

Griffin: That is the ultimate compliment I believe you could give somebody in this day and age. I really think I'd do good on *Taskmaster*, I really do. It's a shame that I'll never be on that show. But man, I think I'd really crush it. I love lateral thinking.

Rachel: Sydnee was talking about that once, of like, just getting like a full family *Taskmaster*.

Griffin: Ooh.

Rachel: Incredible.

Griffin: Yeah. Although, last time, they tried to bring *Taskmaster* to the United States. Have we— We definitely did a thing on *Taskmaster*.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: How do we not remember anything we've ever talked about on this show we've been doing for three years?

Rachel: Well, because we talk about things we like, and turns out we do that when we're not recording too. [laughs]

Griffin: Yeah. That's fair. That's true.

[MaxFun ad plays]

Griffin: What's your second thing?

Rachel: My second thing is a trip to the poetry corner.

Griffin: Oh, my God!

Rachel: It's been a little while.

Griffin: Hold on, let me strap in. [imitates zipper and strapping-in noises] Got to be careful! Let me put my helmet on. And my elbow pads. Because it's dangerous— Sometimes the poems hit you so hard. I don't want to get knocked out of my seat, out the window, and fall.

Rachel: [simultaneously] All I can think about is how you're sitting right now.

Griffin: I'm sitting kind of like a gargoyle, aren't I?

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I'm perched, ready to go to the poetry corner.

Rachel: Just really, really showing me what happens—

Griffin: It's a vertical man-spread. It's like a— Do you know what I mean? It's going up.

Rachel: Yeah, the knees are up and out, yeah.

Griffin: Yeah, I'm sort of in a birthing position, which maybe— Do you think it's like a sympathy thing?

Rachel: [laughing] Probably.

Griffin: That's interesting. Well, the only thing I'm gonna birth right now is attention that I'm going to pay to you while you do this incredible segment.

Rachel: I think with the poetry corner, more than like, a helmet and a seatbelt, you need like, a box of Kleenex.

Griffin: Oh, yeah.

Rachel: And a blanket.

Griffin: Oh, is this one of those?

Rachel: Uh, it could be worse, I'll say that. [laughs]

Griffin: Fuck.

Rachel: Uh, the poet I am doing is one that I have recently become aware of, so I got— For any of you that are looking for like, the new poets on the scene, there's a Best American Poets that comes out, like an anthology that comes out every year. And I got the, uh, 2020 one 'cause I was looking to hear who was out there today.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: You know, William Carlos Williams has been gone for a long time now.

Griffin: Sure, yeah.

Rachel: Uh, and that is where I found Rachel Eliza Griffiths.

Griffin: You looked at me as if I was going to say something like, "Hey, that sounds like my name!"

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Is that what you were expecting?

Rachel: Well, I mean—

Griffin: You looked at me like, "Got something to say about that?"

Rachel: Little bit. [laughs]

Griffin: Okay. Well, I don't.

Rachel: So, she is a poet, visual artist, and novelist and recently, in 2020, released a collection of poetry and photography called *Seeing the Body*. Uh, which is compiled in the aftermath of her mother's death.

Her collection pairs poetry and photography in exploring memory and Black womanhood and the American landscape and rebirth. Like, there's a lot going on in this book. I am definitely going to order it after reading some of her poems. I do not think I can read any poems from that book because it is devastating.

Griffin: Okay.

Rachel: The poem I read, uh, in the anthology was called *Good Mother* and it is about the experience of her going to a pharmacy, like a CVS or a Walgreens after her mom has passed on, like, in the Mother's Day season.

Griffin: Oh!

Rachel: And I was just, like, "Can't read this one out loud." [laughs]

Griffin: No, you can't.

Rachel: Yeah, terrible.

Griffin: We've never had to stop doing the show in the middle of an episode before. That would definitely be the case if that—

Rachel: Yeah, yeah. She's written several collections of poetry, so I mentioned *Seeing the Body* which just came out in 2020. There was *Lighting the Shadow* in 2015, *The Requited Distance* in 2011, *Mule and Pear* in 2011, and *Miracle Arrhythmia* in 2010.

She actually got her MFA from Sarah Lawrence in creative writing and appeared in the first ever poetry issue of *Oprah* magazine, which is kind of incredible.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: So, she has a debut novel coming out from Random House, so she, like, does everything. She's incredible.

Griffin: Yeah, no kidding.

Rachel: But she also writes really well about death and grief, which, while I didn't— Wasn't able to summon the strength to read poems about her mother, I found another poem that I really wanted to share.

It was actually published in the *New Yorker* in 2019 called *Heart of Darkness*. And it is about the death of Cecil Taylor who was an American pianist and poet, kind of like an instrumental figure in the New York jazz scene.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: And so she wrote this poem about him and meeting him, uh, and I just found it to be a really, like, lovely tribute. So I wanted to read it, it's called *Heart of Darkness*.

"Years ago I went to Noho Star
with some poets & Cecil Taylor.
Noho Star is closed now
& Cecil died yesterday. I walked
to Union Square & watched black
men playing chess. Rubbing their jaws
while the afternoon light poured
down the gentle rooks of their fingers
hanging above a queen or pawn.
Cecil Taylor sat across the table
from me. Wearing leather gym
shorts, rainbow-striped kneesocks,
a fringe vest, & a face so musical
I could hear the notes blunting
& banging as he low-laughed & looked
like a lion who had bitten off
the ancient secret of a soft roar. I
liked him right away. Said yes when
he asked me if I would share
a dessert with him. I in an ivory
dress that was vintage, the kind
my mother would have worn,
with chiffon sleeves—the shining
air made the loose dress
cling to me. The way a special
music clung to Cecil Taylor,
followed the radical swing &

swag of his voice. *Do you want to have the Heart of Darkness together*, he said. *That looks sweet enough*. I remembered later when we stood on the sidewalk, sugar & poetry in us. Heat coming off the summer night in the city always made me feel I could never leave New York. He kissed my cheeks. Said he had been fooled. *I didn't think they made women like you anymore*. Tipped his cowboy hat & took off his sunglasses. My god, in the dark his eyes burned so clear & wild I thought the sun was out, roaring through our hearts like a song, daring its hunter to aim."

Griffin: I get this tunnel vision sometimes, when you're reading a poem, especially one that is as like, sort of, visual as that, where it's like—

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I literally— I— Like, everything else...

Rachel: You forget where you are?

Griffin: Yeah, it's very disorienting, uh, and incredible. That was so good.

Rachel: Yeah. I liked reading that one, because one, I could get through it.

Griffin: Not— It was close there.

Rachel: It was close there, yeah.

Griffin: It was a squeaker at the end.

Rachel: Um, but also, it really kind of captures one of her strengths, you know? That makes this newer book of hers about her mother so powerful, is that her ability to really attach herself to qualities and moments with a person that are so definitive and so indicative of who they are and what makes them so incredible.

Griffin: Right.

Rachel: And like, and compose these really, like, lovely tributes, you know? That make you feel like, oh, she like, she really got him, you know?

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: In an interview, in the *L.A. Review of Books* that came out in 2020, she was asked if she believed that writing could heal and she said, "Writing this book didn't and doesn't heal my grief. It armed me with tools, sure, and showed me so much about who I am and who I am becoming. I'd throw every copy of this book in the trash if I could pick up the phone and hear my mother ask me what I'm cooking for dinner.

"Because of the way that other writers and readers have responded to the work, I do believe its existence is a positive thing. Let it give itself to others who need it. I needed to write it and I did. It was necessary for me to go directly through it, that intimacy in the process of writing which was like crawling and clawing, to reflect on my life and how I perceive my art.

"Writing makes me feel embodied and empowered because of the listening it requires. I do believe listening can be healing."

Griffin: Mm.

Rachel: I really liked thinking of it that way, because— I'm always impressed by people that can write these kind of tributes, you know, after somebody dies because it's such an emotionally, like scary, vulnerable place, and to phrase it as, like, listening, that she had to, like—

In order to do it, she had to do the listening and the listening was what was healing. I thought, like, that's a really nice way to think of it. Less of like,

you're trying to create something from nothing, but you're trying to like, listen to your experience and kind of put together something that represents that.

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: So I found that really powerful. I would encourage you all, that poem that I mentioned, *Good Mother*, that I can't...

Griffin: Right.

Rachel: ... that I can't read out loud, is also very good. That whole book just looks beautiful.

Griffin: [simultaneously] Devastating.

Rachel: Yeah, devastating. [laughs]

Griffin: That was amazing. Uh, my second thing is, uh— I should, actually, I should narrow this down and say regular-sized Jenga.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Because—

Rachel: You don't like the big bars?

Griffin: It's come back in a big way, right? With Big Jenga that happens, and maybe this is a localized thing here in Austin—

Rachel: I don't think so.

Griffin: Okay, I didn't— I assumed not, but I feel like every bar with an outdoor space had Big Jenga in it for a while.

Rachel: So loud. So loud.

Griffin: And when it falls down, it's the loudest noise in the entire universe. It's the noise of a sun exploding.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: It's so, so, so loud and scares me and I'm always afraid it's gonna fall and hurt somebody and it probably does a lot. So, I'm gonna say regular-sized Jenga, though, is pretty great. Um, and I've played it with Henry once or twice, but honestly, though he enjoys it, it's a lot of work to set up the tower and...

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: Having him do a smash to it, um, you know, seconds after the game gets going, it makes me not want to continue, sort of, that process. Uh, Jenga. Tower. 54 blocks. You stack them up, three by three, alternating— You get it. You know Jenga, right?

Rachel: Yeah, and miraculously some of them are loose.

Griffin: Some of them are loose.

Rachel: Some of those little pieces are loose—

Griffin: Oh, I'm gonna get into that.

Rachel: And that's the best part, man! When you find one of those loose pieces?

Griffin: You find one of those loose pieces of— It's— Yeah, it's so satisfying. I've played with people who, I feel like, like Uno, there are people who enforce different rules for Jenga and some of them don't exist.

Rachel: Oh, yeah.

Griffin: You are allowed to bump pieces. You're allowed to bump blocks.

Rachel: I know! Yeah, some people are like, "Well, you touched it so—"

Griffin: "You touched it so—" It's not— Yeah. It's not chess, where if you, you know, take your finger off the piece, that's it. No, you do— If you do move a piece while you're bumping them, you do have to, like, put it back where it was before you can start touching another piece.

You are only allowed to use one hand while doing this, so none of this like—

Rachel: [slowly] Oh.

Griffin: ... pincering a piece with, like, both of your index fingers?

Rachel: I've definitely seen people do that.

Griffin: Yep, that's bullshit. They are disqualified— Think back to every game you've played with people who did that? You won that game because they were cheating. And that's all that I'll say about that.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Um, your turn ends when somebody else touches the tower or after ten seconds have passed since your move. You take the brick out and you got to put it on the very top. And thus the tower continues to get taller and more and more and more unstable.

So, the tower has to be stable for ten seconds before your turn ends, so you can just sit there and watch it and wait. I'm not sure physics, like, agrees with that time span, like.

Is there really a tower that's gonna take 10 entire seconds to fall down? I can't make heads or tails of that. Maybe if a stiff wind is blowing and you want to wait and see. And of course, you can only take bricks from below the top two layers.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: None of this, like, "Oh, I'll just pick one up from the—" No. That's B.S. So, Jenga was invented by a woman named Leslie Scott and it's based

on a game that she just used to play with her family using this set of building blocks that her family bought from a sawmill in Ghana, which is where she lived for most of her life.

And, actually, the word "Jenga" is a shortened Swahili word, which is "kujenga," which means "to build." Never knew that. And so— You know, she invented this game just based on a game she used to play with her family and then, during the 80s, distribution for it exploded and turned it into the staple board game that it is now.

It has sold, as of this year, over 90 million copies, which is over— Not over, about 5 billion Jenga blocks.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Which is a whole bunch of Jenga blocks. So, according to the packaging of one of the editions of Jenga, the tallest tower that's ever been built was on one of these original sets, by a distributor whose name was Robert Grebler. And he built one that is 40 and 2/3 levels tall before it fell down.

Rachel: Wow.

Griffin: Which, if you think about it, is— There's only 54 blocks in a set. That is an extremely big tower.

Rachel: Yeah. I mean, yeah, I guess if it's perfectly balanced...

Griffin: Right.

Rachel: ... you could do, like, one block in a row.

Griffin: But! It is extremely hard to accomplish that, and I will tell you why. This is the thing that completely shattered my reality when I read it. Each Jenga block is meant to be 1.5cm tall, 2.5cm wide, and 7.5 cm long, by design. That is how long they're supposed to be.

But! Every block has a slight, and a random, and sometimes nearly imperceptible variation on one of those dimensions. To make them flawed, like, inherently flawed by design, it's not an accident. So when you have a brick that is loose...

Rachel: Oh!

Griffin: Right. It is because, maybe it is just imperceptibly, a little bit shorter than the other bricks.

Rachel: Wild.

Griffin: Yes. So that's why it makes it so tough to do, like, a perfect stack up to the heavens. Because you are inherently using building materials that are offset.

Rachel: Wow.

Griffin: Yeah, and I've definitely noticed that before, I feel like, while playing. Especially, like, while stacking up the tower to begin with. But I would chalk it up to, like, "Oh, it's just humidity in the air," or "Oh, we have a bad Jenga block here," or "Oh, this must have broken some—"

No! It's by design. Jenga blocks are not like, perfectly uniform.

Rachel: It's almost like you could make your own. You could get a bunch of Jenga sets and you could make your own rogue set.

Griffin: Ooh.

Rachel: That you like, take all of those pieces.

Griffin: Yeah. I like to play with a shallow set.

Rachel: It's like your own pool cue, you like—

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: You like, get out your little briefcase and there's all your—

Griffin: But that's B.S. though, you can't play Jenga with your own set, I feel like. Because that's like playing pool on a pool table that, you know, tilts slightly to the left there, so you can, you know, hustle people on it. Man, there are probably Jenga hustlers out there.

Anyway. One time I played Jenga truth or dare and that was too much compound anxiety for me.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: I'm already nervous enough playing as it is, I don't need, like, my deep dark secrets to come out or maybe I'm supposed to do a kiss to somebody. No thanks.

Do you wanna know what our friends at home are talking about?

Rachel: Yes.

Griffin: Well, good. Because I have a couple submissions here. The first one is from Jaya who says, "I just wanted to say that I was listening to episode 154 and decided to listen to that Wolf Parade album and I am straight vibing. Here I am, a 20-year-old college student during a pandemic who hasn't listened to new-to-me music in months, now listening to a 2005 indie rock album and loving it. So I'm just here to thank you for this recommendation. It brought me joy today."

We get a lot of, like, feedback like this, but this one really delighted me. The idea of somebody, like, cooped up— I mean, like we all are, in quarantine and not necessarily being exposed to a lot, like, new media.

Rachel: Yeah.

Griffin: And finding what is a pretty righteous rock 'n' roll album is...

Rachel: It's a really good reminder.

Griffin: [simultaneously] It's pretty cool.

Rachel: I think, you know, as people in our 30s, we sometimes think, "Well, everybody our age knows about this."

Griffin: Yeah.

Rachel: But there's always the chance that you're gonna find a younger listener or maybe somebody who just wasn't aware and really changed their trajectory.

Griffin: I mean, *Apologies to the Queen Mary*, is, at this point, a 16-year-old rock album.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Which is devastating. Uh, John says, "My small wonder is when your car's turn signal matches up perfectly with the BPM of whatever song you're listening to. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it's one of the most satisfying things ever."

Pretty sure we've talked about that before, but also, it happened to me recently while I was out driving to, uh, just some lo-fi chill-hop song and, oh, the vibe was nice. I didn't even want to take the turn, I sat at the green light for a while, just 'cause the vibe was so right. And I knew I'd never capture it again.

Hey, thanks to Bo En and Augustus for use of our theme song, *Money Won't Pay*. You can find a link to that in the episode description. And thank you to Maximum Fun for having us on the network.

Rachel: Yeah! Thank you, Maximum Fun. I wanted to encourage people, if they haven't checked out *Judge John Hodgman*, to do so.

Uh, we are at the one year of anniversary of the cruise that we were on right before lockdown happened and we were supposed to see our friend John Hodgman on that cruise and then—

Griffin: Oh, that's right.

Rachel: He couldn't go, because he had been in Europe and that was where we thought everything bad was. And then turned out everything was bad everywhere.

Griffin: [singing] Little did we know! [stops singing] Uh... that the magic was in us, all along.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Yeah, uh, and hey, we've got other stuff at mcelroy.family, merchandise and things and, uh... chk-chk-ah, what else, huh? What else, babe? We are, uh... We're gonna have a new baby here.

Rachel: Very, very soon.

Griffin: Very, very soon. And, uh, the— It's not scheduled to come out until the end of the month, so you know, maybe some regular programming until then, but I would wager that the week where the baby does arrive, there will not be an episode that week. And then everything that comes after that for a while—

Rachel: Unless, unless!

Griffin: Unless...

Rachel: The baby arrives on like, a Thursday or Friday, like a real party boy.

Griffin: Like a real party boy.

Rachel: And then we would have had an episode that week.

Griffin: All of this is to say that we are entering wild boy country and anything can happen and just be ready for it. Like a thief in the night, this baby will arrive.

Rachel: I heard you talking about our new baby on *MBMBaM*.

Griffin: Yeah!

Rachel: And I realized there are a lot of people that probably didn't know.

Griffin: Didn't know that there was another— Gonna be a second— Yeah. Yeah, it's gonna be a real zoo over here. Am I right or am I right? [low voice] And it's gonna be nothing but pee, again. And poop again, all over.

Rachel: Our older son is just gonna have to start fendin' for himself.

Griffin: He's gonna have to.

Rachel: We really need to teach him how to make his own chicken nuggets.

Griffin: How to do a grilled cheese.

Rachel: [laughs]

Griffin: Oh, my God. It's gonna be so [laughs].

Rachel: [laughs]

[theme song plays]

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