

REBECCA ROSENBLUM

## IF THIS

She liked to see him, didn't know why, just did. She'd look across the street and see him and smile with no thought in her head. His eyes so deep and small that they were always shadowed, always dark. His body all sticks and stones under too much fabric. She would sit by the window to read, and see him carrying garbage to the curb or carrying groceries to the door or walking with a girl all in blonde bouncing at his elbow. Then a pale brunette and later another blonde. They never went in, that Sarah saw, though she didn't sit at the window enough to know for sure. She saw what she saw and that was a man she liked and didn't know, his broken-in leather briefcase banging against his left leg as he walked.

The scars were healing nicely and she was nineteen years old, and when the wind was right her hair flew up and tugged at her skull and she remembered that she was a girl and alive and nineteen years old. She never thought that she could fly anymore, which made things easier. Learning to make lasagna with her friend Kate beside her and a thick recipe book in her hand, writing essay after essay about meter and rhythm in 20<sup>th</sup> Century poetry, striding like a princess across a green-gloss lawn – sometimes she knew she was herself all day, days at a time. She smiled if it was required, even if it wasn't, and his hair was longer in the winter, growing up instead of down and not tugging in the breeze, stiff as tulip stems.

Most of the winter and most of the spring until it almost wasn't spring anymore, she didn't think of him. There wasn't much to think, truly, about a voice she had never heard and a palm she had never touched. In the slush-grey first days of spring, her friend Kate had found her a secondhand bicycle that made the city shrink as if she had suddenly found a longer stride. Sarah went farther than she had gone in a long time. But she remembered sometimes his collar twisted under itself, halfway or gone entirely from the worn dark corduroy coat. She thought he didn't like the blonde girls or the brunettes, knew that his eyes rolled up when he spoke to them, seeing something above, something flying. He looked tired, she thought one Tuesday and then didn't think anymore about him for a long time. Sometimes she would put her mouth on her wrist and kiss the thick pink scars, like lips.

Her friend Kate was the only one that would still come over for dinner, and even Kate hugged her less than before. When she did her hands caught up under Sarah's ribcage and clung

there, searching and awkward. Sometimes they'd stare at each other across lasagna steam or grey textbooks and there wouldn't be a word in the world to say.

It was cloudy that particular spring, with Sarah's roommates fighting loudly in the background and her papers settling gently into piles. Then one day she looked out and didn't see him. And a day and a day and a day. Layers of days passed without his long body moving across the sidewalk and something hurt her behind her knees as if she would fall.

What do you want? Kate asked her and she didn't know. Most of a year she didn't want anything enough to even look for it, and if she did, now, she wouldn't see the old leather briefcase hit against the shadowy legs. One day he was gone but she didn't know which day, only now she was looking at a house with the door closed, a curb with no garbage, no man in dark clothes anywhere that she saw.

She went to a play and went to a restaurant and ordered good pasta and the scars like mouths laughed and laughed. She went to a class, to a party with vegetables arranged in wreaths, to a store that sold slippery-soled shoes, and half the time she didn't even mind that her head was so echoingly empty. She didn't know why, since she'd only seen him from far away, she could picture so clearly the hollow at the base of his throat, the top of his dirty grey shirt.

On the way back from a seminar or a bar or a steamy-scented coffee shop late one evening, she walked slowly and there was no wind to tug at her hair. She walked slowly and her strides were small on the sidewalk like a girl on her own, late at night in a big city and there he was in the middle of it all. He hunched over his shoe on the sidewalk, tying broken laces, the hem of his coat on the spring-melt ground. When she was passing him he tugged the bow into place and straightened. He walked on.

She walked on. She strengthened her stride to match the length of legs hidden in thick trousers. The tip of his white nose was red and his lips were thin and grey-chapped. They walked on the sidewalk, on and on.

She saw him see her, saw him see the way her hair fell over her face when there was no wind, until there was nothing left to see. She saw him see how she was thin; unlike blade-thin Kate she was willow-thin, and there was nothing under her woven green shirt that made it worth taking off. She saw his dark marble eyes turn towards her and then straight ahead as he strode around a tree. She saw his hand under the cuff of a too-small brown corduroy coat, his hand white and chapped like his lips and swinging at the same stride as his feet, the same stride as her feet. She saw that the coat sleeve was short enough to reveal a wrist as white and silent as a face with no mouth.

They walked on the sidewalk and she wanted to take his hand. She wanted to slide her icy chalk-stick fingers into his, and they walked on down the sidewalk, and she took his hand. She took his hand, because what else was there to do, really?