

## The Idea of Him

By H. Reade Joo

An antidote to the despair of romantic loss is to tell yourself or your friends, it wasn't him, it was the time and the place; it was the night, the summertime, the mountains, the gondola. It was the cool lake water you loved, and the leaves just changing. It wasn't him, but your mood that week, the layered coincidences of train schedules and assigned seats conspiring. In other words, desire is of your own making. Nothing was truly lost. It wasn't him; it was *the idea of him*.

For example, a friend goes on a single dinner date and imagines a happy future together based on little evidence, ignoring many details of her dining partner, then is devastated when there is no second date. The sadness at a relationship's end may be more about the loss of companionship, not the specific person or a unique chemistry you shared. I have always thought serious attention is required to feel love that is specific, that is *true*. I would assure myself that only a particular kind of person moved me, even when it was not true, and make lists of would-be meaningful attributes and experiences. This view defended against the pain of loss—including the agony of finding myself in the depth of a relationship without affection.

At their prenatal appointments, mothers and fathers talk about how excited they are to meet their newborns. I have been in the room when many of these first joyful meetings happened, sometimes after long and difficult labors. One night I was in obstetrics' triage. A woman came in because she hadn't felt her baby kicking much as the prior day. From outside the room, I heard her say her due date was the next morning. She felt silly coming in only a few hours ahead, but they just wanted to check. Her husband sat beside their hospital delivery bag. She smiled at him over her huge belly while she had an ultrasound.

The nurse didn't leave the room for a long time. Then she called for our attending. "I couldn't find a heartbeat," she said, "would you like to try?" We all knew what it meant: she hadn't had any difficulty finding the heart. Our attending went in. At my workstation, just outside the room, I heard what I thought was a woman laughing. As it grew louder, I expected I would soon hear a second voice, of another person telling jokes to make her laugh. I didn't. I soon recognized it was not laughter at all but wailing as I'd never heard before in public. I heard her sob for an hour. At the nurses' station we all cried as we worked—for a patient we hadn't met, who had lost a baby she had never met. Later that night, she delivered. The cord had been wrapped three times around the baby's neck.

Parents say "We are so excited to meet you," but if this meeting is like any other, it's like meeting a neighbor in the apartment next door, whose schedule and favorite songs and coffee order you've already learned over the months of living so near. But the meeting is not like any other. The baby had hands, and he curled one direction, not the other.

Sometimes, a love can pre-date its object. The idea of a person, pre-formed, settles around its match. An affection developed over years in the imagination is felt, in a train car or hospital room, to be instantaneous. When a friend asks me, “How soon can I know if this love is real?” I respond, “I think it is real.” This form of love can be sustained for years. Object and context are inseparable. A great love can exist largely in the imagination. Perhaps, this is the reason new parents sometimes say, in front of each other and in total agreement, they never felt love so pure and powerful as when they first held their child.

Instead of saying, “You only love the idea of him,” know that is the proof you are capable of feeling love, that is the proof you will feel it again. I say it not in defense, but in hope. Your grief will subside. The idea of him is the hardest loss to bear.

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