

Jig Saw

4/1/2015

The damn dog got in the way. It wouldn't let me jump. I hovered over the ledge of my building, shaking and leaning, leaning and shaking.

Then there's Roxy and me and the life we're in. I've never known what it's like for anyone to need me like she does. If Eve and Kara and Layla and Scarlett were no different, why should Roxy be? How could she? "Tell me you love me," Roxy says. "I want to hear it." "I do," I go, but I don't. Because I just don't know.

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It's just a matter of time before she lets go. I have to beat her to it. I want Roxy to run. I want her to want to run. She's tough. Her father was a bootlegging pharmacist who drugged his wife to tiptoe behind her back and tell her she was seeing things. He cheated. He embezzled. He skimmed. He evaded. Jimmy Champagne left Roxy's mother with six-figure-debt and a baby. A baby named Roxy.

Now this dog keeps slipping into our building. We live down the hall from each other and he struts between us. The mutt's always sniffing about, tail in air. He lands at my door. I peep through the peephole. I survey his eyes as they squint in their deposits of amber.

This is my way out. I open the door, lead him down the hall, and install him at Roxy's place.

*

Roxy's too busy smiling to know I don't trust her. She waits for me in bed as I lug home from work. My hands are cast in clay clumps. I've dug enough ditches to fatten the earth ten times over. "Take your shirt off," she says. "Roxy," I say. "You've got a fever." I nuke her some carrot soup. I pad her forehead with a wet towel. I read to her so she can sleep. It takes her forever to fall but when she falls she falls forever.

She yawns herself awake and the first thing she says is, "What're we gonna name him?" She asks with her hand on its skull. They both stare. She in her pouted lips and it in its pointed ears. I know what's going to happen if I give it a name. So I say, "You name it," which backfires. "Fine," she says, and names the bastard after me.

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Spartacus usually wanders out then home but not today. I take the day off googling him in the flesh, through
 ik Roxy's going to hurt enough to want me again. But she's learned
 tly I let everything go to shit before it has a chance to.

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then on.

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I could tell her I found the dog, but I don't. I keep damning Spartacus to the lobby but he keeps pawing his way back. Then it just happens. I shove him in my car and drive to the vet and the vet says it's him and me or him just dying and I go, "Whadaya think I'm doing here?" and leave him whimpering behind a cage.

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Roxy finds out I lied. "You didn't," she says. "You wouldn't." She drags me to the vet because "If you make me go alone," she says, "I'll never forgive you." I don't know what to say. So I say she misunderstood, that "it was a check up," then bring him back to my apartment.

*

Spartacus stays. He follows me everywhere. He's gained twenty two pounds and drools and jumps into my lap every time I fall through the door. I'd been looking for somewhere new to run to but everyplace always ended up being the same. So I stay put and it's just me and this dog until Roxy tries again.

*

I catch her on my ledge like a tightrope walker, stretching from end to end. "I wanted to see what it's like," she says. But it's more than that. She shakes so Spartacus pounces to fangsnatch her, then slips. It's eight floors down. I look out and see the ditches I've dug. The biggest one being where I'm standing.

*

They demand you be grateful. That you see the bigger picture. I do. I am. I'm trying. "There's war," they say. "There's famine. And cancer, don't forget about cancer. Be grateful for what you have." But that's the thing. Roxy is what I have. What I have is Roxy.

Spartacus was an abandoned service dog. Trained to know where to turn and when to stop and if to keep going. He knew better than I did. I'm thinking of that damn dog as if he'd never slipped.

I want to tell Roxy everything. That what she believes is true. That the one we want will want us back and is out there and it doesn't have to be this hard. That in the case of Roxy and me, it's Roxy and me. I want her to be my first real friend. I want someone to finally know who I am.

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“You don’t have to live downstairs anymore,” I say. But Roxy’s full of silence, hooping her keys around her finger, meditating on forgiving me once more. I try to think of a single time I’ve forgiven her for anything. I’m blank. Roxy’s the most forgiving person I know. I imagine our roles being reversed.

I know what I would do.

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Educated at Harvard, Penn Javdan has lived in Northern California, Toronto, Paris, NYC, and Boston, Massachusetts.

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