

Sincerely, Asthma

Joseph Pearl

It's been a while since I last squeezed my hands around your windpipe. You probably don't miss me much. Word has it you're doing well these days—speaking up more in class, and exercising and sleeping well, too. You don't come running back into my arms as often as you once used to.

I'm sure it's all for the best. You always had the worst look on your face when we were together. Blinking as your vision fogged up with smudges of black ink, your cheeks numb and nose prickly. Not to mention losing motor function of those pesky extremities.

In 2012, you sat in a doctor's office to talk about our relationship. Behind my back, sure, but we can blame your mom for driving you there.

The allergist was concerned with finding nitric oxide in your lungs. Ushered into a cramped, curtained room, you sat in front of a machine that took these measurements through your exhalations. A little animated cloud smiled at you from the monitor above the contraption. The goal was simple: exhale steadily into the mouthpiece for one minute to keep the friendly, digital cloud afloat.

You botched your first attempt, failing to produce sufficient wind from your little lungs for the full minute. The once happy cloud had plummeted from the sky, a pair of Xs for eyes pronouncing it dead. Positive imagery for a young boy. You imagined yourself looking like the cloud at my expense—tongue stuck out, cheeks spotted red and white, and keeled over in the grass. Eventually, though, you got the hang of the test, and the results were as anticipated. You would take an inhaler and a pill every morning and every night to fend me off from then on out.

Remember when that same doctor called you eight years later? The pandemic had been in full swing for months by then, you weren't a mess by July of 2020 standards. The nature of the call was to check in on your mental health in recent news of the FDA announcing concerns for serious psychiatric side effects in the medications he had prescribed. You smiled, reporting no issues at all, having not gotten out of bed in three days and not having eaten anything but saltines in six. After all, only about half of them applied to you—that's good enough plausible deniability by your book. At least you were capable of retrospect, acknowledging that you were lying to him about the presence of his concerns for the better part of the past eight years. No use jumping ship now, though. The medication worked its magic (when you took it) and your brain was probably fried by years of this pill, anyways.

I wished I hadn't put you in this predicament. After all, you turned to long distance running as a sanctuary, a safe place for your mind and body to roam free. Sure, you were lonely, but at least the loneliness you found in the morning haze of trails and pavement was finally yours. But there I was, looming over your shoulder with every loping stride.

Looking back on it, you probably owe me a little bit of thanks. I gave you something to outrun, and you turned out pretty damn quick. Least I could do, don't mention it.

Your first therapist figured I might not be working alone. She mentioned something called Vocal Cord Dysfunction. When I make breathing tough for you, your brain sounds the alarms and retracts the vocal cords. The tighter they get, the harder it becomes to breathe; the harder it becomes to breathe, the higher you ascend the ladder of panic. It's common among asthmatic, ruthlessly worrisome kids like yourself. Nothing conducive to a fruitful collegiate career in long distance running, she insinuated. Nonetheless, another reason to fixate on keeping me as far away from you as possible.

I try to stay away too, you know. Like most over-sentimentalized breakups, we left things at "I'll always be here if you need anything." I figured you'd take that as decent closure. But our relationship is only as terminated as your medication regimen is perfect—this door will never be as closed, locked, and sealed shut as either of us would like.

It hurts me, looking on as your body tightens and seizes when I'm forced to come back. That little spot at the bottom of your neck, just above the dip of your collarbone. The way it sucks down deep into your chest with your every desperate gasp for air. The blinding panic, scrambling to pry my hands from off your neck. I'm always rooting that you keep that little red, rescue inhaler on your person at all times.

I need you to know that us staying apart is, really, up to you. Should the right sequence of chemicals fire in your brain, I'll be at your front door, roses in hand, ready to give us another go, time after time. If only our paired condition came with a bright red unsubscribe button, I know we'd both press it. Until that button exists, though, please do your best to keep me away.

Sincerely,

Asthma

P.S. Make sure to call Student Health and Wellness for refills. You're running low again.