

Textbooks

A sudden gust of late-November wind buffeted me head on, forcing me to clutch my coat closer to my chest. Leaves—no longer the brilliant reds and oranges of recent months, but dun-colored and dead—splintered into dozens of pieces underfoot. The last remnants of morning frost still clinging to the ground melted into my paw pads, leaving them feeling clammy. The still-rising sun was bright but cold, its heat unable to penetrate the wall of chilly air that surrounded me.

I shuddered. As much as I loved autumn here in the Northeast, the turning of the seasons never failed to sap my vitality, leaving me feeling as lifeless as the leaf-barren trees I passed by. Apparently this was a relatively common thing – seasonal affective disorder, I think they called it. Something about fewer daylight hours triggering a change at the neurochemical level that made you feel, well, S.A.D.

Maybe that was a part of it for me. It's not like I'd ever seen a doctor for this kind of thing. More likely, though, the coming of winter meant that the holidays were just around the corner, and in turn being forced to confront twenty-odd years of unpleasant memories.

I unlocked the front door of my building and dried my feet as best as I could on the floor mat, then trudged up the stairs to my apartment. The graveyard shift unloading pallets and stocking shelves had utterly exhausted me—more so than usual, even—and all I wanted was to sink into the embrace of my mattress, pull my comforter over my head, and sleep until the sun went down. No work tomorrow, so no need to set an alarm.

The thought that I'd finally get to leave the outside world behind prevented me from noticing the package placed just outside my door. I stubbed my toe on it, hard.

Muttering a curse under my breath, I bent down to pick it up. It was flat and unremarkable, with an overabundance of clear packaging tape crisscrossed all around it. From its shape and heft, it felt like a book, and a weighty one at that.

I snarled at it.

I was pretty sure that within the box was a textbook, which meant that I hardly needed to look at the shipping label to be even more sure that it was from Mom. Assuming that I was correct, this was less a 'gift' than a passive-aggressive jab to get a rise out of me after months without so much as a text. A reminder of Christmases past, of the pressure she'd placed upon me to succeed. And, whether I was succeeding or not in her eyes could be easily inferred from what she'd placed under the tree: a toy if I was, a textbook if I wasn't. As if getting some stupid math or science book was going to magically raise my grades – my dyslexia, unnoticed until I entered college, made that impossible no matter how hard I tried.

Needless to say, I received very few toys.

Dad sure wouldn't have bothered. He'd long since given up on me. *His* Carlos wouldn't be working a minimum-wage job to make ends meet. The tiger *he'd* raised would be doing something actually important with his life. At the very least, *his* son would have had the decency to be born straight to keep the family line alive – there was always the chance that his grandkid might not follow in his father's footsteps.

Ugh. This was the absolute worst time of year.

I tried to imagine what was inside. My money was on some primer for learning to code, as though the market for software engineers hadn't went to fucking shit with the rise of A.I. Even lowly shelf-stockers could follow trends on social media. However, to my utter surprise, the out-of-state address wasn't either of theirs, and one unfamiliar to me. The name of the sender, though, was anything but.

My pulse quickening, I darted into my apartment and went straight to my desk, shoving aside my keyboard and mousepad to make room. The call of my bed, which had been so insistent just moments ago, was now the furthest thing from my mind. I flipped out my pocketknife and slid the blade through the tape, trying but failing to keep my paws from shaking.

I had no idea what it could possibly be – or, more importantly, why my ex would be sending me anything at all after two years without contact.

When I pulled the book—I had guessed correctly about that, at least—from its cardboard sheath, I recognized my old genetics textbook immediately. It was the one Andrew had borrowed junior year to study for his winter final. The one he hadn't returned because the following day, after a horrific fight, he had moved out and never spoken to me again.

I thumbed through the pages quickly. The book appeared to be in the same condition I'd lent it to him in, more or less. It was oddly anticlimactic. Maybe the jaguar had been cleaning out his place and figured that I might need it for some reason – though, given how our paths had diverged since, that was a bit hard to believe.

Just as I was about to shut the book and set it aside, a piece of notebook paper fluttered out and landed at my feet. I peered down at it in disbelief: here was an honest-to-God, pen-and-paper letter, in the year of our Lord 2025.

I plucked it up off the ground to inspect it more closely. Andrew had either written it hastily, indecisively, or both, because his chicken-scratch handwriting was even worse than I remembered and the whole thing was riddled with cross-outs. Still, with my pounding heartbeat as a backdrop, I began to slowly parse the words:

“Carlos,

I was going to wait until Christmas to give this back to you, but then I remembered how difficult the holidays were for you and thought I would mail it early. Though maybe this will only add to the difficulty, I don't know. We broke up around the same time of year that I'm mailing this. If that's the case, then I'm really sorry in advance.”

I couldn't but smirk as I heard the letter in Andrew's voice – higher in pitch than mine, slightly nasally, and hopelessly endearing.

“Anyway, I came across the book in my closet as I was packing up to go back to Hartford and move in my parents. Things haven't really been working out with med school and I need to take some time to figure out what I really want to do with my life. I'm not going to go into it all here, it's too much to talk about, and the details don't really matter all that much anyway. But it's

made me think a lot about the past lately, and you.”

The last sentence knocked the air right out of me.

“I don’t even remember what had started the fight. Probably something stupid. Our fights were always so stupid. I do remember what I said to you when I walked out of your apartment, though. I wish I could take it back. Not because I think we could have saved the relationship if I hadn’t said it, because we were already kind of on a collision course, but I never wanted to hurt you so badly that we couldn’t even remain friends afterward.

“You know how I’ve always said that I try to live my life free of regrets, right? After sitting here and thinking about it, I’ve realized that I’m not really sad about bombing my last exam or getting kicked out. Even if I’d passed it, I would have just failed the next one, or the one after that. The writing was on the wall. Going to med school wasn’t a mistake, I’d made the best decision I could at the time, and even though I’m damn-near close to rock bottom right now, I know I’ll figure something out eventually. I always do.

“But, that day, there was something that was entirely in my control, and I completely fucked it up. I can’t go back in time and redo that moment, as much as I’ve replayed the scenario in my head and gone over all the ways I might have acted differently. All I can say is that I’m sorry, Carlos. I’m so sorry.”

I sniffled, hard, and an unbidden pair of tears trickled down each cheek.

“I can’t tell you how many times over the past two years that I’ve picked up my phone to call or text you and then gotten second thoughts, or how many emails I’ve started and deleted halfway through. You can already see by the state of this letter how much of a struggle writing down my thoughts is. I want to crumple this rambling mess up and throw it away, too – but if I

do, I know I'll lose the resolve to reach out to you at all yet again.

"I'm not sure what I hope to accomplish by saying all of this, either. It's too little, too late. I guess I do still have this childish fantasy that we could pick up where we left off, but even if you did have any small desire to get back together, I don't know if it would go any better the second time around. Mostly, though, I just can't stand how we left things. How I left things. And, though I really regret how it ended, I haven't once regretted having a relationship with you, or any of the time we spent together. I wanted you to know that.

"Whether or not you read this, or decide to respond, or are even interested in talking to me ever again, I really do hope you've been well. My phone number hasn't changed, but in case you lost it or deleted me from your contacts or something, it's 860-555-3409. Call me anytime, but even if you don't, I wish you the absolute best, from the bottom of my heart.

With love, Andy"

I must have stood there a good fifteen minutes reading and rereading the letter, poring over every passage, scrutinizing every word. No matter how hard I looked, I couldn't see anything that betrayed a hint of insincerity... except on one point.

It was probably true that he'd forgotten how our last fight had started, even if I hadn't. And it *had* been over something stupid: an argument about whose turn it was to do the dishes. But, I was sure he knew that it had quickly escalated into a heated discussion about the direction of our shared future together, because otherwise his final words to me would not have cut so deeply:

"What, do you think I'm not good enough for you, Andy?" "Yeah, well, maybe I don't."

I didn't know how much of a heat-of-the-moment thing it had been for Andy, and how much he'd truly meant it. The letter didn't say. Nor did it say *why* he had chosen to say just about the only thing that was sure to immediately sever our relationship. He knew full well about the fraught situation between me and my parents, and how it played exactly into my deepest insecurities. It had been cruel, it had crossed a line, and he deserved to feel guilty about it.

What had hurt me most, though, wasn't the words themselves, but the fact that, until now, Andrew had never once reached out to apologize. It wasn't until the long days of waiting turned to weeks and months that I had actually begun to *believe* he'd meant what he said.

The sudden desire to talk to him crashed into me like a tidal wave. I found myself overcome by a rush of warmth that made the tips of my fingers tingle and my forehead feel feverish. Every shallow breath was painful, but resisting the urge to yell at the top of my lungs was even more so. Tears were again threatening to overflow.

It was maddening. My reaction didn't make logical sense to me—I had moved on, my feelings for the jaguar dead and buried—but I couldn't deny what my body was telling me, either.

In spite of everything... I guess I'd always been waiting.

I finally set the letter down, then pulled my phone out of my pocket and navigated to a name I had never deleted from my contact list. As I pressed the 'Call' button, I couldn't help but smirk. I never thought I would be so happy to get a textbook.