

# Jairus

By Sam Pelkey

The last time I saw you, we met up a block from my house to vote for the federal election (I saw you more often than I saw anyone - a couple times a week, getting drunk together, running errands together, going for walks in the summer sunshine). You'd been putting on weight, which I knew upset you, and your eyes were tired, your voice was drained. You said that you had been going through withdrawals and having a hard time getting the help you needed from your doctors to get through it (later your girlfriend would tell me just how bad the withdrawals could get, how much you struggled with one medication to the next, how much that affected your fall). I hugged you and told you that I loved you (we did that a lot, too. I liked that you had put on a little bit of weight - we hugged a lot, and it just meant that there was more of you to hug. I was so scared a lot of the time, and feeling the substance of you let me know you were still here, that our friendship was enough, that you could feel how ferociously I loved you - that you knew I would do anything for you; pick you up with noose bruises on your neck, pick you up from Alberta hospital, give you a room in my home, give you money; I would have done anything for you. In a strange way, seeing you so much and being so close to you were some of the best times of my life).

We only talked a little, five minutes or so on the way to the school where they were holding the polls, and then you told me about a new piece of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles lore while we were waiting in line (or maybe it was a new Dark Souls game – there's pain and anguish in knowing it's your last conversation with someone, but I didn't, I couldn't, I didn't know what I would need to remember). After a few minutes we were split up into two different lines, so we texted a little bit while we waited – I was frustrated because I knew we were both busy and I thought this could be something we did together, rather than spend the time in the same room but completely unable to talk (later we texted our regrets that we didn't get to spill the tea about our lives and the things that had been on our minds recently). Finally, I was at the front, casting my ballot... But you texted me to say that this wasn't your polling station, that you couldn't vote here, even though I'd looked it up beforehand, I thought you could have, but your house was a block over the district line, so you'd waited in that line for nothing – I still feel like that's my fault, like we could have had a better hang out if I had known (would that have made a

difference? If we could have talked a little more about what was going on?). I texted you back asking if you wanted to wait for me or if you wanted to go home, and you said you were going to try another polling station close to your house – and that was it. I wanted to hug you again, say I love you again, but we texted each other about having dinner together soon. We were going to relive our epic midnight breakfast, this time with a rack of ribs added too.

That was October 21<sup>st</sup>. October 22<sup>nd</sup>, you texted me about going to the gym together and getting back in shape – we made plans for Friday, the 25<sup>th</sup>. I texted you towards the end of the day asking if you wanted to do a movie night with some of our friends after the gym on Friday. October 23<sup>rd</sup>, in the morning, you said, “Sure i’d be down” (the last thing I ever heard from you). About 13 hours later, in the early morning hours of October 24<sup>th</sup>, your mom told me you were gone (how? how? We still had plans, I had just seen you – how does it go from “we can be babies together at the gym” to identifying a corpse by the tattoos on your fingers?).

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I hugged you, I said I loved you – a ritual repeated a thousand times over a summer, a summer when we were as close as I’ve ever been with anyone – we’d known each other our entire lives, that love was as close to blood-brothers as I could ever get with anyone; but could it make a difference? Can a change of practice in the last year of someone’s life be enough to counteract a lifetime of hardening, of pressure to be perfect (if I could see you now I would hold you so tight, I would kiss you, I would never let you go again), can love be enough to counteract the pressures of being a black man in our society? (Your girlfriend told me the other day that if it had been her the RCMP were looking for on suicide watch, there’s no way she could have been tasered, there’s no way she could have been tackled and dragged to a police car by people claiming to be there for your safety when you told them you would go with them peacefully) Can love be enough to counteract the intersecting pressures of being a black man in our society? (Would you have lived if no one ever called you a n---er?)

I don’t know how much difference it would have made – but I know that the pressures of strength, of perfection, took their toll. I know that without those labels, people would talk less about the choice to end your life as a sign of weakness – and why do we care so much about being strong anyway? How could anyone know how strong you were unless they saw how much you fought, every day, how hard you fought to live despite the suffering? How many people are

strong enough to be tasered, to be arrested, to have your worst nightmare come true and be confined against your will, and still come out the other side with the strength, the fight to stay alive, to go to every treatment, to follow everything that was prescribed to you by the doctors, regardless of how it felt? To keep coming back to electroshock when it ruined your memory (when we passed the Canadian Tire where you had worked for years, blocks from your house, you asked me where we were, why it looked so familiar)?

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I thought you would have called me, like the last attempt – I thought that I could keep you safe, that I could show you that it was okay to have weakness, that it was okay to accept help. I wonder if that might have been easier if you hadn't had to deal with the pressures of being a man – you wanted so badly to be perfect, to control your own life. I know you had a hard time asking for help, that the person who you were most able to let support you was your girlfriend – how different might things have been if you weren't a man, if we grew up in a culture that told men it's okay to ask for help, to have anxiety and depression, to rely on the community around you (that told men that it's okay to touch each other, to say I love you)? I hope it made a difference – to know that you were loved, ferociously, dangerously, by so many people. We all miss you so much, words can't express how it feels to be without you. I'll never forget you. I'll never forget you. I'll never forget the way it felt to hold your body against mine (you had gained a little bit of weight, but it made it nicer to hug you, I liked it), to hug you one last time. I wish I had started hugging you years sooner.