Mark Kardash

Professor Arvesen

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Infatuations and Failures: A Guide for How to Fall and Rise Again

At a late evening hour, I am sitting in the ballroom of a hotel that my high school has rented to hold the 2019 Senior Prom. Sitting next to me is my father, all dressed up and fresh, wearing a black suit almost identical to mine, as if he was just another student celebrating the great feat of successful graduation. In fact, I do seem to recall that, that evening, someone confused him for one. Not a minute passes since I have arrived, that I am greeted by one of the high school's police officers, having ditched his usual uniform for a stylish brown suit. He’s one of those people that could adjust their mood to every situation in the world. He can be strict and serious when duty calls, but the rest of the day, and, at events like this, he can give you that big, friendly smile. As me and my father sit and talk about different things from my successes that school year (he can't stop saying how proud of me he is), and my plans for the future, to my romantic pursuits. And while my father is all smiles and happiness, my positive emotions are being attacked by persistent internal concerns. My heart keeps pounding inside my chest, and I feel like I need to hide it inside my suit before it flies out across the room like a deflating balloon. I am feeling cramps in my stomach, as two questions violently press on my braincells: Is she coming tonight? and Were my suspicions right, are they together? I am trying to have fun. I am trying to take my mind off it. I tell myself that she probably decided to stay home, knowing that she's a busy person, one of the few who aren't addicted to typical, exhausting high school drama. As me and my father enjoy the evening, or, at least, are trying to, other students begin to come in. Most boys in tuxedoes, brought to perfection by an elegantly placed bow tie, and girls in all sorts of exquisite dresses. Some are simple and elegant, others decorated with flamboyant accessories. Their entrance into the ballroom resembles a never ending parade of flowers. Some seem to have come alone, but a great number walk in with a date by their side. Watching all of this, I begin to calm down. No sign of her! She isn't here! How silly it was of me to worry! Thank God, the worst I could think of has been avoided. I settle down, and throw my back on the couch, preparing for a night of carelessness. For a moment, I think that maybe I'll even have actual fun tonight. I spend the next 30 minutes looking around, trying to absorb the party attitude of the others. And then, as my anxiety begins to finally go away, the door opens. A pause, a few squints into the darkness, as I see that yes, the person who just walked in is in fact her. She's wearing a beautiful, breathtaking dress fit for a queen. The girl I dreamt of for over a year, the girl I admired and cherished, the girl I wrote poems about, has come to prom. She has, after all...hand in hand with one of my best friends. I'm suddenly feeling three times weaker than I already was. I begin breathing heavily, and try to hold back tears, as I realize I have just lost a battle that I'd never had the courage to fight.

The story told above, however, had its origins way before the incident at the prom. It began in in my junior year of high school, in my Physics class, when I first met the girl I will here call Sofia. Although Sofia had been in our class from the very beginning of the year, November was when we had our first actual interaction, which is still very fresh in my mind: Determined to teach myself Spanish, and, that being her native language, I shyly approach her during a break in class to ask about some word definitions. She seems very kind to me from the first moment, as, smiling, she politely tells me everything I need to know. That's how our first few interactions carry out. I come, ask her how one says this or that in Spanish, and write it down into my little notebook. She laughs when I stumble over a word. Not the sarcastic laugh of a teaser, but a shy, good natured laugh that makes one's heart want to sing. She immediately somehow catches my interest, though I haven’t necessarily fallen for her yet. This happens when I begin to see how kind, friendly, and well-mannered she is with the people around her, and how hard she works to get the best out of life. That is when days start going by where she won't leave my mind, and, even though she is also very physically attractive, that is when I realize the most important thing: Her soul is what makes her the sweet princess she is.

At first, when my mind would wander to her at family parties and social gatherings, I knew very well what was happening to me, although I didn’t know how strong these feelings were. I had had crushes before, only for the feelings to cool off, and for me to realize what I felt was far from love. Heck, I don’t even think I was totally sure it was a crush back then. Or, rather, my main question was how big a crush it is. While I was still figuring this out, she came to mind more and more often. Every time a smooth, romantic country song came on my school bus’s radio, I couldn’t help imagining myself dancing in the sunset with Sofia. And once the bus arrived at my stop, reality came in, reminding me how far from dancing with a girl I was if I couldn’t even walk by myself.

Medical malpractice resulted in me being born with cerebral palsy, rendering me unable to walk without support. It has also severely impacted my psychology and character, with me having a very difficult time socializing, especially with people my age. Things became even more complicated when it came to having a romantic interest in someone. Due to my lack of socialization and my largely introverted lifestyle, my idea of romantic love was basically the plot of a cheesy Hallmark movie: Underdog meets princess, magic happens, he likes her, she likes him, they fall for each other, kiss under the moonlight, the end. I had no idea of what I have to do for a girl to like me. In fact, I didn’t even know if there was a way to make my feelings known. Once again, due to not having many social interactions, ever since romance became known to me, I believed that a crush on someone is a very private thing, that could be shared only with one’s family. It seemed shameful to me to tell someone else about my feelings, and an absolute taboo to actually confess my feelings to my crush. All I knew how to do was fantasize and hope.

One day, I receive yet another blow to my confidence when a student I’ll here call Jim, whose seat is right next to Sofia’s in my Physics class, asks her to help him with his Spanish homework, something he’d done a few times before. As they are practicing on how to correctly fill words into blanks, Jim pronounces a Spanish word with his American accent, and Sofia, in her sweet, innocent voice, remarks that “I love your pronunciation”, giving that shy, good-hearted laugh of hers. And at that moment, I suddenly feel a lightning passing through me. This is *my* smile. This is *my* laughter. She had shared it with *me* first. Even though I do not take it as a definite romantic interaction, my body did go into fight or flight mode for a few seconds there.

The above incident may be what gave me the rare courage to approach Sofia the very next class period, and have one of the most interesting, most impactful, and, yes, I dare say it, cutest conversations I’ve had so far. We talked about our lives, our countries, our families, and random things like learning English as a foreigner. And right then, I experienced something that I previously saw only in members of my family: *She cared*. She actually *listened* and *cared*. No girl I liked before had been so invested in a conversation with me. There was an atmosphere around her of such kindness and tenderness, it made me wonder what she would be like as a mother. Those ten or fifteen minutes felt like a sweet dream, and felt like the closest I’ve ever been to being liked by a girl. For those few minutes, I felt the luckiest person in the world. And then, everything began rolling downhill.

I had walked out of that room being now three times more in love with Sofia than I was before. I even thought, for a moment, that something might happen between us. But, as I said before, I had no idea what I could do to make the next step. For the remainder of the school year, it felt like my sole purpose of going to Physics class was to see Sofia. I kept dreaming and dreaming about us being together. In the evenings, I put the sincerest of my feelings into poems, praising her kind nature and heart. I talked to my father, and he suggested that I invite her to senior prom next year. Over summer break, I underwent a major surgery to improve my condition, and I hoped that, after I recover, I will improve my walking, and finally be able to impress her. However, that summer I fell into a sort of depression while being inactive after the surgery, and, when senior year started, I was walking even worse than before, still not having fully recovered. By the time I finally saw Sofia in my senior year (her not being in my classes anymore), I noticed that she was regularly spending time with Rodrigo, who was something like a good friend to me. Sometimes I witnessed them hugging goodbye before going to class, though I wasn’t sure what to make of it. I also noticed that Rodrigo started actively talking with one of his best buddies about romance, and discussing whether he would ever “find the right girl”. Seeing this, I began realizing something about myself: No one besides my parents cared to ask *me* about *my* romantic life. I slowly became somewhat bothered and jealous of Rodrigo having someone to talk to about such intimate things. I was even more jealous that they both felt absolutely okay with it. And that is when a suspicion woke up within me that no one cared about my romantic life because they assumed I didn’t have one. As I saw it, me being disabled somehow meant, to others, that I cannot possibly have a girlfriend, or even the need for one. Although I have never viewed my disability as some sort of irreversible curse, or a thing to be ashamed of, I actually got severely hurt suspecting such behavior. It hurt me even more when, during a conversation with Rodrigo and Sofia at a dining room table, I find out they actually became friends at about the same time period I met her, and that Rodrigo had the courage to ask for her phone number, while I was certain this was a surefire way to get slapped in the face. There was such a weird, depressing mix of feelings within me that it was even too late to ask her to prom. And when I went to prom…well, I ended up a wreck.

After seeing Sofia and Rodrigo having fun together, I left prom almost immediately. I had seen enough. Next came the song covers, poems, and everything I typically do for emotional therapy. And along with that, a thought kept visiting me, that I kept trying to chase away. That nobody wants a partner with a disability. That I will have immense difficulties finding romantic love because of my cerebral palsy. That my cerebral palsy was my biggest disadvantage. I spent almost all of my vacation time in Ukraine mentally accusing my friend of stealing my chance. What I was really accusing him of was being better than me. More stylish, more confident, more independent, possibly more financially stable. More…*normal.* After witnessing so many classmates freely talking about, and having, romantic relationships, I became convinced that being single at high school age is a shame. That not having a girlfriend was wrong, and not being able to get one meant something was wrong with *me*, which I attributed to my disability. I spent my time in Ukraine dreaming and recovering, but still wondering about what made me unattractive. When I went to my cousin’s town, she ended up giving me girl advice, pointing out some moments that doomed my chances of getting together with Sofia, and suggesting what I should do next time I have a crush on someone. For the first time, I had someone to talk to about my romantic life. And truth be told, it wasn’t as redeeming as one would think. After all, my cousin is still a part of my family, and I took such conversations with family for granted. Even though our conversation was very nice, I wasn’t quite healed yet. I still had the perception that I am somewhat less of a man for being single, and that my disability renders me physically unattractive. This wasn’t even about reaching the expectations of my peers, as it seemed like my peers did not have any expectations from me. According to the established societal perceptions, a “real man” is the “perfect man”. A man who does not have *flaws*. A man who can rescue the damsel in distress by climbing and kicking and jumping. He *cannot* be disabled. That would not be *right.* And so, when my classmates were occupied with pursuing love, I always seemed to be the *exception.*

When I started college, my experience fueled me to write an article about the difficulties of dating with disabilities. It is while doing research for that article that I found a confirmation of all my suspicions. It turned out that yes, disabled people do have immense difficulties in dating, and yes, they are very often assumed to be single. This actually empowered me, as I realized that I was not alone out there, and there was a common cause to fight for. However, my setbacks were still not totally gone. I still very much resented Rodrigo, and, as much as I tried not to think about it, he worked at the martial arts establishment where we regularly take my brother. Rodrigo had no idea about the “Sofia situation”, and was constantly very kind to me, trying to establish communication. But however sincere his kindness was, each time we met I couldn’t look at him without dread. I tried to fight it, and talk to him like nothing had ever happened. But the more we talked, the stronger the negative feelings got within me. I wanted to get rid of them, and detoxify my soul from all the weight and hate it had stored within. I wanted to finally be able to talk to him without feeling horrible. And that is why, one day, after Rodrigo mentioned he and Sofia had broken up, I let my emotions take over, making the absolutely stupid mistake of telling him how I felt towards his ex. Boy, was I lucky he has nerves of steel, and is very understanding. No injuries were sustained. We talked quietly and calmly, and even though that doesn't justify my actions, he must have realized I was under severe emotional distress. He even offered me to stay in touch in case I want to talk about some things. However, it was exactly after that moment that I realized I would need to make some major resolutions by myself, finally asking myself the question: How does one *become* attractive?

It has been almost 2 years since my fiasco at the prom. And in this time period, several things have become much clearer for me than they were before. Yes, I did my research. Yes, I actually Googled things like “Why don’t girls like me?” and “How to win over a girl when disabled?”. Yes, I got angry, I cried, I screamed. But at the end*, I learned.* First and foremost, what happened at the prom wasn't anyone's fault but mine. It was an incident caused by my own inexperience. For more than a year I admired and worshipped a girl like a statue, not knowing what to do next. And that is simply because I never asked. Born with cerebral palsy, I had people take excessive care of me. I had everything I wanted, and thought that if I like someone, they will magically fall for me as well. I spent a long time pitying myself for being “hopeless” and “unattractive”, until I finally asked myself the question: What is it that makes me “unattractive”? And how can I fix it? And while I was pondering over these dilemmas, I kept failing to realize the most important thing: Even though opinions may vary, I believe every human has the ability to attract someone. No matter if you are a 6ft tall basketball player or a paralyzed wheelchair user. We all have that ability. We just need to find OUR way of doing it. Hit the right emotional buttons, and have confidence. The first thing we should realize is that there are no unattractive people in this world. Yes, there are people who act in the most unattractive ways, thinking they own the world and demanding respect without respecting others. But no one was born to be this way. We all have the power to attract. And once we realize that, we open a great many doors in front of us that we never even knew existed. Second of all, well...I cared too dang much. If someone just isn't interested in you, why try? If they are not into you, you'll simply never get a good relationship with them. That's when I realized I am not living my life to impress someone. I decided to live my life for...life. I decided to improve myself for myself, and not to meet someone's expectations. I decided to finally live life to the fullest.