

Accidentally in Love

Once upon a time, I accidentally started dating a girl. It seemingly happened without me even trying to start up a relationship, and before I knew it, I was dating her. My dear reader, you may be wondering “how the hell do you manage to accidentally date somebody? The last time I checked, dating was a conscious decision.” Well let me paint you a picture of a chilly autumn day.

At the beginning of October in my final year of middle school, I was called over to a table across the room by my friend Dawson. He and Rachel had been whispering pointedly for nearly ten minutes at that point, and I was about to be let in on their conspiracy. I pretended to get up and sharpen my pencil, casually standing within range of their whispered questions to me.

“Do you like Sarah?” they asked me. At the time, I was hopeless to pick up the romantic connotations within their question, and so I confidently respond that “of course I do! She’s super cool.” Before I could blink, Rachel was handing me a folded slip of paper with ten digits scrawled across it and assuring me that “good, because she really likes you too! You should give her a text tonight when you get home.”

The bell cut through my mind and the shrill screeching illuminated the social undertones in the previous question that I had been too naive to catch. I had just “confessed” to a crush that I didn’t have. And even worse, Rachel was definitely going to tell Sarah the next time they ran into each other. “If I can make it to Sarah first and just explain the whole situation,” I thought to myself, “this will all be alright. I can admit that this was all a silly misunderstanding on my part and we can continue being friends.”

I slammed my papers into their place in my plastic folder and spiked my pen into my backpack. Before the bell had stopped echoing through the classroom, I was out in the hallway,

running for the stairs. Rachel, somehow, was even further along than I was. As I turned the corner to the row of lockers where Sarah and I were neighbors, my heart falls seeing Rachel and Sarah already deep in conversation.

Now, any reasonable person would simply walk up to them, and talk to Sarah like an adult. That's not a difficult task, and most people would be happy to be told plainly that their friendship is valued and "we should be better friends than we are, but I don't think we should date." So I mustered all of my courage, walked up to the two of them and started the conversation by greeting Sarah.

Obviously, she said "hi" back, and we carried on some mundane pleasantries. I wish I could give you a word for word, court-reporter transcript, but alas the six years standing between today and my naive youth have rendered that corner of my memory barren. As Sarah walked away from me, I had somehow admitted to the crush I didn't have on her, promised to come to her halloween party that I had no desire to attend, and had promised that I would text her as soon as I got home.

"No worries, I can fix this," I think to myself, "just text her and straighten this whole thing out." But the awkwardness simply continued to bubble up. When faced with the reality of a pretty girl being incredibly nice to me, it was difficult to bring up the topic I needed to broach. Getting to know someone new is such a fun pastime, and I was beginning to enjoy talking with Sarah. She was sweet, and kind, and compassionate, and a million other positive attributes that I could enumerate below if given the time; she truly deserved to be dating someone who was crazy about her.

"And why can't that be me?" I began to think, "I'm a cool person, and I know that she already likes me, and I'm interested in a relationship." Reflecting now with the infinite wisdom that comes after a year and a half at a state university from the mountain west, it's clear that

only one of those thoughts is relevant to someone looking for a relationship; however, the obviously foolish past version of myself believed that those three things would be good enough for me to fall in love with her.

Slowly spiraling out of control, it was a fortnight before I was holding hands at her Halloween party whenever her parents walked out of the room. Only a month before she was asking me to go bowling; “we can have an actual proper date!” Two months later and I sit making a Christmas present for her.

“We’ve like *been* on dates, but we’re not ‘*dating*’ dating,” I tell myself to justify the emotional turmoil I would put Sarah through if she ever learned how misleading I’ve been over the previous months. “I haven’t kissed her yet.”

It’s easy to convince an eighth grader of almost anything, and it’s even easier when I’m the eighth grader in question. Bad behavior is easy to justify when the stakes don’t seem to be completely real, and when you haven’t had your heart broken yet, the concept of breaking someone’s heart is entirely abstract. So, I convinced myself that everything was totally clear between the two of us. “She knows that we aren’t seriously dating,” I tell my friends when they ask about the two of us. Then she asked me to the school dance.

Today, going to a school dance is one of my biggest guilty pleasures. Leaving every stressor, care, and worry outside two decrepit wooden doors to jump around to the heart rattling bass of the latest pop anthem is an addicting passtime. However, as is unfortunately becoming a recurring motif within my tale, my younger self squandered these precious moments.

The night of the dance, I arrived fashionably late, because I knew tonight would be the night I finally broke things off. I had come to realize that the little voice centered between my ears was actually right: I need to tell Sarah that we’re done.

The night was over, and Sarah was crying. I expected to feel somber, but all I could feel was a sense of relief. Was that relief that I had finally done what I ought to have done months previous, relief that I was finally able to “be my own person,” relief that I didn’t need to worry about the feelings of another person? I can’t say anymore, reader. The shame wouldn’t come for months, and the drive to finally apologize for my unwittingly manipulative machinations wouldn’t come until far too long after that.

Six years and a few heartbreaks of my own later, Sarah and I sit down and talk regularly. We’re better friends, and closer confidants, than we ever were when I lacked the decency and courage to simply tell her the truth. She happily tells me about how lovely her boyfriend is to her, and I can say that “I’m so happy she finally has someone who is as mad about her as she is about them!” She’s been through more hell than even I could have ever managed to inadvertently inflict on someone, and I tell myself that I am genuinely happy for her happy ending.

But once again, dear reader, I’m not being entirely honest with Sarah; because, most days when I get to see her, I still wonder why I felt that relief all those years ago. And I wonder what would have happened if I could reach back through time and give myself even a touch of the reflection I’ve managed to gain in the intervening years. I wonder if I could have stopped Sarah from having to cry over me, and I wonder if I could have actually managed to fall in love.