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What I Learned from (Not) Falling in Love

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what i learned from (not) falling in love

His name is Michael. He was nineteen. I was twenty. We had been working together at a before and after school program for six months. And it wasn't until the last month of us working together that I felt anything at all for him. On the first day we met, I opened the door to let him in. We exchanged pleasantries while I assessed his appearance, wearing only a t-shirt and jeans. I dismissed his looks as not my type, but who knew one day I'd see him in a whole new light. It had been three years since I felt like this for anyone. So, the excitement to see him every day, the desire to be paired with him to lead field trip groups, and the love of his swept back black hair were unfamiliar feelings. Then it came to me at night when I was trying to put my mind to rest. It all made sense. I had a crush on my co-worker.

I don't know what brought it on. Maybe it was his hair or how well he worked with the kids or a multitude of things that added up over the last few months and it didn't hit me until that one day in July.

Michael, of course, isn't the first guy I've had a crush on. He's one of many. And I treated the situation the same as any other. I kept my feelings to myself and admired him from a distance. At least it started out that way. What sets Michael apart from other guys I've liked was what followed.

I shared the news with one of our other co-workers after five of us met for breakfast one morning. I sat in a booth next to Michael close enough to touch. The words played on repeat in my head, so loud I thought Michael might hear. *I have a crush on Michael. I have a crush on Michael. I have a crush on Michael.* I needed to tell someone, someone who'd listen and wouldn't judge. Someone like our co-worker, Chloe. She'd listen. After breakfast, Chloe and I had gone to get our

nails done. But it wasn't until we were walking back to our cars that I built up the courage to finally say it.

I don't know who else to tell so, I'm just going to tell you. I have a big, fat crush on Michael.

A smile stretched across her face. *You do? Oh, my God. Sammy! You should tell him.*

I shot her a look of confusion. *What?*

You should tell him. You never know what might happen.

What would I even say? My stomach twisted into knots at the thought of telling Michael I liked him.

Just keep it super casual and be like, "Hey Michael, I have feelings for you."

I imagined standing in front of him and letting the words fall out of my mouth. My palms grew clammy at the thought of it and I wiped them on my jeans. What if he made a face? What if he told me he didn't feel the same way? What if this ruined our friendship?

He's never said anything bad about me to you has he?

No, never. I wouldn't steer you wrong, Sammy.

Her advice to me was something I would have never considered. Just the thought of looking him in the eye and telling him I had a crush on him made my heart race. But once she planted the idea in my head, I couldn't imagine a scenario without it. After the initial shock of hearing such a ludicrous idea, I realized that it wasn't ludicrous at all and I decided to tell him. In doing so was a huge step out of character for me and completely out of my comfort zone, but the idea was there in my head and I had to know what would happen. I practiced what I would say over and over and prepared a reaction for whatever response he might give me.

I told him on a Thursday after a long field trip day at the San Francisco Zoo. (We were not, however, paired up to lead a field trip group together but were assigned separate partners and our own group to lead.) It was after closing and we were finishing up before heading home for the night. The two of us were alone and it was the ideal moment I was anticipating. I stood in the office off the main room of the building, filling out my time card, when I said to him: *I need to tell you something.*

His first reaction was *Oh, shit.* He thought I knew something about the internal job he applied for. I didn't. *Is it something bad?*

No. At least I hoped it wasn't. *Oh, man.* At this point, it was too late to turn back. I had started and now I had to finish. After completing my timecard for the day, I closed the binder and moved to the kitchen.

Just tell me. You're freaking me out. He started moving closer to me which only made me more nervous.

I can't look at you when I say it. Hiding behind the door frame and closing one eye, I finally said it. I let my guard down long enough to say it just as I practiced. *I have feelings for you.*

I braved a look at him. There was a moment of disbelief that passed between the both of us, shocked at what I just said. I quickly filled the silence. *It's okay if you don't feel the same way. I just wanted you to know.*

He said, *Aw.* And then he said, *But you're leaving in a month.*

Michael was calm. He wasn't overtly happy or sad or disappointed. He was flattered that I told him but it didn't change that fact that I was leaving in a month.

If you weren't leaving so soon, there would definitely be a chance that we could see where it went.

Long distance was out of the question. Michael had been burned by his last girlfriend who cheated on him while she was away for school. He wasn't willing to risk it, not even for me. But I understood. And I understood, too, when he changed the subject completely. I didn't push it, knowing it wouldn't make a difference. So, we got in our cars and I watched him drive away. I put my heart on the line and Michael was kind enough to hand it back to me without stepping on it first. And because of that, I wasn't sad. I was hopeful.

I have never been in love before. This was the closest thing I ever had to something but it still turned out to be nothing. But maybe I only thought that because the something wasn't love, it was something else. It was a feeling. A feeling that Michael might not be my first love but someone would be, someday. Michael gave me the hope I needed to believe that someone could love me.

The ice-cold burn of rejection came later but was soon replaced with that initial feeling of hope. Things didn't turn out how I'd hoped with Michael. Maybe it was the timing, maybe it was fate or something else entirely, but Michael was real and the possibility of us being together existed. I could spend hours listing the things I love about Michael—our shared love of the San Francisco Giants, how he waited for me after work until I was done closing, the one time he made me pinky promise I wasn't mad anymore—but maybe it was for the best that our story didn't play out. Maybe I learned more from *not* loving him than I could ever learn from loving him.