

Gordon Fraser

Serial Monogamy

Long River Graduate Writing Award

Sarah was the first, working me into an icy sweat at the thought of reaching my arm around her shoulder. Watching bad horror movies, like the nineteenth *Halloween* film. She frightened less easily than me.

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Alana Small, Morgan Hunter, Emily Daniels, Megan McCarthy, Ingrid Law, Elizabeth Wilson. Never asked any of them out.

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Five of us went mini-golfing that summer I spent in Tennessee. Thick, black clouds hung slug-like in the air, threatening to rain us out. I'd been staring at Maggie the whole time—how her thin legs stretched upward, slightly spread so she could putt, to the bottom of her jean skirt. When we left, she handed me a little green golf pencil, "To remember me by..." she said, laughing and leaning in so I couldn't help but brush the side of her ass.

I was older then, so I knew where the gift of a golf pencil could lead.

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I dated Kirstin for three years. I lived with Jessica two and a half.

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I like buying flowers, especially roses. There's something about the frivolity, the expense, even the smell. Roses smell like money. Roses smell like, "Don't worry, I'll take care of you." They smell like sacrifice.

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Heather went straight for my pants—kissing and fondling in the semi-dark upstairs hallway of the high school during a Romeo and Juliet rehearsal. She didn't want commitment, she already had a boyfriend. She thought Juliet was dumb.

I remember tracing her neck with my lips, tasting her ear. Unclasping her bra, the kind of bra girls wear before they think too much about someone unclasping it. When she offered to screw me that Saturday (her parents were in Aruba), it was only a week after I'd first tasted that ear in the hallway by the custodial office, and I panicked. Told her I was busy. Ignored her.

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Sex with Kirstin was athletic and destructive. We would have these marathon days, doing it two, three times, at least. We ripped sheets off the bed, broke lamps, toppled furniture. Once, we knocked an 11x17 framed photo of her dead grandmother from the wall and sent it tumbling down a flight of stairs. Spent that night shopping for frames.

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I thought I knew how to put on a condom, and I did, in theory, but the first time I actually tried it I dropped the little latex disk behind my headboard. The second time, it didn't seem to unroll right. You know what they say about third times.

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Maggie was tiny, a hundred pounds maybe, with dark, curly, wild hair and small, firm breasts. She had this way of cupping me in her hand like a broken toy, like something precious she'd found after it'd been lost a long time.

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I want to hear secrets. What does she keep from herself, even? "Come on," I want to say. "Tell me..."

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When Jess was seventeen, her mother died. Cancer, of course. From her freshman to her junior year, Jess had been the only one around to take care of her mom. Apparently, when it finally happened, the older woman's lungs collapsed. Jess told me it was loud. I held her when she said that. Didn't say anything myself. I mean, what do you say?

...

I'm driving my parents' car, a '96 Corolla, when Ashley tells me what her uncle did when she was six. I look over at her face—at how small it is, framed by wavy black hair against a backdrop of passing gas stations and restaurants. They glimmer in soft focus like Christmas lights. I reach my hand out and put it on her knee. I do that a lot.

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"You can tell me anything," I whisper. "It's okay..."

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She's crying from a nightmare, and it takes me a while to wake up. When I do, I grope for her in the dark, whispering her name and forcing my eyes to open as I envelop trembling shoulders. She's hot, burning. Smells strongly of sleep and faintly of peppermint. I kiss her cheek, my nose pressing deeper into hot flesh than my lips. I nearly poke her eye when I brush hair from her forehead. Then, because I don't know what to do, I kiss her again.

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Sleeping alone is more restful, more comfortable. I wonder why no one wants to.

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Whenever Jessica got upset, we would—it's funny to me now—we would order Chinese food from this dive across the street, sit down on the floor of our bedroom, smoke a bowl and listen to one of her Ani DiFranco CDs. *Little Plastic Castle* was my favorite. We ate beef teriyaki and wonton soup, heads buoy-bobbing to Ani's steel-string voice as we exhaled thick, hazy, beautiful smoke like a pair of languid dragons.

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Kirstin always said I'd make a great dad.

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I'd put my head on her lap and stare up at her face—my eyes were sleepy and her image fuzzy—and wonder how she got so beautiful and what the hell she was doing with me, and she'd stroke my forehead with her right hand as she looked off into the air like she was waiting for something.

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In the dark, they all feel the same.

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We went on these long drives together—not headed anywhere in particular, we just drove. A stiff wind from the open window blew a kind of blonde tornado around her face. The rushing sound silenced the stereo. Didn't matter. We didn't talk, just watched the trees and lakes and small towns, approaching and escaping.

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"I need you," she whispers.

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I never dated Ashley, but we fooled around. No sex, but all the other stuff. She had this desperate way of looking at me, like she was hungry or scared. Whenever I got up to leave, she'd pull me down, press her lips to mine so hard my teeth hurt, and rip at my clothes. Never let me pull my lips away.

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Shitty movies I've seen: *City of Angels*, *Hope Floats*, *Practical Magic*, *What Dreams May Come*, *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*.

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She's choking me.

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I reach half-heartedly under the blankets, pretending I want to screw because I don't want to talk. She gropes with the same silencing ambivalence. I'd rather not look at her, but I do.

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I never told Maggie we were through. I went away and, gradually, I called less. Didn't feel guilty 'til she sent me a birthday present.

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I knew she was cheating. I wasn't an idiot. And she knew I knew. It became a little game we'd play. I'd invite him along when we did something, just to be friendly. Sometimes, he'd bring a girl. She hated it when he brought a girl.

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I'm sitting in Kirstin's car telling her it's over—we're in the parking lot of the high school. It's late and the sky is black—not bluish black or star-specked black, but shroud black. I look up as I listen to her crying, pleading, and I think, *It looks empty.*

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Jessica took the longest. We never fought, just pecked each other. Most days, I wanted to punch her.

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We fucked all the time after we broke up, inventing weird excuses to meet (I still have your book...) and, once together, the clothes would come off and we'd be going hard, hard, hard...

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I kept telling her to leave me alone.

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"You wanna be my girlfriend?" I ask, and even though I'm eleven I vaguely know I'm asking for something big. "Yeah," she says. Then she pads off to tell her friends. I take a big, full breath, surprised at how easy it was.

...

I hadn't been single for almost three years, and part of me worried I'd make a fool of myself, but as soon as I got her talking I knew I'd be fine. Later, I'd slip my hand around the small of her back and kiss her. Piece of cake.

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I never cry, which is strange.

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Kirstin would call me late at night, like three AM late, my freshman year in college. I kept reminding her we weren't dating anymore, but it didn't help. She said she needed to talk, overcoming phony tears. I listened for hours sometimes as she blamed me for everything that had gone wrong in her life. Then, in the morning, I'd shuffle bleary-eyed to class. The calls slowed to a trickle that winter and, by spring, they'd stopped. But I still found myself waking at three o'clock, sitting up in bed and listening in silence for the telephone.