

Summer Story

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I WAS FIFTEEN WHEN I SAW that my Mia Maid Advisor was having an affair. I'm afraid to tell you the story now, and afraid to think too hard about what I knew then, and what I didn't know. We can pretend it's fiction, if that will make you feel any better.

The prophet always told us only to date Mormon boys, and not to date until the age of sixteen, and so, officially, I didn't, though by the time I was out of Beehives, I used to stand around in the foyer between church meetings and talk with the older boys. The prize place was the orange velour armchair in the corner next to the bishop's office by the rack with the tithing slips. Dave often found me there, sat on the arm of the chair, put his arm around me, and talked about nothing. That was okay because his mother was one of our Young Women's advisors, the one who went to Girls' Camp with us every summer, the one whose kitchen was always open to girls who wanted to talk. Instead of calling her Sister Carlson, the older girls called her Aunt Margie. Dave Carlson had fair hair and washed-out blue eyes. He was a couple inches taller than me, a couple years older than me, cool and rather aloof from the other kids his age. He wasn't part of the guys' basketball group in the church gym. He didn't date any of the girls in the ward or in the high school, and he had an undertone of unhappiness and distant discontent. When he was thirteen, before I knew him, he had broken his back in a waterskiing accident. It was a dangerous injury; his mother feared for her oldest son and prayed for him, and he recovered.

When Gina came, it seemed she was perfect for Young Women's—twenty-two, married just out of high school, with a little boy at home and another baby on the way and a handsome young husband who got a job out at the plant. Her long hair was pulled back in two barrettes, just like the young woman on the cover of our class manual and on the medallion we could get if we fulfilled all our goals for six years. We heard her father was bishop somewhere, back in her hometown. In our little town, there were only two wards and not very many people to choose from for callings. Gina got called to Young Women's right away,

and became best friends with two of the girls who were graduating from high school that year. They rode around together in a jeep and played pranks on people—like the time a big yellow Century21 “For Sale” sign appeared overnight on the church lawn. I loved Gina because with her, things were fun and she made it seem like everybody fit in.

I loved my bishop too. When I was Beehive president, I called him “Bishop” and he called me “President.” He treated Beehive president as if it were a serious job. He was a quiet, dark-haired young engineer at the plant, not long out of BYU, with a young family and a perfect wife. After a while, he called me “Prez” and I called him “Bish,” and we agreed on a scripture challenge—to read the scriptures thirty minutes each night. Every Sunday after Sacrament meeting, when he passed me in the lobby on the way to his office, he asked me if I had done my reading. I always said I had though I didn’t admit to the times when I fell asleep with the book still open. He sometimes confessed to me that he hadn’t done his reading every night. The scripture challenge was our special agreement, a secret compact between colleagues.

The year when I was a Mia Maid was not an easy one. Two of the popular girls got pregnant, and Aunt Margie was worried about her son Dave, who was drinking sometimes. I started going with Scott, a boy from the other ward. Dave still found me at the orange velour armchair on Sundays and put his arm around me or held my hand, but (as I found out later) Scott warned him to keep away from me. Scott was big-shouldered and sometimes got in trouble at school for fighting. I would rather have gone with Dave, but because of Scott, Dave never asked.

We were a small ward in a small town, scratched into the edge of the desert and not another town around for miles and miles. We were close. Aunt Margie tried to counsel us through high school; we tried to comfort Aunt Margie and cheer her up. Gina had us over to her house for a slumber party; we tried to fix a fifth-anniversary dinner for Gina and her husband. And Bishop—I tried to help him out when I could, and sometimes I took my problems to him in his office with the dusty brown curtains and the olive-green vinyl chairs. Even though we didn’t talk that often, I felt like he took care of me.

Gina’s best friends graduated and went away to the state college in the city. Dave graduated too and with good grades. By special pleading Aunt Margie got him into BYU. But early in the semester he was caught drinking beer with some other guys and was reprimanded. Dave quit school rather than live under the punishments they wanted to load on him. He came home and kicked around for months, doing nothing. I didn’t see Dave at church anymore because he’d moved out of his mom’s house and quit coming.

Then summer started. Just as it always was in the desert, the sky was as clear and hot as a blue gas flame. The black tar melted soft down the

center of the streets, the white sidewalks were too bright to look at, and the days were flat and empty. One day I rode my bike over to talk to Aunt Margie and sat in her cool kitchen. Another day I rode over to Gina's. Standing in the narrow patch of shade on her concrete porch, I rang the doorbell. When Gina opened the door, the air conditioning flowed out onto me from the dark entryway. I was surprised to see Gina wearing a swimsuit.

"We're sitting in the backyard getting a tan," she said to me with her joking smile. She turned back and I followed her into the house. Through the sliding glass doors out the back I saw Dave in shorts, shirtless, lying on a plastic lounge chair. Gina stepped barefoot across the dead dry grass and sat down on her plastic lounge chair next to him.

"If you spray yourself with a squirt bottle, you can bake longer," Gina explained to me. "You get a better tan." She misted her hot arms and shoulders with the spray bottle and then her long, bare legs. She was already very tan. Dave didn't say much, but he took the spray bottle from Gina and sprayed himself all over. Then he set it down on the ground under his chair and dozed off again.

I didn't stay long. There wasn't much to say. I didn't want to sit in the backyard, even under the shade of the eaves, and facing out to them in the glare of the sunlight hurt my eyes. I went home.

A week or two later, I biked over to Gina's again. When I got inside, in the cool, we sat for a while at the kitchen table and talked. "I'm trying to help Dave out," she said. "You know, to straighten out his life, to quit doing stuff he's not supposed to do. Maybe go back to college." That would be good, I said. I had liked Dave for a long time.

Through the end of June, I thought about riding over to Gina's house, thought that I might run into Dave there, and I wanted to see him. But I didn't go. Not long after, we had a YW activity. We met at Gina's house in the evening to go up in the hills and roast s'mores over a fire. "Is it all right if Dave comes along?" Gina asked. "He was just here hanging out."

We all went out to get in Gina's car, a brown Pinto wagon, a nice family car. Dave said, "I'll drive." He already had the keys in his hand. We crowded in. Gina got in the front and then scooted over to sit on the narrow box between the driver's seat and the passenger seat, just behind the gear shift. I sat in the front passenger seat next to her. She was dressed for the heat in her shorts, and Dave had his surfer shorts on too. As we pulled out of the driveway, Dave put the car in reverse. When he took his hand off the gear shift, he laid it carelessly along the inside of Gina's bare leg.

It seemed stupid to build a fire in the summer when it was already so hot, but Gina insisted. In the dark, Gina sat next to Dave and joked with everyone as usual, or maybe more than usual. I don't really care for s'-

mores. They're too messy. I wanted Dave to pay attention to me like he used to. But he stayed on the other side of the fire with Gina, poking sticks into the flames, and so I tried not to watch them. I walked away and pretended to look at the empty desert sky instead.

When I remember Bishop, I think I was lucky to have him for my high school years. Later, after I had gone to college and lived in Utah, I heard rumors about some young bishop who had got his head messed up with polygamy. He told one of the teenage girls in the ward that he was called by the Lord to restore the Principle and swore her to secrecy. When I heard that story, I thought of my Bishop. I tried to imagine him saying something like that to me. I imagined how I would have felt special, safe in his care, chosen. I remembered my yearly "worthiness" interviews, how we sat privately in his office. How reticent his questions were, how formal. How I would have told him anything, if he had asked. I remembered how I admired him and how, unlike the other men in the ward, I never saw him sitting in church beside his wife. He was always alone up on the stand or sitting at the desk in his office. We all took care of each other, but in my mind, Bishop especially took care of me.

Bishop must have been the one who had to take care of it in the end. In August my father came home from church and told us: They announced in priesthood meeting that Gina was excommunicated for adultery. Suddenly, Gina's quiet husband decided they would move to Arizona for a year at the university. Within weeks Gina and her family were gone. Aunt Margie and her husband and the rest of the kids moved to a house in the other ward. Dave disappeared.

Just after my sixteenth birthday, I ran into Dave. We sat and talked for a while. He didn't tell me anything outright, except that Gina had thought of leaving her husband but didn't have any way to support her two little kids. Dave drove me to his apartment in the rundown part of town. He was driving a sand-eaten Cobra with a rumbling V-8 engine, and drove carelessly, one hand barely holding the bottom of the steering wheel, and coasting through stop signs. He told me he'd had a tequila sunrise for breakfast. He was a lot different from how he used to be at church, when he would stand with his arm around me or hold my hand and talk about nothing. But he was still Dave. He drove me back downtown, and when he dropped me off, we agreed to meet the next day for lunch. After he left, I thought about how I could help him get back to being the person he was.

I waited for him the next day on the corner, but he never showed up.

He called me a few days later, but not to apologize or make things up. "I got held up," he said. "You know. Stuff to do, people to see."

"Yeah, I guess I can understand that," I said. It didn't sound like much of an explanation or an excuse. "We can still meet for lunch if you want."

There was dead space on the phone. Even at the age of sixteen, I understood already in part the deadly betrayal that Dave and Gina had created, the dismembered families that were trying to heal before, spiritually, they bled to death. I understood the rift that now cut him off from all ties to the ward except the safest, most formal ones. From what Dave had done, there was no other way to judge him but as selfish, corrupted, and predatory. I knew my dad would tell me to keep away from Dave if he found out.

But I offered to meet him. Selfish, corrupted, and predatory, Dave should have said yes.

Finally he said, "No. I don't want to meet you for lunch. I didn't come the other day on purpose. I've got a lot of stuff to deal with right now, and I just don't want to get you involved in it. It's not the sort of stuff you want to get messed up in. It'll be better for you that way."