



Prayer Book
for
Contemporary Dating

Megan McDermott

PRAYER BOOK FOR CONTEMPORARY DATING
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Prayer Book for Contemporary Dating: The Preface

And you lose and you lose and you lose, with a win every so often – a make-out on a park bench after midnight, a relationship with both physical and emotional intimacy, a homemade Italian dinner for your birthday after 10 p.m. because you were having sex while he should've been cooking. Then you'll lose again, but harder. Harder than when that guy ghosted you after those four good dates, though maybe not harder than when you were collateral damage in an attractive classmate's midlife crisis.

At least God can't ever break up with you, though She is allowed to ghost.

So what will you do in the waiting? Waiting for the Divine to soothe your rejected soul. Waiting for someone to love you. You do what you can. Like all saints, you keep talking, keep swiping, thumb grazing faces, rosary beads.

Saturday Night Communion, Senior Year of College

Cup of salvation, straight peach schnapps – consecration by desire.
We danced and drank in the living room, me in a borrowed bra

after a roommate declared my boobs underwhelming. Ritualized
preparation for strange hands sliding down our hips.

I hadn't discerned yet what counted as sin – the drunkenness,
the touching, both? I only knew the list of things God didn't want

me to want had grown tedious. My body up against a stranger's up
against a wall wrote its own theology – liberation treatise

on limbs previously dedicated to an obvious and irrepressible aura
of abstinence. That year I let the aura peel, though facts

underneath stood firm. I was fine with being a virgin
as long as I didn't dance like one. Sometimes I wondered

what guys guessed, though I clarified myself by the night's end –
the way I'd let our bodies move together, aggressive,

then duck their kisses and scurry home in a protective gaggle of
girls drunk off Arbor Mist, a friend once yelling,

“She's literally preaching tomorrow,” to rebuff a football player
who wanted us to get high back in his dorm room. Whoever

was least drunk proffered reminders about drinking lots of water
while we exchanged forehead kisses goodnight – blessing

what was done and left undone. In there somewhere, unspoken
reassurance: Christ's body still in ours, twenty-one and horny,

collapsing onto respective beds, wondering, sighing,
What if, this time, I had told that stranger yes, yes?

A Kiss Named “Yes, I Really Was That Old”

In the car, I realize I no longer remember
the name of the first person I kissed,

even though I was twenty-two years old,
a full-blown adult with a college degree.

If I'd been a wobbly pre-teen spinning
bottles in a basement, I could forgive the slip –

name lost to hazy, hormonal distance.
But I wasn't, so I test names. Dylan? Brian?

Neither seems right, so I'll name the kiss instead,
call it “The Long Anticipated” or the preceding

thought, “Fuck It, I'm Twenty-Two.” Alternatively:
“What Happened on the Dance Floor Stayed

on the Dance Floor” or maybe “What Happens
When Dance Floors Are The Only Place You Feel Sexy.”

I no longer remember the name, but I remember
the self-conscious knowledge that my friends

stood nearby as witnesses. I call it now
“Weak Fulfillment of Prophecy and Prayer.”

Discourse on Eve, in the Context of a Party

Mark me, then, as especially fallen,
here in the moonlight. Me in this short dress,
me with a Yuengling in my hand.

I am three drinks in and too tired
to protest the endless paradigm.
I can pretend, too, that the world
is filled with crafty women waving
apples at innocent men. That we laugh
at their teeth digging into sin, that malice
is why we draw eyes to our skin.
I will be the fallen woman, on the wrong
side of all the dichotomies. Saint/sinner.
Virgin/whore. Mary/Eve, Mother of God
perpetually unsexed in opposition
to our hypersexualized foremother
who must've, of course, seduced Adam
into disobedience, though we're never
actually told he needed any convincing.

I am three drinks in, and I am finished fighting
the things I fought for years. Done living
in a world where all traffic lights default
to red, all answers to "No," all touch
to danger. I am leaning towards "Yes,"
towards trying, towards tasting.
I am ready both to play the temptress
and to be gullible in the presence of pleasure.

I am three drinks in, an unabashed Eve,
ready to claim the spirit of all the women
I've sneered at over the years: women
who are obvious, who flirt too hard,
who kiss in dark corners. I am long past
pretensions of paradise. I am stepping

out of the subdued self, shedding old ideals
and the camis meant to cover secret flesh.
Now I'll recover the selves I suppressed,
tricked by definitions of discipleship hinging
on respectability instead of love.

Blessing of the Profiles

May something from the core of you be evident by photo #3 – some part of what makes you lovable twinkling through pixels and two sentences of self-description. May it all be true but not too true, not *I'm still scarred by that 40-year-old I thought was 35* true, or *I'm not sure I believe anyone will love me* true, or *Beware! Religious baggage!* true. May whatever you mean to delay revealing get filtered away, and may you present yourself as a person who appeals to those you find appealing and puts off those opposed to your flourishing.

May the number of people who could possibly love you under the right circumstances be greater than those who will ghost you after you've knelt on their living room floor, or those who will tell you you're too young and beautiful to go to lectures, as if complimenting you, or who will devolve into insecurity when you don't come the first time, or – truly, it's a miracle anything ever really goes right for anyone.

May you step out in the wonder that these risks require, throwing yourself – or at least your image – into the void, on the off-chance some thumb somewhere might slide across your smile, then slow down – long enough to ask who you might really be.

JoJo's Coffee & Tea

Almost laughable, this meeting place
with its one distinct prior memory:
Tinder date I'd pressured myself

into the year before which,
out of character for me, ended
back at his apartment. I still spot

the man sometimes, at crosswalks
downtown or in café windows,
and remember that this stranger

saw more of me than anyone
I've ever fallen for. Everyone
who's shattered me has done so

from a distance – you included,
with your carefully curated practices
of wanting me but not-quite-yet.

Tears already pooling, I ordered
tea to go before your entrance
slammed me with a double portion

of breathlessness: both how much
I wanted you and how much
I wanted you to be different.

I'm Not Sure Why I Didn't Yell

Why, still, did I defang my rage to tears?
To blame: feminine socialization, Jesus
prompting my pause, or – I cringe –
hope that measured hurt, vulnerably displayed,
would rekindle the notion that I was worth
wanting? Whichever it was, I rolled obscenities
to the back of my mind as we ambled
together down a hill path – our swinging arms
respecting a new gap between us. To cut the silence,
I explained: “I’m being quiet because I’m angry
and don’t want to say something I’ll regret.”

Even inside the sense of an end, I catered
to your feelings. But what I wanted
was to return breaking for breaking, find
catharsis in your ego, like mine, stressed
to its snap. Restraint meant something
remained unfinished, even though I had
technically highlighted all pertinent pain.
I let there be one final hug, a last act
of openness forever followed by closure.
An embarrassment now, though maybe
it burrowed into your body, as haunting
as the lash of a fiercer tongue. Perhaps
it has come to burn like the outbursts lying
dead inside me. Yes, I left you markless,
and yet, can gentleness leave its own impressions?

Gratitude Prayer for Internet Creeping

Thank God for the internet,
both as a source of dates
and a way to suss them out,
though to be honest, I only ever
creep post-positive impression,
follow-up to eye-to-eye, maybe
mouth-to-mouth encounter.
That's possibly unsafe, but I know
how judgey I can be – the way
that written words, so close
to my heart when I deem them
good, can also sound alarms.
So I save investigation
for a few dates in, when I feel
myself becoming more open
than the shell that rolls its way
to that first-date coffee shop.
Thank God for figuring out
his last name before things
go any further because I may
not believe anything I used to
about sex, but enough fragments
of purity rhetoric stick inside me
that, despite myself, I'd be ashamed
if he stayed "Luke, 32, from Bumble."
Thank God that he doesn't
appear to still be married,
that there's no alt-right, incel
Twitter account. That there's
not one of the many things
I don't let myself even imagine,
because if I let myself imagine,
how would I ever get myself
out the door? Already all
the things I've actually known
line up as proofs for the non-

existence of love. So thank God
I am still at a stage where good
might be discovered as much
as bad – for being in the before,
no heartbroken yelp yet, no shoe
lobbed at the back of my closet.

Define the Relationship Prayer

Sometimes prayer is in the palms,
facing either up or out, but today
I pray from other parts
of my body – those longing
to be touched by him again,
but with the added pleasure of labels.

My request is that you'd ward off
my pressing pessimism and bring me back
to the girl I was the summer after college
graduation, chanting, "DTR! DTR!"
at a friend from the backseat of her car.
Those three letters light and golden
to someone who had freshly rediscovered
the concept of agency. All of college
I had waited on divine intervention,
preferably in the form of some gorgeous
evangelical boy with no hang-ups
about making out before marriage,
but then I heard you anew in feminist
theology books and the cries of my own body:
it was time to renounce inaction.

And yet being direct has yet to secure
my happy ending, didn't save me
from that man in seminary who
had no clue what "DTR" meant.
He was also too old to know
who Demi Lovato was, so perhaps
you were already giving me a sign.
In any case, no amount of exacting
talk and pinpointed feelings
prevented me from being gutted
on a park bench when he insisted,
against all my mental transcripts,

that it was only ever friendship.

For once, I want communication to make everything foolproof. I want to be rewarded for saying how I feel, for becoming a more proactive version of myself, for transgressing the roles I thought you wanted women in back when I read the Bible different – as a reason to give in to my fears, as a way to make trepidation pious. I want defining to not automatically mean definitive ending. I want defining to be a step towards an opening-up future. I want him to want me. I want moments of truth that revolve around good truths instead of hard ones. I want to emerge unscathed. I want to emerge more than the opposite of scathed. I want my life to feel so smooth that all doubts left over from past prospects slide right off me, and instead it is just his hands, his hands, hands as my boyfriend's hands.

My first boyfriend

becomes my first boyfriend
when I am twenty-six and eleven-twelfths
years-old.

My first boyfriend is thirty-two
and has a four-year-old daughter.

My first boyfriend does not
kiss me by the lockers.

We kiss on a Sunday morning
in his apartment when I'm wearing
my clerical collar and have to
run off to work.

He does not take me to prom,
but maybe he'll be my plus-one
at a wedding coming up
or I'll be his at a law school formal
in the Spring.

My first boyfriend wonders if it's weird,
that I've never had a boyfriend
while he has a child, custody arrangements.

The answer is yes.

The answer is sometimes I wonder what I missed,
some carefree version of young love.

But wouldn't that have needed a whole other me?

Whether at sixteen or a decade later,
I always would've been scared shitless,
always would've found it incomprehensible:
his desire matching mine.

I Hope That I Will Fall In Love With You, or Understanding Your Feelings When You're In A Relationship for the First Time at 27

Will I know I've reached love
when the sparkling moments
don't need me in the frame,
but just zoom in on you –
you in the middle of the night
when I'm not yet asleep,
softly snoring, you mixing margaritas
at your kitchen counter, the way
you looked so studiously at that
painting in the Springfield museum,
or your admission that you still believe
in soulmates, catching my cynical
heart by surprise?

Last night, in bed, I breathed out the words,
“I want you all the time.”

I don't have a template for how to be with you.

This is my youngest chance at young love.

Prayer for the Healing of a Broken Heart

I want to be vague enough
that I can use this in another
era of breaking, but I also
want assurance that I won't
feel this again: the weight
of hosed-down hopes that
I just can't kill. As it is,
I haven't yet dislodged romance
from the center of my desires,
where it only knows how to prick.

When starts my slow inching towards wholeness?

I'm in one of those sad psalms,
before the turn. I am lonely.
"I am like a sparrow, lonely
on a house-top."

Still, wouldn't the sparrow sing anyway?
Even up there all alone?

Though perhaps that's just a joy
for the passerby who may smile
but never bother to applaud.
To the sparrow, the song
is nothing – a habit,
natural and instinctive enough
that she might call it backdrop or background,
if she calls it anything at all.

May my heart seize around all the nothings
that I sing, unthinking, from my lonely rooftop.
May I hear my song how the eavesdropper hears it,
picking up on notes other than longing.

Prayer for the First Kiss After a Breakup

Focus. Focus. These lips, this chin, these hands.
Do not let me think about that night in Northampton,
slightly buzzed in the park – looking at him, waiting.
And then neither of us waiting. Then walking
hand-in-hand in the dark to someplace darker.
Do not let me think about all the nights after,
on sidewalks, couches, my twin bed,
against walls, kisses frenetic, kisses casual,
kisses hello and goodbye with perfunctory
sweetness – and that last one so careless,
me so unaware. Do not let me think, *how much
time do I have between hope and an ending?*

Prayer for Re-Downloading Dating Apps

What short-lived bliss,
to have a phone free
of Bumble and Hinge and Tinder,
to not have to entertain
small talk with strangers,
but to have just one person
to bore over text
at all hours of the day.
To face the masses
again requires strength
and perhaps unrealistic
hope that compatibility
can be mined through a screen.

So far I've managed
something of substance
only once in four years
of on-and-off swiping,
and of course it dissolved
before it ever made it to love.

Why, God, are you sending me back
into the desert? Why am I made
to wander forty years before
I can get to the Promised Land?
Why, God, do I suspect that I
might be like Moses – putting in
the work to end up dying
just outside fulfillment?
I don't mean to disrespect
the text or the ancient
Israelites by transposing
Exodus onto my minor
plight, Lord; there's others
who deserve to call it their story.
This *is* white girl melodrama,

but fuck, I'm lonely, even if,
in so many ways, you've
made me free. Still, despite
every blessing, I'm here,
about to face the struggle again,
unsure whether the last person to break
my heart made me feel more
or less capable of being loved.

I don't want to be a saint, I want to be happy

is probably not something I'm supposed to think as a priest, but it's ringing through my brain as I remember my ex telling me more than once post-breakup that I'm a good person, as I remember every time someone hasn't wanted me and yet found me, somehow, amazing. The truth is, I don't always want goodness that inspires awe. I want to inspire lust and love, inspire staying instead of leaving. *I don't want to be a saint, I want to be happy.* It's too late to be a virgin martyr anyway. What kind of saint writes poems about her sex life, then wonders if she's allowed to publish them without professional repercussions? *I don't want to be a saint, I want to be happy.* I want to do my best for God and also come home to someone who loves me regardless of how pious I've managed to be. I want to be beautiful, and not just as a ray of God's light in the world. I want to be beautiful as me, a woman standing in front of someone she had hoped could love her, saying, *Change your mind, forget how good I am, remember how good it felt when you touched me.*

What I Really Meant to Say in the Dive Bar Parking Lot

is that I wanted you to be the first to finally love me.

That I'd been watching your hands all night
and measuring how far they were from mine.

You've known what it's like to be loved
since you were sixteen-years-old,
so how could you understand what
it meant to me – to hope
that I'd finally be let inside
a world I've only known through
other people's stories?

It makes sense that I'm the devastated
one, but still, I wish I would've asked
whether it hurt you at all, to know
we couldn't take each other home, to watch
me cry in that parking lot darkness
and find yourself unwilling
or maybe just unable to touch me.

Kissing Christians

A book at the used bookstore
with *Kissing Christians* on its spine
evokes things I know it's not
about – evokes my ex
who kissed me with my clergy
collar on, no hesitation,
even though I offered
to change at work; evokes
couples who don't kiss
until their wedding days;
evokes my twenty-one-year-old
self who would dance with boys,
but would not kiss them,
because a kiss was something
to preserve. *Kissing Christians*
is complicated – at least for those
told it's different than it is
for others, something more
than lips, tongues, hands in hair.

Did Jesus care as I kissed
that stranger on New Year's Eve,
in one of those kisses that was
really nothing more than body
parts and a desire to prove I wanted
someone other than the one I still
foolishly loved? There are books
out there with answers, where Jesus
tsks and shakes his head about how far
I've fallen from days of careful
repression. What if this book is
the book that is different?
And in it, Jesus kisses me
on the cheek with the same flair
I have after two drinks, like I might
kiss one of my best friends, wanting
to see them love, and if not that, live.

Prayer Book for Contemporary Dating: The Index

For having sex at the right time, a now ill-defined concept – third date with a visiting professor who didn't believe me about my inexperience: wrong; third date with a single dad who would turn into my boyfriend: right. For confidence in dating app discernment. For no hiking on first dates. For cute underwear to match all my cute bras. For not getting dumped after actually investing in matching lingerie. For not getting dumped after finally upgrading to a Queen-sized mattress. For an end to dating website ads on Facebook. For more butches to show up when I search for women. For women who won't ask, "Have you had sex with women?" on the first date. For never again being told about the bathroom sex my date had in that very same bar. For not being seated next to a couple from my church. For avoidance of all "moderates" and anyone who would call themselves "apolitical." For an ability to still believe I might run headfirst into love, or else an ability to stop wanting it – an escape from this in-between, a cycle of shifting from cynic to romantic according to the man and moment. For a day when this book gets packed up or donated, and I can no longer imagine what it's like to go to bed alone.

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Rogue Agent Journal: “Saturday Night Communion, Senior Year of College”

Gyroscope Review: “A Kiss Named ‘Yes, I Really Was That Old’”

Rust + Moth: “Blessing of the Profiles”

Night Coffee Lit.: “Gratitude Prayer for Internet Creeping”

Sad Girl Review: “Prayer Book for Contemporary Dating: The Index”

Megan McDermott is a poet and Episcopal priest based in Western Massachusetts. In 2018, she graduated from Yale Divinity School with a Master's of Divinity degree and a certificate from the Institute of Sacred Music, an interdisciplinary program dedicated to religion and the arts. She first studied religion and the arts together as a double major in Creative Writing and Religious Studies at Susquehanna University, in her home state of Pennsylvania. At Susquehanna, she discovered passions for both poetry and preaching.

Her poems have been published in a variety of journals, such as *Rust + Moth*, *Rogue Agent Journal*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Sad Girl Review*, *The Christian Century*, *The Cresset*, *Saint Katherine Review*, *The Windhover*, *LETTERS*, *Rock & Sling: A Journal of Witness*, *Relief: A Journal of Art and Faith*, and *Amethyst Review*. She is also the author of a forthcoming chapbook from Game Over Books and a full-length collection, *Jesus Merch: A Catalog in Poems*, forthcoming from Fernwood Press.