

IRRESISTIBLE CLOSENESS

by Nina de Gramont



Nina de Gramont,
author of
Gossip of the Starlings

EDITOR'S NOTE: Centered on a group of young, privileged, cosseted girls in a private school, *Nina de Gramont's* first novel reveals how all can go awry in adolescence when you're in the thrall

567-8720. This was the phone number of Mary Jane, my best friend from fifth grade through tenth grade.

If it seems remarkable that I can remember a set of digits I haven't dialed in over twenty years, bear in mind that I once dialed it upwards of ten times a day. Long before text messages, IMing, and cell phones, the height of teenage-girl luxury was the private telephone line. When M. J.'s line was busy for longer than I liked, I would press 0 and demand an emergency breakthrough.

"Nina is calling with an emergency breakthrough," the operator would say, clearly aware that the emergency involved little more than impatient adolescent angst. "Will you relinquish the line?"

I can't remember M. J. ever refusing. Rude as the interruptions seem to me now, at the time they were perfectly appro-

of a friend's spell. It's hard not to want to sacrifice everything for those friendships, even your own self. *Nina de Gramont* remembers how she once felt that same way.

priate to our relationship, which was one of intense urgency and unchecked intimacy. We told each other everything.

There was a lot to tell. M. J. had a privileged but turbulent home life that manifested itself in severe anorexia the summer she turned fourteen. Her parents sent her to a sanitarium with tennis courts and a heated pool. She had a private line there, too. Before I visited, three weeks into her stay, I could have written a memoir of the place, from the patients to the therapists to the acres of trimmed, country club green.

When I did finally visit, I brought M. J. a poem I'd written. Ever since she'd returned from a summer in the west, so painfully thin that her clavicle and elbows pressed through her skin like sharpened sticks, I had read everything I could on eating disorders, including *The Golden Cage*

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by Hilde Bruch. Still considered the classic volume on the subject, it seems heavy reading for my then fourteen-year-old self. But I tackled it in the name of love, and borrowed its title for my poem, of which I remember the first line: *This bird had lingered in her golden cage*. Less exactly, I remember the last two lines, when the bird finally sees that she is lovely, and now, at last, may fly.

It's the only love poem I've ever written. Looking back I'm slightly in awe of my lack of self-consciousness as I handed over this romantic ode in plain view of M. J.'s mother. Equally without embarrassment, M. J. read it on the spot, then showed it to her mother and her roommate.

The fancy sanitarium cured the anorexia, but her parents still insisted on weekly sessions with a male psychiatrist whom M. J. called *The Nit*. She refused to say a word to him. Once, she invited me to a session. The Nit's office was full of leather and embroidered fabric. Everything looked so expensive, so clean, that I thought he must be a very good psychiatrist.

Have I mentioned that M. J. was beautiful? Her skin was clear and perfect, her long hair lustrous and naturally blond. When *The Nit* asked her questions, she chortled back at him, a sexy rebuke. She would not give him an inch, would not accept his—or her parents'—help.

I don't think it occurred to me at the time: the irony of M. J.'s refusing to speak to her psychiatrist, with me—the receptacle for endless confessions—sitting right beside her. If only he had left the room and pressed an

ear to the door, *The Nit* would have obtained all the information he needed and more.

At the end of that year I transferred to a different school. The frequency of our phone calls rose, and then tapered off. One summer evening between high school and college, we had a violent argument in her car, sitting in the parking lot of a deserted Carvel. We screamed at each other and then made up, sobbing in each other's arms. Though in the years we knew each other M. J. and I never kissed—and, I think, never wanted to—the relationship was as intense and turbulent as I've had with any man.

When I wrote *Gossip of the Starlings*, I wanted to capture a particular kind of friendship that exists between teenage girls. Lines between two people blur, along with all logic, and self-preservation is lost in favor of preserving the relationship. Privacy is nonexistent: every thought, every event, every feeling is shared. Like M. J. and me, the girls in *Gossip of the Starlings* know each other too well. Catherine is able to narrate Skye's and Susannah's lives as vividly and immediately as her own.

Unhealthy though it may be, there's an unbearable innocence to this kind of connection, and an undeniable romance. When I think of M. J. now, I don't miss our melodramatic intimacy. But I loved re-creating it in Catherine and Skye—acknowledging the courage it takes to share innermost and still developing selves so completely. Because as Catherine discovers the short distance between eyewitness and accomplice, she learns that the sometimes lethal danger in closeness can be as terrifying as it is irresistible. ■

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