

Long Nights - Chapter 1

I was foolish enough to buy one of those self-help books, the ones for divorcées that promise to turn post-marital depression into inspired optimism. It's thick, Oxford English Dictionary thick, with each chapter covering a different problem that women are expected to need help with at this delicate time in their lives. That would be useful if they didn't all fall into one of two categories: problems I don't have, or problems I'd been blissfully unaware of until the book pointed them out to me.

Let's start with the ones I don't have. The very first chapter is about the age-old tradition of dividing up friends after a split. The thing is, at forty years old, after seventeen years of marriage, no one in our social circle remembers who's *my friend* or *his friend*. Like us, they coupled up and exchanged their individuality for life as a pair long ago.

Now, none of them will have anything to do with singles, especially the recently separated ones. The last thing any "happily married" person wants their spouse to see is someone potentially thriving on their own, so instead of taking sides between us, they've united against us. I'm not facing some reduction in the size of my friend group. I'm experiencing the total loss of it.

The book doesn't even acknowledge that as a possibility. I mean, what kind of loser doesn't have *any* friends? Just me, apparently.

As for the other problems I don't have, I'll list them out: kids, pets, assets to divide up. His car is a lease and mine is so old even I don't really want it. We were renters through our entire marriage and didn't own a single piece of furniture that was worth paying to move. Basically, we lived our lives like we might have to run out at any moment. It worked in our favor at the end, at least.

The other half of the book, those struggles that I hadn't figured out on my own, are worse. The longest chapter in the entire volume is about dating again. When I read the first subsection outlining which apps to use, I knew I was in trouble.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not a dinosaur. I spend a great deal of time online, but I'm not the kind of person who uses it to connect to people. I don't have social media; I have accounts on social media sites that I use to stalk people who I'm worried might be living better lives than mine... now to include my ex. Don't say it. I already know.

Then it's got all kinds of suggestions about how to act on a first date. How to avoid talking about your failed marriage. How to not sound bitter about men in general. Stay positive and inoffensive. Avoid topics like religion and politics. That's right. Keep those important things a secret until you've invested enough time in the relationship that you can rationalize making a bad thing work just to avoid confronting your fear of dying alone.

Luckily, there is a handy list of acceptable conversation starters to get things going on the right foot, cliché things like movies and books. The problem is I've read maybe four novels in the last decade, and while I have watched more movies than I care to admit after confessing I'm practically a stranger to the written word, I've never gotten the hang of talking about them. I don't see subtext or metaphor. Analyzing the arc of characters is beyond me. In all honesty, I usually find out thirty seconds into any attempted conversation that I can't even remember their names when put on the spot. Best case scenario, I can tell you if I liked a movie or not. There will be no intelligent explanation of why.

After that, in no particular order, there's the suddenly-daunting issues of re-discovering my single identity, adjusting to living alone, and, of course, dieting, because once again my value as a woman is going to be determined by my body mass index. I don't care what's trendy, I'm not drinking a kale smoothie. If we're not in an enlightened age that values intelligence and maturity, I'll pretend until the rest of the world catches up with me.

Every day when I get home from work now, I pick that book up, scan through the big long list of challenges, realize the solutions the author gives don't fit me, and immediately put it down. You're probably thinking that means the thing isn't helping and I should find a new source of wisdom, but you'd be wrong.

Immediately after my divorce, I would lay awake at night. Every milestone moment of my marriage played out in my head. The good ones made me worry that I didn't fight hard enough to fix the relationship, that I threw away something that could have been perfect if we had just worked on it. The bad memories, which should do the opposite, just made me feel worthless, like I deserve the mess it all turned into because I'm not good enough. I asked for too much. I didn't give as much as I took.

None of that is true, I know. I can objectively look back and accept that we're no longer meant to be together. Divorce was the right decision. I made mistakes, yes. They don't make me unloveable.

But no matter how hard the rational side of my brain tries to convince me it's true, I don't feel it. When I look in the mirror, I do not see the bright intelligent woman I was supposed to be. I am alone. I am lonely. And I have no idea what the hell it is I'm supposed to be doing with my life right now.

Sorry. That's where that thick tome of a self-help book comes in. Each time I skim the pages, or look at it, or just consider all of those exciting new problems waiting for me between the covers, I get incredibly tired. The sheer weight of all this involuntary change crushes me beneath it until I have no will left to do anything but surrender and let myself be dragged into a dreamless slumber that I never want to wake from.

Sleep, while not productive and by all accounts the exact opposite of the thing that is supposed to snap a person out of their downward spiral of hopelessness, is not a place where I

experience joy, but it is a place where I don't experience pain. It quiets the never-ending movie of the last seventeen years of my life.

On a good day, when I wake up, I can't tell the difference between my newly-divorced jaded bitterness and my normal everything-is-fine pre-coffee crankiness. So imagine my surprise when instead of going to bed and finding myself instantly carried to the morning, one day closer to numbness and acceptance of my circumstances, I open my eyes to find myself at school.

I say school, but it's not my school. It does share some things in common with what I can remember of it, though. I'm in a classroom with rows of those little wooden seats, the ones with the writing surface attached, all lined up in front of a chalkboard. Do they even use chalkboards anymore?

At the front of the room, seated at what should be the teacher's desk, is a heavy-set man with bushy eyebrows and a long beard. He might look like an extra in some movie scene set in a biker bar, except that he's wearing a short-sleeved button down shirt with a plaid pattern that no self-respecting tough guy would wear out of the house. He stares down at his phone, completely disinterested in my arrival.

To my right are a few more people, some of them younger than me, but none the right age to be using this classroom for its manufacturer's intended purpose. A thirty-something man bites his nails. Two women in their twenties stare blankly in different directions while a man in his fifties openly sobs.

I know I'm dreaming at this point, and I very much don't want to do the right thing, but my conscience compels me anyway. "Are you okay?" I ask the older man, because my life is so together I can absolutely lend emotional support to a stranger with problems big enough to warrant crying in public. "Do you need help?" I add, tuning my voice to its peak level of politeness and removing every hint of judgement.

He doesn't even acknowledge my question. Part of me is grateful for that, but the rest can't relax until I've made at least one more attempt at a louder volume to get his attention. "Sir. Sir?"

"He can't see you. None of them can." The voice comes from my left. It's familiar in a way that makes me freeze.

I don't turn to look. I know I'm not going to like what I see when I do. My gaze stays fixed on the back of the sobbing man's head. "Why not?"

"They're not really here."

Of course. I can see them and hear them. They appear just as solid as I do, yet they're not really here. "But I am?"

"You are."

An undeserved surge of annoyance comes up from somewhere deep inside me. I don't like riddles or half-truths or cryptic non-answers designed to heighten suspense. "And where is here?"

"Here is just here. This classroom. The younger woman is in line at the DMV. The other one is stuck in traffic. That guy is in the waiting room at the doctor's office. The old man is in prison."

"And the classroom is real but those other places aren't?"

"Yes. Well, actually, no. But the classroom is the real dream. Their subconscious minds are superimposing their own dreams on top of this one. They only know they're trapped. They... interpret it differently."

"And I'm not doing that?"

"Correct."

"Why not?"

"You see this place as it really is because... well, I don't know, really." I can hear him shrug. The telltale rustle of fabric as his shoulders lift is a sound I'm all too accustomed to. "Maybe you're special, Emily."

I don't know if it's my level of confusion reaching a breaking point or his use of my name, but one or the other causes me to turn without thinking. When I meet his eyes I feel myself deflate. "Why are *you* here?" I ask my boss.

Maybe I misled you. You probably thought it was my ex, right? That would be bad. It would be worse than seeing my boss, for sure. I don't want to dream about either of them, but more than both, I don't want to dream about anything that has to do with work.

It's not because I hate my job. The opposite is true. Just like sleep quiets the noise in my brain, so does going to work. When I'm there, I go into this mode where I'm practically a different person. I'm confident. I'm respected. Nobody treats me like I'm half of an equation that won't balance.

I'm not saying the lingering feelings of my collapsing personal life haven't crept in from time to time, but those moments are fleeting.

I even like my boss. He listens to me and compliments me. Not in a creepy way, in an I-value-your-contributions-and-here's-specifically-why kind of way. When he first took over the position, it caught me off guard. I would do something worthy of praise and he would suddenly

and inexplicably praise me for it. That's not something I was used to. My last supervisor trained me on a subsistence level of positive feedback. Her motto was *Always leave them wanting more*. Or, more succinctly, *always leave them wanting*.

On the day the divorce papers were served, I broke down crying in my office. I wasn't loud or out of control. I just sobbed quietly at my desk. By random chance, he walked in and saw me. He didn't rush to my side or try to hug me. He asked if I needed anything and when I squeaked no, he backed out and closed the door gently behind him so no one else would come in after.

When I returned to my senses and went to his office to apologize he just told me it was okay. The next words out of his mouth were some work thing that I don't even remember, but it dragged me out of my head. That's exactly what I needed. He never brought it up again.

And now he's in my dream. It shouldn't be a bad thing, but it is. It is because I don't have good dreams. I have nightmares or nothing.

"Is this going to be that kind of dream?"

His eyebrows raise. "What does that mean?" There's a playful lilt to his voice which matches the smile forming on his lips.

"Not a sex dream," I blurt out. "A work dream."

"It's not a work dream, either." His head turns toward the group to my right and he looks from one to the next as if there is something to be deciphered from the way they're acting. "It's a punishment."

"What did I do to earn that?"

This time I see the shrug. "I didn't say you deserve a punishment. I said you being here is a punishment." His eyes move slowly to meet mine. "This is a hex. Someone put a curse on you."