

Light Sleeper

By

Cassandra Dunn

I am a light sleeper. It's not something anyone wants to be, except maybe a night guard or a soldier in a foxhole. I wish there was some way to train myself to sleep harder, the way my mother does, so dead to the world that even a queasy child shaking her in the night, looking for comfort, can't wake her. A gust of wind can wake me, the rustle of my own sheets as I roll in my sleep, the thin creak of a floorboard anywhere in the house. Devin knows I'm a light sleeper. He sees it in my puffy eyes most mornings, asks what it was this time.

“Cat. Meowing at 3am.”

He nods, brushes his teeth, inspects his pores in the smear of clarity on an otherwise foggy mirror. I watch him study himself, wondering what he sees there.

The amazing thing is not how full of crap he is, sneaking around in the night, sending her texts, calling her from the garage, emailing unaware that the blue glow of his monitor lights up the entire house, that I can see this luminosity under our bedroom door as I lie awake, wondering why he isn't in bed at 3am. The amazing thing is that he thinks he's getting away with it.

I mean, he is getting away with it, because here I stand, ten inches away from him, torn between wanting to hug him and cut him with the razor he holds loosely in his left hand. But I'm fairly certain, as his eyes catch mine in the mirror and he flashes me

his sleepy toothpaste-foamy smile, that he thinks I don't know. How he can doubt this is a great source of distraction to me. He knows fully well that I'm up half the night, teases me for it, keeps a running list of offenders.

"Paper boy, or guy down the street with the motorcycle?" he asks, as he rolls out of bed the next morning. He rotates from his back to his side, knees tucked, dropping to the floor in a crouch like he's in an action movie, ducking for cover. I glance at the top of his close-cropped head, barely visible above the slope of our mattress, and think he should be ducking. Or that I, at least, should be firing.

"Neither. Some noise inside the house."

He jumps to standing, stretching, feigning the stiffness of a person who has been asleep recently, and not in the adjoining master bathroom with his cell phone, which, incidentally, makes a whooshing sound whenever he sends her a message. One that I can hear all twelve feet away, even through the closed door.

"Bummer. Maybe you can nap later."

I smile, more of a grimace than a grin, and throw a pillow at him. He dodges it with little effort, and heads for the shower. He knows I have work, and after that the HOA meeting that he agreed to attend and then flaked on, offering me up as consolation, setting me up with an unwanted activity for the evening, and freeing him to do whatever it is he does when I'm not around.

I take out my clothes for the day, business casual, appropriate for work and comfortable enough for a full day and night of bullshit meetings. I open the velvet box on top of the dresser, the weighty diamond searching out a stream of light, throwing back brilliance. It takes my breath away. Not just the stunning beauty of the two-karat ring, or

the surprise that he wants to marry me, but the whole promised package: marriage, kids, house, new car, vacation condo, intact family that has welcomed me as one of their own. Security.

So, before I throw all of this away, I need to be sure. And this morning, as I slide into the shower behind him, take over the scalding stream, let him shampoo my hair, I don't know for certain that there's another woman. Except that there has to be. I'm not an idiot. Just another pathetic romantic, raised on Hollywood movies and love ballads and Valentine's Day assurances, looking for the perfect guy, fooling myself into believing there's any such thing.

We all have our secrets. I rinse my hair, facing him, wondering if he would've proposed if he'd known that I am in love with his best friend. Have been for years, since before Devin and I even dated. Unrequited love always burns strongest. Mark remains my standard for perfection: the handsome open-hearted genius, stunningly ego-free, who gives me arrhythmia every time he casually smiles at me. It is only mildly painful to see him regularly, to have him squeeze my shoulder whenever he stops by, picking up to-do lists, honoring his duties as Devin's best man. I've done my best to submerge my feelings, but on occasion they still rise to the surface, pieces of the iceberg, lingering until they melt away, when I am fully Devin's again.

The difference, I tell myself, is that my secrets are in the past. A schoolgirl crush is nothing. I lost hope of Mark loving me long ago. He clearly prefers his life of casual romances, endless hobbies, heavy workloads. He sees nothing in me, never has.

Devin's secrets are not in the past. They are living in his coolly modern house with us, echoing across the hardwood floors at night, cascading down the grey satin walls, oozing all over the black and chrome fixtures.

He lies, of that much I'm certain. He has no problem looking me in the eye, smiling his perfect smile (son of a dentist that he is), and saying he came to bed at midnight, slept like a rock, woke just moments before me. Even as I give him my list of wakeful hours: up at midnight (leaky toilet tank running), two (cat knocking over something metallic), three (distant siren), five (no idea), and know that on only one of those occasions was there a warm body beside me. But I don't tell him this, and he doesn't comment. We keep his secret together.

It occurs to me, as I yawn through the HOA meeting, where angry homeowners bicker over the allowance of political signs on lawns, that Mark would likely know what is going on. I send him a quick text under the table.

Any idea why Dev's acting strange? He's stopped sleeping.

Within seconds Mark replies.

Aren't you supposed to be in an HOA meeting? Pay attention!

The fact that he knows this haunts me for the rest of the night. Is he keeping track of my whereabouts, because he shares my feelings? Or is Devin simply keeping him in the loop, using him for cover on occasion?

I return home, where Devin is busy on his laptop, and settle on the couch. Devin joins me for a few minutes of his favorite show, then disappears. I find him back in front of his computer, cell phone on his lap. He looks up, toward me, through me, but not at me, and smiles.

“Some crisis brewing at work. Might have to stay late tomorrow night,” he says.

I nod, glance at his monitor, at the endless string of email messages that reveal nothing, and head to bed.

I wake at two, surprised to find Devin beside me. I slide out of bed in one swift motion, the kind that doesn't arouse suspicion, the kind that says I need to pee, quickly. Sneakiness is telltale. I use the bathroom then head to the kitchen, fill a glass with water, and hold it beneath the window until it captures the moon perfectly on its shimmery surface. I hear the chime of a message, seek out Devin's phone, hidden in the top drawer of his desk.

I know that Devin will know I've seen this message. Know that will mean crossing some line, from polite respect of each other's secrets to violent wrenching of them free. Know there will be no undoing this violation of trust. I unlock his phone.

I hate this empty bed. Can't wait for tomorrow. Miss you.

The message is from Mark. My Mark. Devin's Mark. Good old commitment-shy Mark. The best secret-keeper of us all.