

# HOW TO

“By turns insightful,  
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laugh-out-loud funny,  
*How to Sleep at  
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# SLEEP



# AT NIGHT



A NOVEL

# ELIZABETH HARRIS

**HOW  
TO  
SLEEP  
AT  
NIGHT**

A NOVEL

**ELIZABETH HARRIS**

*wm*

WILLIAM MORROW

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# Dedication

*For Kelly*

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# 1

Ethan sat down next to his husband at their dining room table, took his hand, and then told him something terrible.

“Gabe,” he said, “I want to run for Congress.”

“That’s great, angel,” Gabe replied. He was grading a stack of tenth-grade history papers, and he wasn’t sure how seriously to take this.

Ethan had been interested in politics since they met, back when they were still routinely carded buying alcohol. Ethan was twenty-four at the time, working in the office of the New York State attorney general, a vicious thug from a dynastic Democratic family. Gabe was a twenty-one-year-old college student, and he fully believed that Ethan could become president of the United States one day, the way he believed the most beautiful theater major at his small liberal arts school would eventually win an Oscar. But life marched along. Ethan went to law school. They got married. They had a kid.

“There’s an open seat,” Ethan continued, his gaze steady. “And I had a call today with a political consultant.”

Oh. Maybe this was serious. Gabe could feel a ribbon of panic rising in the back of his throat.

“Okay,” Gabe said, drumming his thumb against the table.

“The guy who’s held the seat for twenty-eight years is retiring,” Ethan said. “It’s a little south of us, but you don’t have to live in the district to run for Congress, only in the state.”

Gabe tried to breathe while counting to ten.

“The candidates who are going to run hold useless local offices, and most people in the district have never heard of them. So if I come in with a bunch of advertising, really flood the zone, it sounds like I’ve got a shot.”

Twenty. Maybe he should count to twenty.

“It’s a reliably Republican district,” Ethan said, standing up from his chair to pace the room. “And it’s going to stay that way.”

There it was.

Ethan had always been to Gabe’s right politically, and twenty years ago, when they started dating, that was fine. Gabe was so liberal there wasn’t much room on his left anyway. And even when they disagreed in theory, they still rooted for the same team: They both voted for Democrats. Ethan *worked* for a Democrat.

But over time, Ethan’s views had shifted. Slowly at first, like a shadow tilting in the afternoon sun. As he became more conservative, the overlapping ground between them narrowed. Today, there was almost nothing left.

“And I’d be an interesting story,” Ethan continued, striding from one end of their dining room to the other. He was six foot four, and his long legs carried him across the space in just a few quick steps. “At least a couple of news outlets will be curious about a gay Republican who used to be a Democrat. It’s the future of the conservative movement, with Black conservatives and gay conservatives and immigrant conservatives. This is what the Republican Party should be!” He was gesticulating now with his long fingers spread wide. Was he giving a stump speech in their dining room?

Ethan noticed that Gabe wasn’t speaking.

“Honey?” Ethan sat back down at the table. “What do you think?”

Gabe felt like he was trying to breathe into a plastic bag. “I’m—I’m not sure,” he said slowly.

“Look, I won’t do this if you don’t want me to,” Ethan said firmly. “It’s not just my life, I recognize that. It’s also going to put you in the spotlight.”

Gabe gave him a smile, the muscles of his face drawn more tightly than he would have liked.

“Do you have any questions?” Ethan asked. “What can I tell you about how this would work?”

Gabe’s mind was frozen. He’d lost the ability to process language.

“Think about it. I know it’s a lot to absorb.” Ethan stood up and kissed the top of Gabe’s head. “I’m going to go do a little work.” He disappeared into the kitchen, where Gabe heard him putting water in the kettle, readying mugs for tea.

Gabe sat at their dining room table, still and silent, panicking. He took off his glasses to polish away a smudge with his shirt, and rubbed until one of the lenses popped out in his hand.

## 2

Nicole was standing in her kitchen making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for her kids. One required crunchy peanut butter and the other smooth, one liked orange marmalade and the other raspberry jam. Not even the bread was the same. She was battling with the lid of the crunchy jar when she heard a familiar voice coming from the television.

“The governor did say that, but I haven’t found any record of it happening,” said the woman on TV. “He’s a real challenge to cover.”

Nicole startled and felt the jar slip from her hand. It dropped onto the cold tile of her kitchen floor, cracking the foundation of her daughter’s lunch into shards of glass suspended in goo.

She took the lonely top of the peanut butter jar with her into the next room, stepping carefully over her mess with bare feet. She couldn’t possibly recognize that voice after so long, she thought. It had easily been fifteen years.

But she did. Nicole arrived in front of the television to find Kate Keller staring back at her from the Global Satellite News Network, opposite a morning anchor with his serious face on. Kate Keller. Her hair was different, shorter now, hitting just below her chin, and the intervening years had left her with a more angular face, sharper cheekbones. But it was her, beaming into Nicole’s living room, fucking up her morning.

“What was that?” Austin asked as he trotted down the stairs, fastening the final buttons on his shirt. She pulled her eyes away from the TV and tried to make them focus on her husband. What had he just said?

He tried again: “Hey. You okay?”

“What? Yeah. I broke one of those glass jars of peanut butter,” she said. She looked down and saw that she’d trailed dribbles of oil in from the kitchen.

“Why don’t you just buy Jif?” He slid past her to rejoin the mug of coffee he’d left in the living room. He took a sip and dropped onto the couch to put on his leather oxfords.

What do I do? Nicole thought. What would I normally do? Normally she would rush back to the kitchen before the kids tracked peanut butter all over the house. But normally a woman she’d repeatedly seen naked wasn’t on TV in her living room.

Austin looked at Kate Keller over his coffee mug and Nicole felt herself stop breathing. Then he found a spot on his khakis and started scratching at it with his fingernail.

“He repeats misinformation so many times that people start believing it,” Kate told Nicole’s husband as the morning anchor nodded along. “We can’t be a conduit for that.”

The last time Nicole saw Kate, they had staggered through a near silent breakfast, hangovers blazing, at a diner on Ninth Avenue in Manhattan. It was the kind of place that was once everywhere in New York City, with pleather booths and six-page menus, where the bacon was almost liquid with grease and the coffee tasted faintly of a house fire.

Nicole and Kate had known one another for years at that point, and they had clawed each other’s clothes off the night before. But over eggs and toast that morning, as conversations ricocheted fast and loud around them, they could think of nothing to say. They chewed mostly in silence, dropping occasional observations about their breakfast or the topography of their headaches. They couldn’t find a rhythm, and maybe were too tired to really try. Nicole was relieved when the check materialized before they’d finished their food.

Outside on the street, they hovered opposite one another awkwardly before Nicole moved in for a quick kiss, touching their lips lifelessly together. She pulled back again before Kate could reciprocate. They said they’d talk soon, which they didn’t, and turned away.

“We’re forced to become filters in a way a lot of journalists really aren’t comfortable doing,” Kate said from the TV screen. “It scares us to say that someone is lying.”

### 3

**K**ate always dreaded doing TV. She was afraid her nerves would make her slow on her feet, or that she'd misspeak in the moment and step in some shitstorm that would drag her for days on social media. She was a print reporter. She liked that her thoughts had to sit for a minute before they went out into the world. And of all things, talking off the cuff about politics was the worst. Shitstorms aplenty even when you chose your words with precision and a dictionary.

"We'll be right back," the handsome anchor said, peering intently into the camera. He paused, looking purposeful for a few silent moments, then his veil of televised professionalism abruptly fell away. His brow unfurled, his posture loosened, and as he complained to a producer about a new teleprompter he disliked, Kate heard the cadence of his voice become more natural, no longer hitting periodic words with excessive emphasis. He was like some sort of Pinocchio marionette in an expensive blue suit becoming a real boy.

"Thanks, Patrick," Kate said, unpinning her microphone. A producer popped up behind her and unwound a cord from inside her jacket.

"You going to the newsroom today?" he asked, staring at his phone.

She watched him for a second or two, wondering if he'd look up at her. He didn't.

"Going there now," she replied. She gave a quick smile and a "thanks" to the producer who untrussed her.

"That was a good story on the front page today about Brett Cooper," Patrick said.

Kate had no idea what story he was talking about. She hadn't written it, so she hadn't read it. Political reporters were expected to live and breathe the details of voter sentiments and poll numbers, of who was up, who was down,

and who was about to be indicted. She should have ingested as much coverage as possible from all her main competitors by the time she finished her instant oatmeal that morning, sucking it down while hunched over her kitchen counter. She played a word scramble game on her phone instead. Kate hadn't even read her own newspaper.

She could guess what the Brett Cooper story said anyway. He was running for reelection as the Republican governor of Georgia and as the telegenic brand ambassador for the hard right. He gave a great speech and somehow looked athletic and vigorous in a suit, his dark blond hair gelled into submission, but the man had gained a national following by whittling away at the edges of American democracy. Kate had just been talking about him on the air, his enthusiasm for banning books and his disdain for things like facts. He was among the most popular politicians in the country, certainly the most discussed, and he was clearly readying himself to run for president in the next election.

"Yeah, great story," Kate said of the article she hadn't seen. She rose from behind the blue lacquered anchor desk, ready to make her escape. "These are crazy times. Fifteen years ago, nobody would have believed this."

"Keeps us in a job, though," Patrick said with a grin. "Am I right?"

He was. Lunatic behavior made for better stories. And Kate was sick of it. It made her want to toss her expensive, work-issued laptop out her living room window and watch it shatter against the sidewalk.

**K**ate stepped off the elevator and swiped her ID badge at the bulletproof glass doors, which relinquished a muffled "pop" as they unlocked. She walked through the *Herald Ledger* newsroom, a big open rectangle of space. Newsrooms were designed this way so different departments could be within shouting distance if they needed to collaborate on news, a comfortable approach for what had traditionally been a business of yellors.

Kate powered past the Business Desk, where reporters tended to look more put together than their compatriots, pulling on the occasional suit for meetings with Wall Street types. She hung a left at the Metro Desk, where many of the youngest reporters could be found, sitting straight and eager in their mesh swivel chairs, along with a clutch of veterans who had spent their adult lives in that department, obsessed by New York or preferring a life with minimal travel. She continued past the International Desk, where there were no reporters because they were all based overseas. Editors in that corner vibrated with anxiety and caffeine.

She reached her desk, which had an unobstructed view of a multistory parking garage, and dropped her jacket over the wall of her cubicle. There

were few political reporters in the newsroom at any given time because the beat generally required lots of travel or a station in DC. But the editors were always there. They became fixtures, like water fountains or spiky office plants.

The LED lights overhead exposed fingerprints and oily streaks on her laptop screen, but she made no move to clean it, instead taking out her phone while the computer booted up. She scrolled through her emails, which were mostly PR pitches (“Are remote Fridays effective against teacher burnout?”) and blasts from political candidates taking gleeful shots at their rivals (“Don’t let Kickback Kathy get to Congress!”). Then she checked Instagram. She often picked up followers when she did a national TV show, but she was sure to disappoint them. Kate rarely posted anything, mainly using the app to watch cooking videos, though she hardly ever cooked herself. It was difficult to make an elaborate meal for one person, so she ate a lot of runny scrambled eggs, sourdough toast, and raw vegetables straight out of a colander.

She had eleven new followers today. There was a dermatologist named Dr. Mitch, whose teeth were white like halogen bulbs shining from his face, a woman whose profile description said she was “here for the English Bulldog content,” which made the follow a peculiar choice, and—wait.

Her third follower was “Nicole H.” She had curly hair, a thick upper lip, and a wide smile. The account was private, but the profile picture, small as it was, looked like it could be Nicole Harmon. Kate brought the phone within inches of her face and examined the tiny photo.

It was her.

God, she had been in love with that woman. Nicole had been fearless, intimidated by no one, certain she was a match for any situation. She was always the first to dance at a party, always trying to make a regular day into an event. In college, where everyone was in love with Nicole, people used to say she had *Pretty Woman* hair. The red came out of a bottle, but she did have big curls riding down her back that looked like they belonged on a young Julia Roberts.

Kate and Nicole dated for a while in their early twenties, and almost immediately, Kate saw a future for them together. In her eyes, Nicole was the sexiest, the funniest, the smartest, someone with whom she could build a whole life. Except she treated Kate like garbage. Why they hadn’t worked, why Nicole hadn’t given them a real try, was an excruciating puzzle box Kate could never solve. For years, she’d been furious about their dynamic, which cast her in the role of the besotted, accepting scraps of attention in secret. She blamed herself as much as she blamed Nicole. Now, she recognized that

they had both been young and they didn't know what the hell they were doing. There had been something powerful between them, even if it was kind of shitty, too.

Nicole had never had much of a presence on social media, as far as Kate could tell, and she stopped updating her profiles altogether around the time she left New York and moved to Louisville, Kentucky. Her Facebook picture was of her in a red dress and sunglasses on the roof of what looked like the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was probably taken fifteen years ago. Kate couldn't imagine leaving New York City for Louisville, which she knew made her sort of an asshole. She understood that it was a lot more affordable, and that it was what people described as a "manageable" city, which Kate took to mean it was an easy place to have a car. But Nicole's family lived in Cincinnati, which was just a few hours away, and New York had not gone for her as she'd planned.

After Nicole left, her online trail ran dry pretty quickly. Kate had never been able to figure out what she did professionally, but she did find Nicole's husband, Austin Moore. He worked at a pharmaceutical company, had gone to high school and college in Lexington, and had an MBA from a major university in Pittsburgh. He was a lot older than Nicole, and was either extremely photogenic or lamentably handsome.

One time, Kate had fallen down a bit of a rabbit hole, putting her reporting skills to unwholesome use. She figured out where they lived and how much they paid for their four-bedroom, three-thousand-square-foot house (\$495,000!). But that was years ago, probably around the time Kate and her now ex-wife, Shirin, were planning their wedding, and it made her feel pathetic. She hadn't done it since.

But no time like the present! "Nicole Harmon," she googled on her laptop. Not much came up: A bio from when Nicole was getting her master's in art history at Columbia. An obituary for her grandmother, dead at age ninety-seven, that listed Nicole as a survivor. And there were some useless hits on "ourphonebook.com," which offered the false promise of information in exchange for a real credit card number. That was about it.

So Kate switched to the husband. He was still at the same company, Paxol Pharmaceuticals, according to the internet. He had a fancy title now, senior vice president of national corporate affairs, and worked in—Halifax, New Jersey.

She looked them up in Louisville public records, found their address, and searched for the house. It sold more than a year ago for \$670,000.

They had moved back.



She picked up her phone and studied the bio of her new Instagram follower. “Nicole H. Don’t post pictures of your dinner.” Kate took a screenshot and texted it to her brother, Ethan, and his husband, Gabe. The four of them had spent a couple of late nights together in their twenties, drinking too much in Williamsburg bars. That was during a brief flash of time when things between Kate and Nicole felt simple and clear.

“Recognize my new follower?” she texted them. “I’ll give you a hint: she was not your favorite.”

It was Gabe who texted back first.

**GABE:** Is that Nicole Harmon?? Wow—it’s been 100 years and I still hate her!  
Block her! Block her!

Kate smiled, and followed her back instead.

**G**abe pawed through his backpack looking for ibuprofen. It felt like there was a small animal trapped in his head, trying to burrow its way out through his left temple. He found the bottle buried in his bag, next to a pair of tiny red socks and a collection of dusty pebbles his daughter must have stored there for later use. He put three pills in his mouth and swallowed them without water.

He was in the teachers' lounge waiting to make copies, a room that filled his nose with the astringent sourness of cheap coffee. The Xerox in the main office was usually broken, so there was often a line to use this machine. Never in the mood to stand around and wait, Gabe would put off his photocopying until the last possible moment, like the one in which he found himself that morning. He needed packets with readings and essay questions on World War II for sixty-seven students. He was sixty-six copies short. A math teacher was running off worksheets in front of him, which allowed Gabe time to focus on his fretting.

Gabe's parents loved Ethan, but it had taken them years to get over the fact that he wasn't Jewish—and they were barely observant. Their real religion was the Democratic Party. They lived in Bennett, Long Island, a purple town with just a hint more blue to it than red, kind of like a bruise, and they were proud of the fact that unlike progressives in New York City, their votes actually mattered. Gabe had grown up in that town, around liberals and conservatives, but his parents had retreated into a more clearly defined bubble as they'd grown older, no longer forced through their children or their jobs to spend time with people they disagreed with.

After a few strained conversations about voter ID laws, they stopped asking Ethan about his preferred candidates. They were aware he was conservative, but they settled into the delusion that he still supported

Democrats when it was time to cast his ballot, or at least in elections that mattered. Ethan had been kind enough to allow them their fantasy. Learning he'd become a Republican would be much worse than knowing he was nominally Protestant.

The math teacher finished her copies and Gabe stepped up to make his packets.

"Morning!" a voice boomed behind him. Michael Lyman, the AP Government teacher, materialized at his side.

"Hi, Michael," Gabe said.

"Making a lot of copies?"

"Yeah, sorry. It's going to be a couple minutes."

"No problem," Lyman said, leaning against the cinder block wall to wait.

"Hey, how old is your daughter now?"

"She's five. How far along is your wife?"

"Thirty-seven weeks! She could go any day. I've done my research, read all the important parenting books, but man, I've barely held a baby before! I don't know what the hell I'm going to be doing."

"You'll figure it out," Gabe told him. Lyman was among the most condescending people on the planet and Gabe found it momentarily charming that he'd admitted ignorance on any subject. "Babies have very few needs at the beginning. They eat, they sleep, they poop. You'll get a handle on that, and then they'll grow new tricks. But it happens slowly, so you'll be fine. More tired than you've ever been, but fine."

Lyman chuckled approvingly. "I'm sure you're right."

The printer made a crunching sound, and its rumbles and whirls abruptly stopped. Gabe got down on one knee to try to find the problem.

"It's so crazy," Lyman said. "I can't believe they're going to let me walk out of the hospital with an infant."

"It's crazier than you can imagine," Gabe replied into the bowels of the printer. He found a crumpled piece of paper sandwiched between some rollers and yanked it out.

"I hate this machine," Lyman said. "You ever think about having another kid?"

"Not really."

"It's got to be expensive for you. Surrogates and all that."

Gabe nodded.

"I want two kids," Lyman continued. "My wife wants three or four, but no way. No idea how we'd afford that."

"Kids aren't cheap," Gabe said, rising from the floor as the machine spun back to life.

“How’d you guys do it?” Lyman asked with blank curiosity. “Did you have a surrogate or did you adopt?”

Gabe blinked at him as he wondered: What the hell is wrong with people?

The first time Gabe got a question like this, he had just told his assistant principal he was going to be a father and would need to take paternity leave. “Do you know the genetic mother?” she wondered, in a tone like she was asking if they’d selected a stroller. He was so shocked by the question that he answered in elaborate detail. (We had an egg donor, he told her, who we interviewed but don’t keep in regular touch with, and a surrogate who we talk to all the time. Also, the baby is due in May so I’ll need help finishing out the school year.) Once he parted with that information, he felt like a curiosity. Like he needed a shower.

When Chloe was a baby, those questions came every few months. But as she grew into a kid, people thought less about her gestation. Once in a while, though, when Gabe was trapped at the copy machine, for example, someone would ask. Gabe’s favorite response was a reciprocal question, which he considered to be an inelegant but necessary fuck you. “How about you?” he’d ask those strangers. “Did you do IVF?”

The embarrassment wafted over his targets in waves, first at being asked such a rude and personal question, then when they realized they had done the same.

It did backfire on occasion, like the time he was trailed around a party for two hours by a woman who wouldn’t stop apologizing. She reappeared by his side at periodic intervals to beg forgiveness, rehashing their exchange in front of whoever Gabe was speaking to at that moment. He didn’t want the equivalent to happen at school, where he was trapped with Lyman not for an evening, but for years. It was best to remove himself from the situation before he said something he’d come to regret.

“I didn’t realize how late it was.” Gabe snatched a stack of copies off the machine. It wasn’t all of them, but it was enough for his next class. “I’ve got to get going. I’ve got a meeting with a student,” he lied.

“Your copies aren’t done,” Lyman said.

“I’ll come back for them later,” Gabe called over his shoulder as he pulled open the door.

Gabe’s phone buzzed. It was Kate, texting about some woman she dated a few lifetimes ago. Ethan must not have told her yet.