
Anthony Lynch

NIGHT GROWING LONGER NOW

A. Before filling in this form

She once heard a theory. Women give their all to a marriage, and when it fails they move on quickly without turning back because they know they did everything they could to make it work. Men don't give their all to marriage, and when it fails they're always looking back. They know they could have done more.

Therefore, after breakup, women are hard and men are soft.

She did not feel hard now. She felt tense, but not hard emotionally. She had imagined a crumbling mausoleum with high ceilings, dark panels and a few white wigs, but the building was new and the waiting room a soundproof box. The people, mostly standing for insufficient seats, were depressingly plain. She stood, shuffled her feet on the grey carpet. Closed interview rooms lined one wall, and a small sign on a grey door before her said *Court*.

She counted eighteen women and two men. The women pursed their lips and raised their eyebrows briefly at each other because they were each alone but with a common purpose. Some dabbed handkerchiefs at their nostrils and smeared their lipstick. A few like her had dressed for business. Others wore faded jeans or tracksuit pants that made soup bowls at their knees.

Except for one man and woman who went in together, one by one they entered the court and came out two minutes later. Most looked dazed and unsure whether to be happy, as if they'd had a tooth removed or donated blood. Or as if the end had come too suddenly. One woman jabbed her fists in the air, another walked out sobbing.

B. Step-by-step guide

Three months earlier, Connie had visited Fran's house when the form came in the mail. The house had once been Matt and Fran's, now it was Fran's. They sat in the living area that looked out on the courtyard and small olive trees becoming inky with night, skimmed the papers and read the section on common mistakes when completing the form.

"I've already made a common mistake, that's why I've got the form," Fran said.

Connie helped her fill it out. "It costs \$574 all up, which you pay when you file." She cleared cup off the table and pushed her hair back behind her ear. She read out questions and ticked boxes as Fran answered. When had they last lived as husband and wife? Were they likely to reconcile and live as husband and wife? Fran said the questions were stupid.

They completed the form but Fran needed a witness. "A JP or solicitor, someone from the old guard."

Connie drove them to an all-night chemist where a pharmacist who had wild, silver eyebrows and who reminded Fran of a priest read aloud the statement about truth and identity. He looked over his glasses at her while she nodded. He handed her a thick pen with a drug company's name on the side. After they'd signed, Fran bought a packet of antiseptic lozenges.

"You give the form to Matt and provided he agrees, he signs too," Connie told Fran as she drove them home. "Don't just throw it in front of him."

"I'll post it with a Sign Here tag and a cross in blue biro on the dotted line," Fran said. "All right, I'll have it delivered in person. *You'd* be the right kind of person. You made a tactful bridesmaid."

Connie smiled but looked at Fran when they stopped at traffic lights. The red light made the form glow on Fran's lap.

"I don't want a scene, and you'd do it with care," Fran added. "Besides, I found a trophy of Matt's I've been meaning to return. A football trophy he won in a tipping competition, his biggest sporting triumph. It won't fit in the postbox."

The lights changed and they drove another three blocks. At the next red light Connie said she'd deliver it any night except Wednesday, when she had her Italian class. But it was up to Fran to make a time.

"Matt knows you've gone ahead with this?" Connie asked. "You *have* told him?"

"Thanks Connie, I owe you," Fran said. "Matt could really use that trophy."

C. How to proceed

When Fran rang Matt she said she knew it was difficult but she thought she'd get the ball rolling. She'd got the form and filled out her bit and he had to check that he agreed and sign too. Connie could drop the form over any night that week.

"I think ... tomorrow." His voice was small and tight. "Yes, tomorrow."

"OK," Fran said. "Tomorrow, that's Wednesday. Connie's busy Wednesdays with a class. Wednesday's out."

"So not *any* night?"

"Any night except Wednesday. What about Thursday?" She used the reasonable, pressing voice adults have with children.

Matt said he couldn't wait. Fran told him not to be like that. She knew it was no fun; it was no fun for her either. Matt said she hadn't wasted time.

"Wasting time won't help. Matt, I think for both our sakes it's better to move on."

He said nothing. Fran sat back on the couch and cradled the cordless between her chin and shoulder while she picked at a rough band of skin on her foot, which was folded beneath her. She asked if he was still there and he made a noise she used to hear when he slept beside her.

"This form, much to it?"

"You pt in your details and tick some boxes. Then you sign."

"That's it?"

"Essentially," she said. Essentially, unless he wanted to appear in court in a few months' time, but it was not necessary for both of them to go. It really wasn't necessary. He said uh huh.

There was of course a cost, though it would be free if she were a single parent and filing. He said they'd missed their chance. She took a loud breath and said, "Don't let up, do you?" He asked what the damage was.

"It'll cost \$1148 with the Family Court. I thought we could split the cost and that makes your share five hundred and seventy-four."

"Five seventy-four," he repeated, as if to jot the figure in his head. He was probably jotting it in a debit column. He had always been particular with figures — a quality she once found endearing and later infuriating.

"Five seventy-four, if that's all right with you," she said. She heard him again make the small murmur he used to make when they each turned over in the night.

D. Mark-the-box options

Matt's flat was on the ground floor of a small brown-brick block in an inner suburb. Everyone who lived in the block was renting. The light above his door was an inverted dome that people imagined flying saucers looked like in the 1950s.

He offered Connie cask wine. She put the form on the breakfast bar beside the trophy, which had a football player leaping into space with one knee raised to mark the ball. She tried to drop the form beside it lightly, face up but pointing elsewhere. It pointed towards the laundry.

"You don't have to fill it out now, just when you're ready. Give me a call and I'll collect it. Or post it back — it could have been posted here anyhow. You're both filing; it's not being served."

Matt picked up the form and looked at its boxy green face before flicking through the pages. The ticks were not Fran's but at the end was her signature, leaning forward into the future. He said he might as well do it now. There were enough instructions.

"To confuse you," she said. "Most you can ignore. I helped Fran with her bit so I can help with yours if you want. That's what friends are for. Facilitating divorce."

He reached for a pen. "And that trophy?"

"That's what I use if you refuse to sign."

He leant on a magazine and jotted answers. Connie gave advice when he flicked to the instructions. He nodded and ticked boxes and his ticks fell in the same boxes as Fran's except for the question about whether he wanted to attend court. Sometimes Fran had answered for both of them already.

He was fine without her help so Connie took her drink and strolled around the living room, which was tidy but bare. There was not enough furniture and moths or silverfish had fed on the curtains. She leant against the breakfast bar while he worked on the form as if he were sitting an exam. He reached the affidavit.

"I need a witness," he said and lifted his eyes toward her. "Have you become a JP by chance?"

"I'm just the messenger," she said, and drained her glass. "But I have my contacts."

The pharmacist raised his wild eyebrows at Connie when they entered.

"Making a business of this?" he asked.

"Commission basis," she said.

He looked at the form and read out his statement. Matt said yes and signed while a woman waiting for a prescription coughed heavily. She had a small boy who gave a red ball an exploratory bounce, and the boy's hair was dark and wavy like Fran's. The pharmacist put his signature above where he'd signed three nights before. He had the same pen. Hair grew on the back of his fingers.

Matt drove home with his seat back, his arms straight and his elbows locked while his large hands guided the wheel.

"Brave face," Connie said.

Matt said not at all, that things could get you down but often you didn't realise how much until they were gone. "So it's true that you don't know what you've got until it's gone, but sometimes what you had wasn't good."

She wanted to see Matt's face but he kept his eyes on the road and locked his jaw in place as he stared ahead. He drove a little faster, as if he'd quietly decided the best way home. The dashboard before Connie ducked in and out of shadow.

When they got to his flat Matt said he had something for her. He went inside while she waited beneath the flying saucer light, cloudy with insects. He returned and gave her an envelope.

"Don't worry, it's a cheque to go with the form." He tapped the form with the envelope. "Paying my share."

She kissed him on the cheek. As she walked to her car the door behind her closed and the flying saucer receded.

E. Lodging your application

Fran said the best thing about a bust-up was the tingling you got afterwards.

"It's like when you bang your knee on a table and it hurts like hell. But when the pain fades you get warmth where the pain had been."

Connie handed her the completed form. She said that maybe it wasn't a bust-up but a relationship reaching natural closure.

"We have options, and sometimes after a number of years — was it eight? — we choose another option. Or the choice in a sense is made for us, we reach our end." She turned to face the window as if those years were passing by out there. She saw their reflections in the glass.

"Seven-and-a-half too many," said Fran. She'd cut her hair and applied orange lipstick and to Connie, in the glass, it made her face look bigger.

Fran sent the form by registered mail. She sent it from the main post office, as if to ensure its safe arrival, then walked to the waterfront and entered one of the new cafés overlooking the water. She ordered house white. On the bay beyond the fishing boats whose days seemed numbered, wind clipped the tops off short waves. She sat behind a large window and her coat fell open when she crossed her legs.

Her fingertips broke the frost on the wineglass. Her hands were clear now. Three years into their marriage eczema began its journey around her hands and wrists, expanding in small patches that threatened her upper arms and torso. Nothing stopped it except breaking up. The day Matt left it began its retreat. Within two months it was gone.

And the parting would cost her nothing. She felt that he owed her for the years he had stolen, when neither he nor she noticed part of her was dead. She did not feel guilty.

The wine warmed her. Her legs tingled. On the far side of the bay an empty cargo ship stood with its hull exposed. Kids rode by on bikes but the fishing boats barely nodded. She would drop him a line as the curtain fell.

On the way to the car she passed a shoe shop. She went inside, pointed at a brown leather slip-on in the window and asked for size 7. They were Italian, simple but with style. She put the caress of new leather on her credit card.

The shop assistant placed her old shoes in the box and Fran wore the new shoes home. She had always wanted to do that.

F. Help in other languages

Three months later he got her email. Her address jumped out at him as it had once done often and happily. There was nothing in the subject box. After one paragraph she signed regards.

He hated regards, or regards from her. When he left the house, the home in which they'd plotted their future, planted olive trees, upgraded the kitchen,

made love, argued and grown silent, she signed correspondence over property, divorce, marriage and the power bill with regards. It was part of her hardening. Her *calcification*. He liked that word and the idea of her heart turning to bone while he, the bean counter, grew soft.

Each time he wanted to send back an electronic scream. He would begin a heated reply and then delete the incomplete message. It was business, so he too signed with regards or with nothing. Once he weakened and signed yours always, but she maintained regards, a form he resumed.

This time he closed the email and rose from his desk, walked out past reception of the office where he worked through two sets of doors, squinted in the sunlight and shoved his hands in his pockets. He walked without breaking stride.

In the evening he opened a beer and surfed TV channels before killing the sound. He finished the beer and the room darkened quickly with night growing longer now. The TV flung lightning on the walls and mute actors laughed and frowned on screen.

He trudged to the fridge and foraged for food, pulled out more beer and returned to the lounge. He squinted and blurred the actors' faces on screen. If he squinted enough, he couldn't tell whether they were laughing or crying.

He crossed his eyes and made two screens, uncrossed them and put the picture in focus. Fran stared back eating a chocolate bar — he was sure that was Fran stripping the wrapper from the bar. An untidy strand of hair fell across her face in the way it had always done before she calcified. A man Matt had never seen came from behind and bit the bar. Fran snatched it away, and they fell laughing beneath the screen.

He remembered when she had, finally, tumbled out of sight. He told her there'd been someone, briefly. She stared at him a moment then she said she'd had enough, perhaps they'd both had enough. She said it tiredly as if she'd realised a plate of pasta was too much or the old fridge had to go.

And he said OK. He hadn't meant OK but OK floated off his tongue, came out on a reflex. He said it again. They stood there as if they both thought they should say more but they didn't, that was all they needed to say. His lips went numb and he turned to his room and closed the door.

He finished the beer, used the toilet and washed at the basin. He dried his hands and saw himself in the mirror. Shadows spread around his eyes, and his mouth hung open and it was vacant, stupid, devoid of answers. He kicked the wall

before him. He was wearing boots and he kicked until the plasterboard broke. He delivered short, sharp stab kicks until the green plaster in his bathroom gave.

A small hole opened in the wall near the floor. He went to the living room and collected his trophy, returned to the bathroom and got down on his knees. He nudged at the plaster, pushed the footballer's head into the dark space inside.

G. Declaration

She did not feel hard now except in her throat where a small lump made swallowing more difficult than it should be.

She was third last. The registrar was a woman in black smock who looked up briefly when Fran entered. Behind the registrar hung a silver coat of arms and beneath her, facing Fran, sat a white-haired man in a navy suit. Fran gave her name. The registrar said OK and read Fran's papers. She checked whether Matt had agreed to the proceedings and if changes had occurred since they lodged the form. She asked questions partly of Fran and partly of herself, it seemed, and Fran offered an occasional yes or no.

"Looks to be in order," the registrar said. She delivered what Fran took to be regulation patter. As with the priest at their wedding, her voice rose and fell in the rhythms of sleep.

The registrar declared something on behalf of the government. Fran heard her and Matt's names. "Matthew," the registrar called him, as Fran sometimes called him in the early days. "Dissolved," the registrar said. The cancellation stamp of her gavel echoed in the room.

She thanked the registrar and left. She stood for a moment in the waiting area and the next woman was called. Fran made as if to rummage for her keys and sunglasses. She had, mentally, allowed all morning for the court, and she wished now that Connie and all her tact were waiting for her on one of the grey chairs.

Fran made her way out but went the wrong way. So she turned right and followed the daylight calling from the hallway, walked through the foyer and out glass doors. The sea air nudged autumn leaves from trees on the street.

She walked down the street and waited at the lights where new apartments were rising on the opposite corner. She knew the streets backwards but today, entered from the court, they looked different. Even the traffic was quieter. Then a man on a motorbike unzipped the silence, raced through the lights while they were still on green.

