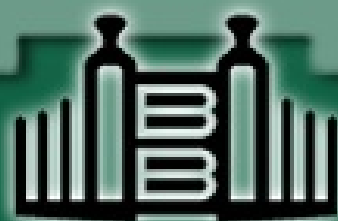


TALK BEFORE SLEEP

A NOVEL

ELIZABETH BERG



BALLANTINE BOOKS

Praise for
TALK BEFORE SLEEP

“An eloquent testimonial to the power of women’s friendships ... Berg captures the way women think—and especially the way they talk to other women—as well as any writer I can think of. You’ll want to give a copy to every good woman friend you have.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*

“Berg’s sensitive writing and thorough understanding of the emotions of true friendship make this sad story one to treasure.”

—*Baltimore Sun*

“There’s something funny about this exquisitely sad novel.... Elizabeth Berg balances the heart-wrenches with belly laughs.”

—*The Hartford Courant*

“A celebration of intimate friendship as well as a cry of grief ... rendered with clarity, authority and feeling.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Elizabeth Berg [is] a gifted storyteller with a fine sense of pace and phrasing, as well as a splendid ear for dialogue.”

—*The Boston Sunday Globe*

“As wickedly funny as it is sob-making sad ... It’s incredibly accurate in revealing what women talk about when they know each other well and are running out of time.”

—*Star Tribune (Minneapolis)*

“Elizabeth Berg understands women and how they talk and eat and live with each other. She is a tender, funny, grown-up writer who talks with us as much as to us.”

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Until the Real Thing Comes Along
What We Keep
Joy School
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Durable Goods
Family Traditions:
Celebrations for Holidays and Everyday

TALK
BEFORE SLEEP

— a novel —

Elizabeth Berg

BALLANTINE BOOKS  NEW YORK

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For women with cancer

who have found their fire,
and for those who are
still searching.

Not long ago, I lost a very important friend to breast cancer. I wanted to write about my experience in a fictional way, to create characters and events that, although imagined, would testify to the emotional truth of all that happened. My purpose was twofold: I wanted to demonstrate the strength and salvation of women's friendships; and I wanted to personalize the devastating effects of losing someone to this disease, which continues to claim lives daily. It is important to say that this is a work of fiction and both the characters and the events in the novel are products of my imagination. The only truth is that the fight against breast cancer has gone on for too many for too long; and the burden is on all of us to change that.

If we look at the path, we do not
see the sky. We are earth people
on a spiritual journey to the stars.
Our quest, our earth walk, is to look
within, to know who we are, to see that
we are connected to all things,
that there is no separation,
only in the mind.

—Native American, source unknown



This morning, before I came to Ruth's house, I made yet another casserole for my husband and my daughter. Meggie likes casseroles while Joe only endures them, but they are all I can manage right now. I put the dish in the refrigerator, with a note taped on it telling how long to cook it, and at what temperature, and that they should have a salad too.

Next I did a little laundry—washed Meggie's favorite skirt, then laid it on top of the dryer and pressed the pleats in with the flat of my hand. I love doing this because I love the smell of laundry soap and the memory it brings of lying outside on warm days, watching my mother peg huge white bedsheets onto the clothesline. Those sheets glowed with the light blue color white clothes radiate when they are extremely clean. My mother seemed to be fighting with them sometimes, muttering at them as best she could through the wooden clothespins she held in her mouth, insisting that they stay anchored in one place while they pulled and yanked to be free, their wet snapping sounds a protest. I always thought maybe we should let them go. Maybe they had a mission. Maybe the sheets were really people who had started all over again, come back on some low rung and now were ready to fly up to heaven for a promotion—say to a paramecium. I viewed all things on the earth as equal, in terms of the Grand Scheme. Vice presidents and river rocks had nothing up on each other. So the cotton fibers of a bedsheet could easily return as a simple pie form of water life, or, for that matter, as a movie star who drove white motorcycles through the glamorous hills of Hollywood.

I also like doing laundry for the feeling of connection it brings me, especially now, when I see my family too little, when most of my time is taken up with things they have no part of. With my hand on Meggie's skirt, I can see her small, keyhole-shaped knees, the sliding-down socks she wears, the nearly worn-out sneakers she won't let me replace. I see her schoolgirl blouses and the half-heart necklace she likes to wear every day lately, advertising the fact that she is someone's best friend. And then, saving the best for last, I see her face, her slightly rounded cheeks, her stick-out ears, her gorgeous red hair and matching freckles. She has just learned to make her own ponytail, and she stands softly grunting at the mirror in the morning until the lumps are gone—or nearly so. I can't attend to these small things now—sometimes I sleep at Ruth's and am not there in the morning and Meggie goes to school with messy hair; and with questionable color combinations, no doubt. She's lucky she's only nine; it doesn't really matter yet. Her bangs need cutting, her toenails too, probably—Joe can't keep up with these everyday details and still work the number of hours he's required to. I know that eventually all will return to normal at my house, and then we will feel better—and worse, too, of course.

For now, I roll out piecrust, let myself be soothed by the sound of low-voiced interviews of oldies on the radio. I have learned so much lately about the salvation to be found in caretaking, whatever form that caring takes.

Today, while I was rushing around the kitchen making dinner at seven-thirty in the morning, Meggie asked, "Is Ruth your only best friend?"

"Yes," I said, surprised at the evenness of my tone.

"Oh." She sighed softly. "I'm sorry for you, Mommy."

“I know you are.”

“Was she always your best friend?”

“No.”

“Did you have one before her?”

“I guess so,” I told her, then sent her off to school. And then I thought about Carol Conroy. The first time I made a promise with my whole heart, it was to Carol Conroy, and it required me to take care of her rabbit, Ecclesiastes. Carol, who liked very much the sound of words she found in the Bible, was leaving our small New England town to visit Disneyland for ten entire days. My jealousy was mitigated somewhat by the importance of the task she had assigned me. “You have to feed this rabbit and change his water every day,” Carol told me solemnly. “And on every *third* day, you have to clean up his poops. It’s not too bad unless he gets sick. But you have to do it even if he gets sick! Now, promise.” I stood up straight and promised with my whole heart—I could feel it straining with earnestness—because I loved Carol Conroy in the way that ten-year-old girls do love each other, with a fierce, ragged flame destined to go out. I vowed to do everything she said unless I died.

Ecclesiastes did get sick—maybe because of some licorice I fed him—and I ended up having to clean his cage several times a day for four days straight. The rabbit’s illness only endeared him to me. I didn’t resent him; I wanted to help him; and I felt gilded when he recovered. Years later, I would say it was Ecclesiastes that prompted me to become a nurse. And now, years after becoming a nurse—in fact, years after having left the profession to take care of my family, I have again made a promise with my whole heart, again out of love for my best friend. Only this time my friend’s name is Ruth. And this time the flame is steady, in no danger of going out. I would say it is of the eternal variety.



So now it is ten-thirty in the morning, and Ruth is in the bathtub, and I am straightening out her bed. She has a white eyelet dust ruffle, white sheets with eyelet trim, a blue and-white striped comforter, Laura Ashley. There are four fat goosedown pillows, each covered with beautiful embroidered pillowcases, white on white. There is a stack of magazines piled high on the floor and a collection of crystals on the bedside table: rose quartz, amethyst, and a clear white one with a delicate, fractured pattern running through it. They are not working. She is dying, though we don't know when. We are waiting. She is only forty-three and I am only forty-two and all this will not stop being surprising.

I hear her calling my name and I crack open the bathroom door. "Yes?"

"Could you come in here?" Her voice is a little shaky and I realize this is the first time I have heard her sound afraid.

I sit on the floor beside her, rest my arms along the edge of the tub to lean in close, though what I am thinking is that I ought to get in with her. She has used bubble bath and the sweet smell rises up warm and nearly palpable between us. Tahitian Ginger. The label on the bottle features happy natives who do not believe in Western medicine. The bubbles have mostly disappeared; I can see the outline of her body in the water. She is half swimming, turning slightly side to side, hips rising languidly up and down. Her breasts are gone.

"What's up?" I say.

She squeezes her bath sponge over her head. She is almost bald, but not quite. Dark strands of hair cling to the bottom of her head and her neck. Duck fluff, we call it. I told her to shave her head and she'd look great, like a movie star, like a rock singer. It's the latest rage, I told her. "Nah," she said. "What's left, I want to keep. It has sentimental value."

"I was wondering what happens when I die," she says now. "I was thinking, how are they sure? Are they really sure? I mean, what if I get buried alive?"

"They're sure," I tell her. "You sort of ... shut down. Your heart stops, and your breathing. Certain reflexes disappear, you know, like the pupils in your eyes don't react." She watches me, holding absolutely still, looking like a colorized sculpture of herself. I sigh, then add, "And you get cold, you get real cold, okay? Your skin doesn't feel warm anymore. They're absolutely sure."

"Oh," she says. "Okay. Just checking." She is relieved; you can see it in the uncreasing crease on her forehead, in the loosening to normal of the area around her mouth. "Wash my back, will you?"

She sits up and rests her forehead on her raised knees. I bump the washcloth over newly revealed bones, the delicate scapulas, the orderly line of vertebrae. "I'm becoming exoskeletal," she says, her voice muffled. "I'm turning into a lobster. Maybe when we die we go back incrementally. You know, a little to the sea, then on to the heavens." She thinks a moment, then says, "I was just lying in here and I felt kind of tired and ... weird, and then I thought, wait—is this it? I mean, how will I know?" She leans back, frowns. "Is that the same question I just asked? Am I making any sense? Do I keep asking the same goddam question?"

I'd been making dinner. I had The Oprah Winfrey Show on the little kitchen TV. The phone rang and I wiped my hands on my apron and answered it and she said, "It's in my brain."

“No,” I say, “it’s not the same question. It’s different. First you wanted to know how *they* know; now you want to know how *you’ll* know. Different question entirely. You will know though. You won’t be the same person you are now when it happens. You’ll be, I don’t know ... wiser.”

“Okay.” She stands up, asks for a towel, tells me she’s done.

“I should think so,” I say. “You’ve been in there for an hour.”

“Have I? Jesus, I thought it was about five minutes.”

“That’s okay. I was having a good time waiting for you. I was reading your diary.”

“Find anything good?”

“The sex stuff. That’s good. But it’s all bullshit.”

“You wish.”

I help her into a nightgown: white, white-lace trim, thin strands of ribbon hanging down the front.

She climbs in bed, pulls the covers up. She is tired, so pale. But her blue eyes are so beautiful and her face such a perfect shape you could walk into the room and see her and find just be jealous.

“I suppose it could be tonight, couldn’t it?” she says. “God, it really could.”

I was with her, sitting in the corner of the examining room, while she read questions off her list. She was pushing to know exactly how and when. She’s that way: if she’d ever had to go to confession, she’d have torn down the curtain separating her and the priest. “Hey! Look at me when I’m talking to you,” she would have told him.

Her oncologist was wearing a blue suit, a white shirt, a beautiful Italian silk tie and a gold Rolex watch. He was handsome and very sad, leaning up against the little sink in the room with his arms crossed over his chest and one leg crossed over the other, too. Obviously, this was too much for him. I think when he first met Ruth he fell in love with her and, guiltless, stayed there—though at a certain antiseptic distance Ruth regretted. Falling in love with her was a liability that came with being a man around her. Finally, he said, “All right, yes. It could be any time. Depending on how it happens. It’s from brain metastasis, it could be at any time.”

Of course she has other options. Respiratory failure, say, from lung metastasis. Liver failure from the metastasis there. Think of those cartoons where people are run over by steamrollers and then get up and walk around. You’ll be seeing Ruth. She put a new message on her answering machine the other day—she thought the old one sounded too sad. I stood behind her and watched her do it, her back so straight. The only thing that revealed what was really happening is that one of her feet rapidly tapped the floor the whole time she was talking. “It’s me,” she said. “I can’t come to the phone right now. But leave me a message and probably you should make it a good one, okay? Okay, ‘bye.” She says “okay” all the time with Ruth. Before, we’d be making plans to go somewhere. “Okay, okay, so I’ll meet you there at seven, okay?” she’d say.

“Will you stay here tonight?” she asks now.

“Of course.” I hope my face doesn’t reflect any of the ambivalence I feel. Another night goes away. I haven’t paid bills. I need to call my mother. Joe and I haven’t had sex in over six weeks. I feel sometimes as if I’m opening a too-full closet and shoving something else in, the door leaning against the door so it won’t burst open.

Later, when she is asleep, I’ll call home. “Please understand,” I’ll say.

Ruth pats the bed. "Here, take a load off. Should we watch a movie?"

I stretch out beside her. "I'd rather talk."

"Okay," she says. "But mostly you. I get too short of breath. It's getting worse. Have you noticed?"

"Yes."

She nods. "Yeah."

"What should I talk about?" I ask.

"Me," she says. "Tell me a story about me. If I seem to fall asleep, make sure I'm not dead. I think you have to call somebody if I am, right?"

"Right. The coroner."

"Yes. And call Michael, too. You be the one to tell him. I don't want his father to. He'll fuck it up. But if I'm just sleeping, don't get offended, okay?"

"Okay," I say. "All right: the story of Ruth. So to speak. Well, the first time I saw you, you really pissed me off."

"You were jealous," she says.

"I know," I say. "Everybody was. But also you were being a pain in the ass."

"Exactly wrong," she says. "You're projecting again."

"Exactly right," I agree.



I don't like parties. I hate parties. They make me nervous and irritable and slightly nauseated. And they make me feel exposed in a terrible way, as if I'm walking around with the back of my dress missing and everybody knows but me. But of course I go to parties. You have to, sometimes, the way you have to go to the dentist. At a party is where I met Ruth.

She was sitting in a corner of the living room, surrounded by people, and she was saying things that were making them laugh. She was irritatingly beautiful: raven-haired, blue-eyed, neatly petite. She had perfect teeth and she was wearing expensive-looking boots with a gorgeous blue skirt and sweater. I'd heard about her, about how talented an artist she was, how interesting, how much fun. "I hate that woman," I told my husband, pointing in her direction.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Ruth Thomas. Can't stand her."

"How do you know her?"

"I don't. But I know about her. Can't stand her."

"So don't talk to her," he said, and I said fine, I wouldn't. But when I went into the tiny downstairs bathroom to hide, she came bursting in the door.

"Oh, sorry!" she said, and started to leave. But then, seeing that I was sitting, legs crossed on the closed lid of the toilet, drinking my martini, she stopped. "Are you—have you finished?"

"Finished what?"

"Do you need the toilet?"

"I'm sitting here," I said.

"Yes, I can see that. However, you can sit a lot of places. Whereas someone who has to take a piss needs to sit right here, okay?"

I got up, started to squeeze past her. "You can have it back when I'm done," she said. "This is the best place at this party."

I waited outside, finished my drink. I heard a flush, then her voice saying, "You can come in now." I waited for her to exit and when she didn't, I went in with her. She was washing her face at the sink, splashing cold water on herself. Obviously she didn't worry about her mascara smearing. When she looked up, I saw why: she wasn't wearing any. It wasn't a good political statement, though, because she didn't need any. "Hand me that towel, will you?" she asked, and I gave her a paper guest towel. "I hate these things," she said. "Makes you feel like they believe their guests are diseased."

I shrugged. I was warming up to her a little. I'm afraid I like critical people when they rant on others because it makes me feel exonerated.

She threw the towel away, looked at it lying in the white wicker trash basket. "Jesus," she said. "Little pink hearts!"

I extended my hand. "Ann Stanley."

She shook it firmly. "Ruth Thomas."

I held up my empty glass. "Would you like a martini?"

"I'll mix, okay?" she said. "No one can make them like I do."

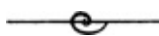
I leaned against the kitchen counter, watching her while she made our drinks. She had a flask in her purse, a lovely silver thing filled with gin. “Where’d you get that?” I asked.

“A Christmas present from my husband,” she said. She nodded in the general direction of the living room. She wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. “It was an attempt to bring us closer. See, we can now, at a moment’s notice, get drunk together. Isn’t that romantic?”

We sat at the kitchen table and got through the what-brings-you-here material. And then we was on to movies. She asked if I’d seen *Sophie’s Choice* and I said no and she said I should, it was terrific, ripped your heart out and flung it onto the floor. “I’ll go with you and see it again,” she said. “You should see it with a woman.”

My husband came into the kitchen, looked at me sitting there with Ruth. I gave him a slight raise of eyebrow, a tiny defensive shrug. He sat down and introduced himself, then had the good sense to leave.

“All right, how long have *you* been married?” she asked, sighing, and I knew we had a lot to talk about. I could forgive her good looks. She was capable of a scary kind of honesty. I was ready for, although until that moment, I hadn’t realized how much I’d been needing to meet someone I might be able to say everything to.



She is sleeping. I do make sure, of course. I watch for the rise and fall of the sheet over her. You must stop your own breathing to do this. Otherwise, you count your own movements as that of the person you're watching. You also must never check for a person's pulse using your thumb, or you'll feel your own heartbeat. Actually, I plan on doing that if I'm the one who's here when Ruth dies. I plan on giving her my heartbeat before I let her go.

I move off the bed slowly, tiptoe into the living room. I call home, the machine answers and I say I'm staying over tonight, that I'll call back again later. Then I go into the kitchen, open the refrigerator, look for something to eat. There is a collection of things here, different efforts by her friends: a pan of spinach lasagna, fruit salad in a flowered bowl, banana bread wrapped in Saran Wrap and ribbon, wild strawberry Jell-?, half a baked ham. In the freezer is a container of homemade ice cream. Ruth's boss, Sarah, brought that. She said, "I was ready to put it in a container and all of a sudden I thought, wait—how big? If I put it in something small, will Ruth think I think she's going to die sooner?"

"I know," I said. "It's very confusing. This is all very confusing."

I break off a piece of the banana bread, sit at the little kitchen table to eat it, look out the window. There's a balcony off the kitchen with a turquoise Adirondack chair on it, many years old and sun-bleached to a pleasant pastel color. It faces the voluptuous rise of hills in the distance and looks to me to be alive and seeing. I hear a noise behind me; Ruth is coming slowly into the kitchen.

"Want some banana bread?" I ask.

She waves it away. "No. I hate banana bread. It's too suspicious-looking. I always thought the cooked banana looked like insect legs." I look at the piece of bread I've been eating. She's right. I put it down.

Ruth opens the refrigerator, scans the contents, closes the door without taking anything. "I don't recognize my own refrigerator anymore," she sighs. "All this sick-person stuff. Where are some lamb chops or something? Where's the fancy lettuce?" She is wearing her unlaced sneakers as slippers, a striped shirt over her nightgown. She hates slippers, lately, as she hates robes and bed jackets or bed trays and glasses left at her bedside. "If my brain goes away and I can't do anything and they bring those fucking bedpans into my house, shoot me," she told me.

She sits down at the table, subtly out of breath. "I was sitting there the other day," she says, gesturing toward the balcony, "watching the sun set. And I was thinking, I am so happy now. I love being alive. I just want to *be* here. I want to stay. All that terrible anguish I went through, it's gone! I'm happy now! Why can't my body catch up to my head?" She looks at me. "Is it really too late, do you think?"

We have both heard the same information from her doctor. We have both asked questions every which way, trying to change the answers. They are always the same. "Weeks or months, depending on what 'fails' first." And yet.

"I don't know," I say. "I really don't. I mean, it's a mystery how you got this, right? Nobody knows how you got this. And nobody knows how those miracle cures happen. They just *do* happen!"

She nods, examines her hands. "I know they do."

"Have you been doing any of that imagery stuff?"

"Oh, yeah," she says. "I've been seeing myself as strong and healthy. I see myself rowing and running, and dancing. And screwing, of course."

"You're supposed to see the bad cells getting attacked by good cells, too."

"Really?" She is sitting up straight, paying careful attention.

"Well, I mean, remember that book we read, that said you make your good cells killers of some kind?"

"Oh. Yeah, I remember. But that seemed so ... negative. Violent. I thought you were supposed to be gentle. Positive and loving. You know, love yourself. Forgive yourself."

"Well, that's true, too," I say. I listened with Ruth to a tape that someone had mailed her. We pulled her curtains, lay down on her bed, closed our eyes, turned it on. A woman spoke about envisioning yourself as a child, about holding yourself on your own lap and rocking yourself. We tried to be serious, but about halfway through we started laughing. I think that was the background music, all this silly tinkling, and then the insult of harps.

"Oh, I don't know what works!" I say now. "I mean, sometimes I sort of believe that stuff and sometimes I just don't."

"Me, too," she sighs.

"Wait," I say, "I'll do it. I'll cure you. What we need here is something custom-made. You've never been a made-for-the-masses type." I stand up, hold my hands over her head, one above the other, make a low singing sound. It sounds sort of Native American. Maybe I've tapped into something I didn't know I knew. I squeeze my eyes shut, imagine walking suddenly on Ruth's cancer. It is caught now, frozen like an animal in headlights. Now that it is seen, its plans spread out and revealed before it, I can tell it to stop, that's all. I remember meeting a man with cancer who told me that when he was diagnosed he came home, stood naked before his mirror and wept. Then he screamed, "Come out where I can see you! Let me see you!" And I do this now, see Ruth's outlaw cells, all of them, everywhere. They are asymmetrical, ragged-edged, leering. Their colors are dark red and purple, the colors of abuse. They are slippery and quick and divide and divide and divide. But now I see them and I tell them to stop. That's all. Just stop. Why not? Why can't an ending to all this be subtle and arbitrary, when the beginning was that way? Her, sitting at a restaurant with me, with her bacon cheeseburger halfway up to her mouth, saying, "Oh, I've got another lump. Want to come with me to have it biopsied? Don't worry, they're never anything."

I open my eyes. Then I hug her. She is so thin now, like a suggestion of her former self. You have to be careful. I don't squeeze too hard, but I push a lot of feeling across the space between us. "There," I whisper. "Now you will start to heal."

She looks up at me and smiles and I see that she believes this might actually help. It is there as a slice of light in her eyes. She thinks this might actually help! And there's more: I believe it too, because it is all we have left. Oh, the stubbornness and the strength of hope. Every day that I am with her lately, I learn another staggering lesson. Everything about her is too much to bear: the delicacy of her wrist, the arrangement of her living-room furniture, the notices to renew magazine subscriptions that she gets in the mail. And yet we do bear it. She does, especially.



We had gone to the late showing of *Sophie's Choice*. Ruth wanted to go when there weren't so many people. There were far fewer than at the seven-fifteen show, but she still insisted we sit in the back row. "I *hate* hearing people talking behind me," she said. "Don't you?"

I shrugged.

"I'm very particular about movies," she said. "You'll have to get used to it. You don't talk in movies, do you?"

"Just during the commercials."

"You don't mean the previews, do you?" She was nervous.

"No," I said. "I mean the commercials. Like when they tell you you can rent the place for parties. I don't talk during the previews. They're little movies."

"Exactly," she said, and settled in against her seat. Then she sat up again. "You don't chew gum or eat anything either, do you?"

"What do you take me for?" I asked.

"Forties talk," she said. "I love it." Then, as the lights came down, "Okay. Shhh." She reached into her purse, handed me two flowered handkerchiefs. "My grandmother's," she whispered. "You'll need them."

I held them up to my nose, to practice. They were softer than Kleenex, and smelled like lilacs and time. I couldn't wait to cry.

When the movie was over, before the lights had finished coming up, an usher came and stood directly behind Ruth and me. "Please exit to your LEFT," he shouted. "And remember to deposit your GARBAGE in the clearly marked CANS on your WAY OUT!"

Ruth was right—the movie had left me feeling beat up; I was overwhelmed with sorrow. I was embarrassed for anyone to see me; two hankies hadn't been nearly enough. I saw that Ruth's eyes were swollen and red, and her face was splotchy with grief. But she was not embarrassed; she was furious. She walked quickly over to the usher, a sulky teenager who was leaning against the wall now, idly watching the stricken audience pass out of the theater and tonguing off one of his back teeth. "What is wrong with you?" she asked.

He blinked at her, stood up straight. His arms hung too long out of his uniform.

"Why do you have to scream about such inconsequential things?" she asked. "Why can't you just let us all have a moment of silence after a movie like this?"

The usher smiled nervously, started to answer.

"No," she said. "Have you seen this movie?"

He nodded yes.

"Well then, for Christ's sake!"

I touched her arm. "Maybe you have to be a mother to understand," I said.

She stared at me, wild-eyed. For a moment I thought she was going to start in on me, to yell. But all she said was, "Well, do you want to go get a drink?"

"Yes," I said, "but let's take a walk first." She went out ahead of me. I turned to the usher who was making minute, spasmodic movements with his neck and shoulders, throwing off his embarrassment. "Maybe you should wait just a minute to make your announcement," I said. "This movie is kind of ... affecting."

“Well, I *guess*,” he said, and started down the aisle, patrolling for the garbage left beside the seats despite his post-film command. Of course this was to be expected. Give an order to someone in pain and they might easily rebel, just for the relief of something feeling good again.



We walked to a nearby bar and sat at a table by the window. We ordered martinis. There was a polite moment of silence, each of us waiting for the other to initiate conversation. Then Ruth said, “Obviously, what I need is to get laid.”

“Well,” I said.

“That kid was just doing his stupid job. I know that. Jesus. He had bad acne, did you see? He’s got enough to worry about.”

“He should have given us a minute,” I said. “Everybody was crying. I even saw a few men wiping their eyes.”

“I know,” she said, smiling, and then, “Are you good at dream interpretation?”

“I think it’s always up to the dreamer what a dream means.”

Ruth took a generous sip of her drink, leaned forward. “Last night I dreamed I came downstairs in the morning, and all my artwork was gone—every painting was off the wall, the one I’m working on off the easel—hell, the *easel* was gone. Eric had locked everything in the basement, with a white sheet over it, like a shroud.”

I nodded. “He resents the time your art takes away from him.”

“He’s killing me,” she said.



The back door opens, and Sarah is there, her expensive leather briefcase bulging. She hangs up her coat and kisses Ruth, then me. “I think it’s going to snow. It’s all of a sudden so cold.”

She sits down at the kitchen table with us, looks carefully at Ruth. “So. How are you?”

“I’m fine. Does it smell like snow?”

“Beats me,” Sarah says. “How does snow smell?”

“I don’t know ... blue,” Ruth says, and I know exactly what she means.

“How are you?” Sarah asks again and Ruth says, “I *told* you I’m *fine*.”

No one says anything, and then Sarah says quietly, “I’m sorry.”

Ruth shrugs.

“It’s just that I worry about you all day,” Sarah says. “People ask about you, and I think ...”

...

“You wonder if I’m dead yet, right?” Ruth says.

“I don’t know. Yes.”

“Well, don’t worry about it,” Ruth says. “I’ll call you right away when it happens. You’ll be the first to know.”

There is a moment of silence, and then I say, “I think *I* should be the first to know.”

“I’m her boss,” Sarah says.

“But I’m her best friend.”

“Maybe I won’t die,” Ruth says. “Ann gave me the cure today.”

“How’d you do that?” Sarah asks.

“I stood over her and spoke in tongues and believed with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind that this won’t happen.” My voice shakes at the end of all this, and Sarah saves me. “Sounds too Catholic,” she says. And then: “What’s for dinner around here, anyway?”

“Nothing,” Ruth and I answer together.

“Let’s get lobster,” Sarah says. “From that place right up the road from you. That’s actually a very good restaurant.”

Ruth shakes her head. “I don’t want to go out.”

“Then we’ll get it to go.”

Ruth frowns. “I don’t think you can get lobster to go.”

Sarah is at the phone already, dialing. “Why not?”

“I don’t know. How do you get lobster to go?”

“You just tell them that’s how you want it.”

“They’ll say no,” Ruth says.

“Hold on a minute,” Sarah says into the phone. Then, to Ruth, “No, they won’t. I’ll explain that this is an exceptional situation.” Then, into the phone, she says, “I wonder if you could help me with a kind of unusual request.”

Ruth smiles. “I always dreamed of being exceptional,” she says. “Only not like this.” Sarah turns to me. “I want some french fries from McDonald’s, too.”

“Okay,” Sarah says. “I’ll go get them.”

I put on my boots and my coat, and Ruth watches me. She is, I know, remembering the intentional pull of the coat over the shoulder, the confidence in saying you’ll go.

somewhere and then just going. Nothing is easy for her anymore. Everything has taken on an unwelcome weight.

Sarah is off the phone; the lobsters will be ready to be picked up in twenty minutes. "I'll get the fries," I tell her.

"Get lots of catsup," Sarah says.

"Make sure they were *just* done," Ruth adds.

"Jesus," I say. "Anything else?"

"Get lots of those little salts," Ruth says. "They're good."

I climb down the steps, thinking how good it will taste, lobster and french fries, thinking about how I would never ordinarily get take-out lobster. I am a reluctant beneficiary. I am the one standing at the base of the high thing, shielding my eyes from the sun, shivering with the challenge of the task I am watching someone else do.

I pull into the McDonald's lot, tell the eager clerk inside that I want three large orders of french fries. "Now, they need to be perfect," I say.

She smiles, hesitates.

"I mean, were they just done?"

She looks over at the fryer. "They're about ten minutes old, I guess. Ten, fifteen."

"I'll wait for a new batch," I say. "Just call me when they're out."

"Okay," she says, and looks around me for the relief of the next customer.

I sit at a booth, unbutton my coat, pick up a newspaper that someone has left behind. Today is Thursday. Tomorrow is Friday. It scares me, the way tomorrow keeps coming. I look in the paper for a good comic strip to bring Ruth. All of them today would only hurt her feelings. Try this sometime: read the comics as though time were awfully short. You will be hard-pressed to find anything funny. You will understand irony. You will put down the paper and look at way the sun happens to be lighting the sky, and you will be thinking one word: please.

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