

Elizabeth  
**Berg**

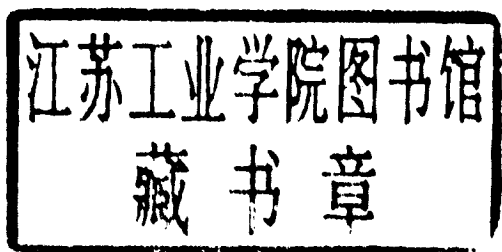


OPEN HOUSE

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Elizabeth Berg



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## OPEN HOUSE

Elizabeth Berg is the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Never Change* and *Open House*, which was an Oprah's Book Club selection in 2000. *Joy School* was selected as American Library Association Best Book of the Year, and *Talk Before Sleep*, another *New York Times* bestseller, was shortlisted for the ABBY award in 1996. The winner of the 1997 New England Bookseller's Award for her body of work, she is also the author of *The Pull of The Moon*, *Range of Motion*, *What We Keep* and *Until the Real Thing Comes Along* which were all bestsellers in the United States. A former nurse, she lives in Chicago.

"Knowing domestic detail, an understanding of familiar – sometimes conflicting – female emotions and an infectious sentimental optimism." *Publishers Weekly*

"Smart, witty and so emotionally taut and true that I couldn't put it down . . . Berg shows a sparkling ability to distil complex human emotions into a few hundred pages of clear, evocative prose." *Journal Sentinel*

"Berg has an ability to capture the way women think, feel and speak . . . With her quirky characters and precise observations, Berg sits somewhere between Anne Tyler and Alice Hoffman . . . The details and emotions in *Open House* are sometimes heartwrenching, sometimes hilarious."

*Chicago Sun-Times*

"Compelling and unflinchingly honest . . . savvy, wry and sharply observant . . . Berg's graceful and deceptively simple prose is laced with clear-eyed insights . . . deft and inspiring." *Denver Post*

"The characters are lively and appealing, and it's an engaging read." *Washington Post Book World*

*Also by Elizabeth Berg*

Until the Real Thing Comes Along

True to Form

What We Keep

Joy School

Never Change

Say When

The Pull of the Moon

Range of Motion

Talk Before Sleep

**For Jean-Isabel McNutt**

# OPEN HOUSE





## PROLOGUE

You know before you know, of course. You are bending over the dryer, pulling out the still-warm sheets, and the knowledge walks up your backbone. You stare at the man you love and you are staring at nothing: he is gone before he is gone.

The last time I tried to talk to David was a couple of weeks ago. We were in the family room – David in his leather recliner, me stretched out on the sofa. Travis was asleep – he'd had his eleventh birthday party that afternoon, the usual free-for-all, and had fallen into bed exhausted. The television was on, but neither of us was watching it – David was reading the newspaper and I was rehearsing.

Finally, "David?" I said.

He looked up.

I said, "You know, you're right in saying we have some serious problems. But there are so many reasons to try and work things out." I hoped my voice was pleasant and light. I hoped my hair wasn't sticking up or that my nose didn't look too big and that I didn't look fat when I sat up a bit to adjust the pillow.

“I was wondering,” I said, “if you would be willing to go to see someone with me, just once. A marriage counselor. I really think –”

“Samantha,” he said.

And I said, “Okay.”

He returned to the paper, and I returned to lying on the sofa, to falling down an elevator shaft. There were certain things I could not think about but kept thinking about anyway: how to tell the people I’d have to tell. How lonely the nights would be (that was a very long elevator shaft). How I believed so hard and for so long that we would be able to overcome everything, and now I would have to admit that we could not. How wrenching it is when the question you want to ask is “Why don’t you *want* me?” but you cannot ask it and yet you do not ask – or talk about – anything else.

“David?” I said again, but this time he did not look up.

I dress to bring in the morning paper. The new me. I once read that Martha Stewart never wears a bathrobe. Not that I like Martha Stewart, nobody likes Martha Stewart, I don't think even Martha Stewart likes Martha Stewart. Which actually makes me like her. But anyway, maybe she's onto something. You get up, you make your bed right away, you shower and dress. Ready. Armed. Fire.

I go into the kitchen to make a strong pot of coffee and to start Travis's breakfast. French toast he'll have today, made from scratch, cut diagonally, one piece lying artfully over the other; and I'll heat the syrup, serve it in the tiny flowered pitcher I once took from a room-service tray. I'll cut the butter pats into the shape of something. A whale, maybe, he likes whales. Or a Corvette. If that doesn't work, I'll make butter curls with a potato peeler.

I lay out a blue linen mat at the head of the dining-room table, smooth it with the flat of my hands, add a matching cloth napkin pulled through a wooden ring. *Wedding gift.* I center a plate, lay out the silverware, then

step back to regard my arrangement. I really think Travis will appreciate this.

My head hurts. My head hurts, my heart hurts, my heart hurts. I stand still for a moment, which is dangerous. So I go back into the kitchen, pull a dusty wineglass *wedding gift* down from the high cupboard above the refrigerator, wash it, and bring it to the dining room to center directly over the knife. Then I go back in the kitchen and select three oranges from the fruit bowl. I will squeeze them for juice just before he takes his seat.

Actually, Travis doesn't like fresh orange juice, but he's got to get used to elegance, because that's the way it's going to be from now on. Starting today. Well, starting last night, really, but Travis was asleep when the revolution started. I went to Bloomingdale's and charged a few things last night; that was the start; but when I got home, Travis had gone to bed.

I stand straighter, take in a deep breath. This is the first day. Every day that comes after this will be easier. Later, when I think of Travis sleeping, the thought will not pick up my stomach in its hands and twist it.

All right. Butter. The whale shape does not work, nor does the Corvette, but the butter curls do, more or less. I lay them carefully over ice chips in a small bowl, then bring them out to the dining room and place them to the right of his spoon. Is that where they go? There must be some incredibly expensive Martha Stewart book on table settings I can buy. Perhaps I'll hire a limo

to take me to the bookstore, later – I don't really feel like driving. Perhaps I will take the limo to Martha's house. "I understand you're divorced," I'll say. "You seem to be doing all right."

Back in the kitchen, I gulp down another cup of coffee. Then I mix eggs and milk in a blue-and-yellow bowl *that tiny shop in Paris, our weeklong vacation there, I stood at the window one morning after I'd gotten up and he came up behind me and put his arms around my middle, his lips to the back of my neck,* add a touch of vanilla, a sprinkle of sugar. I put the frying pan on the stove *put his lips to the back of my neck and we went back to bed,* lay out two slices of bread on the cutting board. These hands at the ends of my wrists remove the crusts. I'm not sure why. Oh, I know. Because they're hard.

I sit down at the table. Stand up. Sit down. Concentrate on my breathing, that's supposed to help.

Actually, it does not.

I check my watch. Good, only five more minutes. I take off my apron and go upstairs to my bathroom. I brush my teeth again, put in my contacts, comb my hair, apply eyeliner, mascara, and a tasteful shade of red lipstick. I straighten the cowl of my new sweater. It's red, too – cashmere. I dab a little Joy – also new – behind my ears and on my wrists. Then I stand still, regard myself as objectively as possible in the mirror.

Well, I look just fine. Okay, circles under the eyes, big deal. The main thing is, what a wonderful change for

Travis! Instead of him seeing me in my usual old bathrobe with the permanent egg stain on the left lapel, I am nicely dressed, made up, and ready to go. *Everything* will be different, starting today. *Everything* will be better.

I go into Travis's room. He is messily asleep; covers wrapped around one leg, pajama top hiked high on his back, pillows at odd angles, his arm hanging over one side of the bed.

"Travis?" I say softly, raising his shade. "It's seven o'clock." I sit down beside him, rub his back. "Travis?"

"I'm up," he says sleepily. Then, turning over quickly, eyes wide, "What *stinks*?" He puts his hand over his nose.

I stand; step back. "Perfume, it's . . . Listen, get dressed and come down for breakfast, okay? I'm making French toast."

No reaction.

"I mean, not the frozen kind. From scratch." *Please, Travis.*

He sits up, rubs his head. Two blond cowlicks stick up like devil horns. He is wearing one of David's T-shirts with his own pajama bottoms. The bottoms are too short for him, I see now. Well. No problem. Today I will replace them. Maybe Ralph Lauren makes pajama bottoms for kids. Silk ones. Monogrammed.

Travis yawns again, hugely, scratches his stomach. I look away, despairing of this too manly movement. I

seems so recent that I had to step around imaginative arrangements of Legos – jagged-backed dinosaurs, secret space stations, tools for “surgery” – to wake him up. Now he hides a well-thumbed issue of *Playboy* under his bed. One day when Travis was at school, I inspected Miss August thoroughly. I felt like putting in a note for the next time he looked at her.

Dear Travis, Please be advised that this is not a real woman. These are bought boobs, and pubic hair looks nothing like this in its natural state. This woman needs to find her life’s work and not spend all of her time in front of a mirror. If you went out with her, you would soon be disappointed. Signed, a caring friend.

“I don’t want French toast,” Travis says. “I want Cheerios.”

“You have Cheerios every day.”

“Right. *Because*, you see, I *like* them.”

Sarcastic. Like David. But he is smiling, saying this. It is David’s smile, born again.

“Well, today is a special day,” I tell him.

“How come?”

“We’ll talk about that later.”

“Okay, but I don’t want French toast.”

“Why don’t you just try –”

“Pleeeeeeease????”

My God. You'd think he was begging for a stay of execution.

"Fine." I make my mouth smile, make myself walk slowly down the stairs, one foot, then the other. I am wearing panty hose under my new jeans, and I feel the fabrics rubbing together as if each is questioning the other's right to be there.

I go into the family room *pipe tobacco* and turn the stereo on to the classical station. Ah, Mozart. Well, maybe not Mozart. But close enough. It's one of those guys. I'll take a music appreciation class. Somewhere. Then, getting ready to sit down to dinner with Travis some night, I'll say, "Some Verdi, perhaps?"

"That's an idea," he'll answer. "But maybe Vivaldi would be better with lamb."

"You know, you're absolutely right," I'll say. I will have taught him this exquisite discrimination. As a famous man, Travis will say to the interviewer, "My mother changed wonderfully when my father left us. Our circumstances actually improved. Naturally I owe her everything."

In the dining room, I remove Travis's plate from the table, then go into the kitchen to pour Cheerios into a bowl. Too plain. I'll slice some banana on top in a most beautiful way. I pick up a knife, and some feeling comes over me that has me rush over to the kitchen table. I sit and hold the knife and try very hard to stifle a sob. *Not now. Later.* And then something occurs to me: David



may change his mind. That's why he didn't insist on telling Travis himself, right away. He's not sure he even wants to do this. This is male menopause, early male menopause, it could be that, they get that just like they get their own version of PMS, they just don't admit it. He's been so moody, I haven't been good about listening to him, I haven't been willing to talk about a lot of things I do wrong. He could very well have needed to just act out this way, scare himself a little – well, scare both of us – and now he'll come back and we'll just straighten this out. Men! I get up, Lucy Ricardo.

I take a banana from the fruit bowl, slice it evenly, ignore the feeling of a finger tapping my shoulder. *Sam? He's not coming back.*

I look at my watch, pour milk into the pitcher I was going to use for the syrup. Then I pick a pink blossom off the begonia plant on the kitchen windowsill to rest beside his plate. I carry everything out to the dining room, carefully arrange it, then lean against the door-jamb. Outside, the sun shines. Birds call. Cars pass with the windows down, people's elbows hanging out.

I am exhausted.

It will be a few minutes before Travis comes down. I need to do something.

I go into the basement to start a load of wash. When I begin separating, I find a pair of David's boxer shorts, the blue ones, and, God help me, I bury my face in them for the smell of him.