

Open House

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a novel



Open
House

A NOVEL

*Elizabeth
Berg*

RANDOM HOUSE



NEW YORK

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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 to 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

PROLOGUE

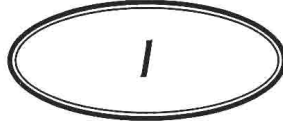
see someone with me, just once. A marriage counselor. I really think—”

“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 place 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 a 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 why. 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 neck 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. It 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 doorjamb. 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.

I look up and see my sewing machine. I bring his shorts over to it. Then, using a hidden seam, I sew the fly shut. With great care, I do this, with tenderness. Then I go back to the pile of laundry and get some of his fancy socks and sew the tops of them shut.

I have a lot of David's clothes to choose from; he packed last evening like he was only going on a business trip for a couple of days. And I sat on the bed watching him, thinking *Why is he packing? Where is he going? Why must he do it like this, does he think he's in a movie? What can I say to stop this, isn't there something to say to stop this?* But I couldn't say anything. I felt paralyzed. And when he finally stood at the doorway of the bedroom and said, "I'll call you," I'd waved. Waved! Then, from the bedroom window, I'd watched him drive away, marveling at his cool efficiency in signaling at the corner.

I could not stay in the house alone. I would not stay in the house. Travis was gone—he went to his friend Ben's house every Thursday after school to eat dinner and do homework. He liked going there because that family had three dogs and a cat, whereas, as Travis frequently liked to point out, he had nothing, not even ants. I called my mother, telling her briefly what had happened

and asking her to come over and wait for Travis to get home. And then I got in the car and drove to the mall and charged and charged and charged.

When I got home my mother assured me that, as requested, she had not said anything to Travis. Amazingly, she said little to me, either. "We'll talk later, honey," she said, and I answered in what I hoped was a noncommittal way. I was so grateful she had come. I wanted so much for her to go.

I come up from the laundry room and find Travis seated at the dining-room table, delicately picking the banana off his Cheerios. "How come I'm eating out here?" he asks.

"For fun."

"Can I have some orange juice?"

"Oh! Yes, I forgot, I'll go make it right now."

". . . You're making it?"

"Yes. You're having fresh-squeezed orange juice."

"I don't like fresh-squeezed orange juice. I mean, I'm *sorry*, but you *know* I don't like it. It's got all that stuff floating around that bumps into your teeth. Plus I don't like *bananas* on my cereal, *either*."

"Travis. Listen to me. You must try new things every now and then. Sometimes you have learned to like things in your sleep."

"Are we out of Tropicana?"

"Yes, we are."

He gets up and goes to the refrigerator, peers in, triumphantly pulls out a carton of juice. "It's right here, Mom, practically full! We're not out of it! See?"

I take the carton from him, upend it over the sink. "Now we are."

We stand there. Finally, "Jesus!" he says. "What's wrong with *you*?"

Let's see. Let's see. What to do.

"Come with me," I say. I lead him to the dining room, point to his chair. "Finish your cereal, okay? It's almost time to go."

I sit down with him, take in a breath. "I'm sorry about the orange juice, Travis. I'm really sorry I did that. That wasn't right."

I clasp my hands together, stare at him. He has a bit of sleep stuck in one corner. "Wipe your left eye," I tell him. "You need to wash your face a little better in the morning. And, listen, I don't want you saying 'Jesus' like that."

"*You* do." He wipes at his right eye.

"Other eye."

"*Dad* does. *He* does it all the time."

I sit still. Outside, I see the wind lift up a branch, rock it. Then let it go.

Finally, I say, "I don't care who does it, Travis. It's not okay for you to do it. Don't say it anymore."

"Fine."

I lean back in my chair, sigh.

"What's *wrong*?" he asks.

"There is something wrong."

"I *said*."

"Right. But I don't want you to worry. I'm going to talk to you about it, okay? But I think it would be best if we waited until after school."

"Are you . . . going somewhere, Mom?"

I don't answer right away. I don't know. Am I?

Worried now, "How come you're all dressed already? Are you going to the doctor or something?" Someone in Travis's grade had lost his mother recently. The knowledge festered among the kids, spooked them terribly despite the carefully planned programs presented by the guidance counselors.

There, I am suddenly grounded. It is such sweet, wavelike relief. “Oh, sweetie, no, it’s nothing like that. It’s nothing like that! I’m sorry, I know I’m acting . . . I’m just tired. But we’ll talk later. It’ll be fine.” I smile brightly. “So! Did you like eating breakfast this way?”

“What way?”

“Well . . . You know, out here in the dining room. Fancy dishes . . .”

“Yeah, I guess so. Yeah! It was nice. Thanks, Mom.”

Oh, what am I doing? Why am I making him take care of *me*?

Travis picks up his book bag, then shifts his shoulders, seeming to adjust himself inside himself, a gesture I love.

“Can I kiss you good-bye?” I ask.

Our old joke. Every morning I ask him this, and every morning (since he turned nine, anyway) he makes a face as though I were asking him if I could spoon cold oatmeal into his ear. But now he nods yes and my stomach does an unpleasant little somersault. I put my lips to his cheek. And he kisses me back—pecks at my cheek and then quickly turns away.

So. He knows. They are absolutely right, kids always know. When he comes home from school today and I tell him that David has moved out, he will nod sadly and say, “I thought so.” And then he will start making *F*s.

I watch him walk down the sidewalk toward school. His jacket collar is half up, half down. His jeans are slightly too long; they bunch up over the top of his sneakers. His book bag carries papers with his earnest script, his own thoughts about the material he is assigned to read. He is just beginning to become himself. He is too young to have to face what he is going to have to face, it will shape him too much, quash his tender optimism. It’s unfair, it’s so *unfair*! That’s what I should have told David: do what you have to do, but

don't walk out on Travis. For God's sake. Ruin my world if you have to, but don't ruin his, too.

Back in the kitchen, I take a sip from my coffee. It's gone cold; a ring of congealed cream visible at the outside edge. Look how fast things turn. I dump the coffee out, then throw the cup in the trash. I never want to see that cup again. "David," I say, very softly. Like a prayer. "David," I say again, and lean against the wall to cry. It helps. It's so funny, how it helps. Stress hormones get released when you cry, that's why it works. It's amazing how smart the body is. Though maybe we could do without loving. I think it's overrated, and I think it's too hard. You should only love your children; that is necessary, because otherwise you might kill them. But to love a man? It's overrated, and it's too hard and I will never, ever do it again.

Well. What I will do now is make a list. There's a lot to think about, so much to do. I'll go outside, I'll sit out there where it's so much bigger, where there is no roof to fall in on your head and make you brain damaged, should you survive.

AT THREE-THIRTY, I am sitting on the sofa in the family room, waiting for Travis. I've had a nap, I'm fine. Well, I've had a couple of naps. The waking-up part, that's hard. *What's . . . ? Oh. Oh, yes.*

One thing I want to be sure of is that Travis does not blame himself in any way. I believe I should start with that. Out loud, I practice, "Travis, sweetie, I need to tell you some things that will be hard for you to hear." Yes. Good. "But what I want you to understand, and to remember the whole time I'm talking, is this: all of this is about your *father and me*. This decision. It has nothing to do with you. You are such a good boy." Yes.

No. No. This is starting with a negative. It will scare him. Start