

Erma Bombeck

The Best of

Bombeck

At Wits End



"Just Wait Till
You Have Children
of Your Own!"



I Lost Everything
in the Post-Natal
Depression



Galahad Books • New York City

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AT WIT'S END

Illustrated by Loretta Vollmuth

This isn't a book.

It's a group therapy session.

*It is based on six predictable depression cycles
that beset a woman during a twelve-month span.*

*These chapters will not tell you how to overcome
these depression cycles.*

They will not tell you how to cope with them.

*They will have hit home if they, in some small way,
help you to laugh your way through while hanging
on to your sweet sanity.*



JANUARY 2 — MARCH 4

**WHAT'S A NICE GIRL LIKE ME
DOING IN A DUMP LIKE THIS?**

IT HITS on a dull, overcast Monday morning. I awake realizing there is no party in sight for the weekend, I'm out of bread, and I've got a dry skin problem. So I say it aloud to myself, "What's a nice girl like me doing in a dump like this?"

The draperies are dirty (and will disintegrate if laundered), the arms of the sofa are coming through. There is Christmas tinsel growing out of the carpet. And some clown has written in the dust on the coffee table, YANKEE GO HOME.

It's those rotten kids. It's their fault I wake up feeling so depressed. If only they'd let me wake up in my own way. Why do they have to line up along my bed and stare at me like Moby Dick just washed up onto a beach somewhere?

"I think she hears us. Her eyelids fluttered."

"Wait till she turns over, then everybody cough."

"Why don't we just punch her and ask her what we want to know."

“Get him out of here.”

“She’s pulling the covers over her ears. Start coughing.”

I don’t know how long it will be before one of them discovers that by taking my pulse they will be able to figure out by its rapid beat if I am faking or not, but it will come. When they were smaller, it was worse. They’d stick their wet fingers into the opening of my face and whisper, “You awake yet?” Or good old Daddy would simply heave a flannel-wrapped bundle at me and say, “Here’s Mommy’s little boy.” (Any mother with half a skull knows that when Daddy’s little boy becomes Mommy’s little boy, the kid is so wet he’s treading water!) Their imagination is straight from the pages of Edgar Allan Poe. Once they put a hamster on my chest and when I bolted upright (my throat muscles paralyzed with fright) they asked, “Do you have any alcohol for the chemistry set?”

I suppose that’s better than having them kick the wall until Daddy becomes conscious, then ask, “Do you want the cardboard that the laundry puts in your shirts?” Any wrath beats waking Daddy. There has to be something wrong with a man who keeps resetting his alarm clock in the morning and each time it blasts off smacks it silent and yells, “No one tells me what to do, Buddy.”

Personally I couldn’t care less what little games my husband plays with his alarm clock, but when I am awakened at 5:30, 6:00, 6:15, and 6:30 every morning, I soon react to bells like a punchy fighter. That’s what I get for marrying a nocturnal animal. In the daylight, he’s nothing. He has to have help with his shoelaces. In all the years we’ve been married he only got up once of his own accord before 9:30. And then his mattress was on fire. He can’t seem to cope with daytime noises like flies with noisy chest colds, the crash of marshmallows as they hit the hot chocolate, the earsplitting noises milk makes when you pour it over the cereal.

The truth of it is, he’s just not geared to function in an eight-to-five society. Once he even fell out of his filing cabinet.

Around eleven at night a transformation takes place. He stretches and yawns, then his eyes pop open and he kicks me in the foot and says, "What kind of a day did you have?"

"You mean we're still on the same one?" I yawn.

"You're not going to bed already, are you?"

"Yes."

"Would it bother you if I played the guitar?"

"Yes."

"Well, then maybe I'll read a little before I go to sleep."

"Why not? I have the only eyelids in the neighborhood with a tan."

No doubt about it, if I could arise in a graceful manner, I could cope.

It's starting to snow. Thanks a lot up there.

Before moving to the suburbs, I always thought an "Act of God" was a flash of lightning at Mt. Sinai or forty days and forty nights of rain. Out here, they call a snowfall an "Act of God" and they close the schools.

The first time it happened I experienced a warm, maternal glow, a feeling of confidence that I lived in a community which would put its children above inclement weather. The second time, that same week, I experienced a not-so-warm glow, but began to wonder if perhaps the kids could wear tennis rackets on their feet and a tow rope around their waists to guide them. On the third day school was canceled within a two-week period, I was organizing a dog-sled pool.

We racked up fifteen Acts of God that year and it became apparent to the women in our neighborhood that "somebody up there" was out to get us.

It got to be a winter morning ritual. We'd all sit around the radio like an underground movement in touch with the free world. When the announcer read the names of the schools closed, a rousing cheer would go up and the kids would scatter. I'd cry a little in the dishtowel, then announce

sullenly, "All right, don't sweat in the school clothes. REPEAT. Don't sweat in the school clothes. Hang them up. Maybe tomorrow you'll visit school. And stay out of those lunch boxes. It's only eight-thirty." My words would fall on deaf ears. Within minutes they were in full snow gear ready to whip over to the school and play on the hill.

Little things began to bother me about these unscheduled closings. For example, we'd drive by the school and our second-grader would point and ask, "What's that building, Daddy?" Also, it was March and they hadn't had their Christmas exchange yet. Our ten-year-old had to be prompted with his alphabet. And the neighborhood "Love and Devotion to Child Study" group had to postpone their meetings three times because they couldn't get the rotten kids out from under foot.

"We might as well be living in Fort Apache," said one mother. "If this snow doesn't melt soon, my kid will out-grow his school desk."

We all agreed something had to be done.

This year, a curious thing happened. In the newspaper it was stated that snow was no longer to be considered an Act of God by the state board of education. Their concern was that the children spend a minimum number of hours in school each week and that the buses would roll come yells or high water.

Snow is a beautiful, graceful thing as it floats downward to the earth, and is enhanced greatly by the breathtaking indentation of school bus snow tires. Snow is now considered an Act of Nature in the suburbs. And everyone knows she's a Mother and understands these things.

"Whip it up, group. Everyone to the boots!"

"What do you mean you're a participle in the school play and you need a costume? You be careful in that attic, do you

hear? If you fall through and break your neck, you're going to be late for school!"

A drudge. That's all I am. They'll all be sorry when I'm not around to run and fetch.

"So you swallowed the plastic dinosaur out of the cereal box. What do you want me to do, call a vet?"

Lunches. Better pack the lunches. Listen to them bicker. What do they care what I pack? They'd trade their own grandmother for a cough drop and a Holy picture.

Of course, none of these things would bother me if I had an understanding husband. Mother was right. I should have married that little literature major who broke out in a rash every time he read Thoreau. But no, I had to pick the nut standing out in the driveway yelling at the top of his voice, "I am thirty-nine years old. I make fifteen thousand dollars a year. I will not carry a Donald Duck thermos to the office!" Boy, he wouldn't yell at me if my upper arms weren't flabby. He never used to yell at me like that. *He* should worry. He doesn't have to throw himself across the washer during "spin" to keep it from walking out of the utility room. He doesn't have to flirt with a hernia making bunk beds. He doesn't have to shuffle through encyclopedias before the school bus leaves to find out which United States president invented the folding chair.

It's probably the weather. "Everybody out!"

Look at 'em stumbling around the driveway like newborn field mice. It's the weather all right. No leaves on the trees. No flowers. No green grass. Just a big picture window with nothing to look at but . . . *a new bride moving into the cul-de-sac!* Well, there goes the neighborhood. Would you look at her standing at her husband's elbow as he stencils their marvy new name on their marvy new garbage cans? I suppose tomorrow she'll be out waxing her driveway. So give her a few years, and she'll be like the rest of us sifting through the coffee grounds looking for baby's pacifier.

What am I saying? Give her a few years of suburban living and she'll misplace the baby! What was it I was supposed to look for this morning? Maybe I'll think of it. I wonder how much time I waste each day looking for lost things. Let's see, I spent at least two hours yesterday looking for the bananas and enough straight pins to pin up a hem. Lucky the kids came up with the idea of walking across the floor in my bare feet or I'd be looking for pins yet. I suppose I could've uncovered the bananas by smelling breaths, but you have to trust someone sometime when they say no.

The day before that I misplaced the car keys. Of course, that's not my fault. That was the fault of the clown who left them in the ignition. You'd certainly never think to look there for them. Just say I spend about two hours a day looking for stuff. That amounts to 730 hours a year, not counting the entire months of November and December when I look for the Christmas cards I buy half price the preceding January.

I'd have a child growing up on the Pennsylvania Turnpike today if a group of picnickers hadn't noticed her sifting through trash barrels in the roadside park and become curious about how she got there. I wonder if other women piff away all that time looking for nail files and scotch tape.

I knew a woman once who always said, "Have a place for everything and everything in its place." I hated her. I wonder what she would say if she knew I rolled out of bed each morning and walked to the kitchen on my knees hoping to catch sight of a lost coin, a single sock, an overdue library book or a boot that could later inspire total recall.

I remember what I was going to look for . . . my glasses! But that was only if I wanted to see something during the day. So what do I have to see today that I couldn't put off until tomorrow? One of the kids said there was something strange in the oven. Probably a tray of hors d'oeuvres left over from the New Year's party. I'll look for the glasses tomorrow.

In the meantime, maybe I'll call Phyllis and tell her about the new bride. Better not chance it. Phyllis might be feeling great today and then I'd feel twice as crumby as I feel now.

This place will have to be cleaned before they can condemn it. Wouldn't be at all surprised if I ended up like my Aunt Lydia. Funny, I haven't thought about her in years. Grandma always said she ran away with a vanilla salesman. Lay you odds she made her move right after the holidays. Her kids probably hid the Christmas candy in the bedroom closet and the ants were coming out of the woodwork like a Hessian drill team. One child was going through the dirty clothes hamper trying to retrieve her "favorite" underwear to wear to school.

Lydia spotted her nine-year-old dog (with the Christmas puppy plumbing) and ran after it with a piece of newspaper. The dog read a few of the comics, laughed out loud, then wet on the carpet.

Uncle Wally probably pecked her on the cheek with all the affection of a sex-starved cobra and said he wanted to talk about the Christmas bills when he came home.

She passed a mirror and noticed a permanent crease on her face where the brush roller had slipped. Her skirt felt tight. She sucked in her breath. Nothing moved. Her best friend called to tell her the sequin dress she bought for New Year's Eve had been reduced to half price.

Speculating on her future she could see only a long winter in a house with four blaring transistor radios, a spastic washer, and the ultimate desperation of trying to converse with the tropical fish.

You know something. The odds are Aunt Lydia didn't even know the vanilla salesman. When he knocked on the door, smiled and said, "Good morning, madam, I'm traveling through your territory on my way to Forked Tongue, Iowa," Aunt Lydia grabbed her satchel, her birdcage, and her nerve elixir, closed the door softly behind her and said quietly, "You'll do."

Each woman fights the doldrums in her own way. This illustrated guide, *What to Do Until the Therapist Arrives with the Volleyball*, is not unique. Its suggestions may, however, keep you from regressing into a corner in a foetal position with your hands over your ears.



A: KNIT. Learning how to knit was a snap. It was learning how to stop that nearly destroyed me. Everyone in the house agreed I was tense and needed to unwind. So, I enrolled in an informal class in knitting.

The first week I turned out thirty-six pot holders. I was so intent on an afghan you'd have thought I was competing with an assembly line of back-scratcher makers from Hong Kong.

I couldn't seem to stop myself. By the end of the first month of knitting, I was sick from relaxation. There were deep, dark circles under my eyes. My upper lip twitched uncontrollably. There were calluses on both my thumbs and forefingers. I cried a lot from exhaustion. But I was driven