

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Range of Motion

Elizabeth Berg

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## About the Book

'I can tell you how it happened. It's easy to say how it happened. He walked past a building, and a huge chunk of ice fell off the roof, and it hit him in the head. This is Chaplinesque, right? People start to laugh when I tell them-'

As Jay Berman lingers in a coma, his young wife, Lainey, is the only one who believes he will recover. While he lies motionless, she hopes to reach him by offering reminders of the ordinary life they shared - sweet-smelling flowers, his softly textured shirt, spices from their kitchen. And throughout her ordeal, Lainey is sustained by her relationship with two very special women, each of whom teaches her about the enduring bond of friendship and the genuine power of hope.

## About the Author

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*, *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.

*Also by Elizabeth Berg*

Open House  
Until the Real Thing Comes Along  
True to Form  
Joy School  
Never Change  
Say When  
The Pull of the Moon  
Talk Before Sleep

# Range of Motion

Elizabeth Berg



arrow books

*For you, holding this.  
From me, nearby.*

*Keep me from going to sleep too soon  
Or if I go to sleep too soon  
Come wake me up. Come any hour  
Of night. Come whistling up the road.  
Stomp on the porch. Bang on the door.  
Make me get out of bed and come  
And let you in and light a light.  
Tell me the northern lights are on  
And make me look. Or tell me clouds  
Are doing something to the moon  
They never did before, and show me.  
I'm half as wide awake as you  
And start to dress wondering why  
I ever went to bed at all.  
Tell me the walking is superb.  
Not only tell me but persuade me.  
You know I'm not too hard persuaded.*

—ROBERT FRANCIS, "SUMMONS"

*I think that the world desires to be beautiful. I have found that beauty in mathematics. I have found it in the hunting behavior of wolves, and the way men and women touch each other. I think the world's keenest desire is for beauty, and that our knowledge of how to achieve that is the various forms of behavior and expression that we apply a single word to, which is love.*

—BARRY LOPEZ

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## PROLOGUE

THEY SAY THAT one of the reasons for tragedy is that you learn important lessons from it. Appreciation for your normal life, for one thing. A new longing for things only ordinary. The feeling is that we are so caught up in minutiae - slicing tomatoes and filling out forms and waiting in lines and emptying the dryer and looking in the paper for things to do - that we forget how to use what we've been given. Therefore we don't taste the plum. We are blind to the slant of the four o'clock sun against the changing show of leaves. We are deaf to the throaty purity of children's voices. We are assumed to be rather hopeless - swallowed up by incorrect notions, divorced from the original genius with which we are born, lost within days of living this distracting life. We are capable only of moments, of single seconds of true appreciation and connection. That is the thought.

I never did believe that. I always felt I had a kind of continual appreciation with a flame that did not flicker, despite the ongoing assaults of an imperfect life. I didn't think I was the only one, either. I thought that all around me were awake people with hearts huge and whole and open. And I wondered, after the accident happened, what is the point in this? Where is the meaning in it? What lesson can I possibly learn?

But sometimes lessons take the crooked path. I mean that I used to wonder how I would feel if I were suddenly plucked from my normal life. I wondered how I would see it; wondered, in fact, *if* I would see it. I suppose it's like the desire for a true mirror to reflect all of our parts, both visible and unseen. I think now the accident was a way of that

happening. Because I did get plucked from my normal life, put in the position of seeing it from another vantage point. And I would say that I did see it. I would say that I saw and saw and saw it. And though the method is not one I would have chosen to verify a supposition, I would also say that my gratefulness is unutterable.

I CAN TELL you how it happened. It's easy to say how it happened. He walked past a building, and a huge chunk of ice fell off the roof, and it hit him in the head. This is Chaplinesque, right? This is kind of funny. People start to laugh when I tell them. I see the start of their hand to their mouth, their poor disguise. I laughed when I heard. I thought after the doctor told me what happened that Jay would get on the phone and say, "Jeez, Lainey, come and get me. I've got a goose egg the size of the world. Come take me home." Only what happened wasn't like Chaplin: Jay didn't land on his butt with his legs sticking out at chopstick angles, twitch his mustache, get back up and walk away. He landed on his side, and stayed there - rather like a child sleeping, the ambulance attendant told the doctor. He was on his side, his arm draped peacefully across his chest, and he didn't wake up at the hospital nor has he since.

Now there is no ice on buildings. Now daffodils sway, uncertain in their newness. Now the hospital is going to transfer him to a nursing home. No more they can do, they told me in our little meeting this morning. "Wait," I said. "There has to be more." I wanted a bigger conference, one of those fancy ones where the social worker comes and tries not to let me see her looking at her watch. It's a tacky watch. You shouldn't try to make a watch look like a bracelet. One or the other. But anyway, Wait, I said, and they said, Sorry Mrs. Berman, we just can't keep him. I said nothing after that. I thought I would sit there saying nothing until they gave in and said okay. They didn't do that. They left, one by one. I saw the white coat of the neurologist flapping a bit as he walked past, the head nurse looking at notes she pulled out of her pocket. I heard the squeak of the physical therapist's new sneakers, Nikes, he's said yesterday, he always buys Nikes, and we'd talked about the relative merits of sneakers and I'd watched the sun play off the top of his hair while he gave Jay range of motion. That is

what they call the passive exercise Jay gets here, range of motion. He can no longer jog every morning, returning on Sundays with a bag from Lessinger's bakery that smells of warm sugar and is stained with irresistible patterns of translucence from the grease. He can't move at all. So every day, a few times a day, someone must put each of Jay's body parts through all the movements of which they are capable. First the thumb is bent, then straightened, then bent and straightened again, twice more. Next, each finger is done individually; then the whole hand, fingers all together. Then comes the wrist, then the elbow, and so on. They do his neck, they do his knees, they do his great toes and his little ones. *Don't forget*, a stranger's hand tells Jay's body. *Remember all that is here for you to use*. So I was watching and I was telling the therapist I still liked Keds, but I was thinking, Be Careful. And I was thinking, Save him.

Saving was not on the agenda at the meeting. They were not really thinking of Jay. What they were thinking was, Next? This left me no time to tell them that they were dismissing the man who showed up at my dorm room with his arms full of lilacs, stolen at considerable risk and so purple the buds were black. He wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the good place, and a heart-shaped leaf lay trapped in the hollow of his throat as though it were planned, though of course it was so perfect it couldn't have been planned. He was nineteen then. Now he is thirty-five, the father of two children who hang on his arms when he comes home, fight for the privilege of relieving him of his briefcase. Girls, Amy and Sarah, four and ten, who are beginning to yell at me because they miss their father.

I go to visit him every day and I keep trying. Jay, I say. You need to come back here now. Please come back. Wake up. I put things in his hands for him to feel: his wallet and keys, his cotton work shirt worn to the softness of Kleenex, baby pinecones, his daughters' drawings, the comb from my hair, a fork. I talk almost non-stop, about anything, just so that

the language might stir him, just so that something, a word, an image, might reach the deep and silent place in him that surely is waiting for the right thing, which will be tiny, I know, which will be so tiny and amaze everyone. "How did you do it?" They'll say and I'll say, "Listen. There isn't a way. It was a normal day. I turned an afternoon movie on his television. Black and white. Bette Davis. I started to tell him to pay attention, this was a good part, and he woke up. That's all. That's it. You just have to wait. You just have to believe."

I would guess that they have given up on believing, here. They have seen too many coma patients die - "fail," they call it - even when all signs pointed toward recovery.

Now I will wait in a nursing home and I will probably be the only one who believes. It will be around my head like a pale aura, my belief, but at the nursing home they will no doubt see my hope only as naïveté and it will make them more tired than they already are. "Pardon me," I see them saying, their arms full of scorched linens, giving me wide berth and not looking me in the eye lest I ask another question. I've heard about nursing homes. Imagine how many flowers I'll have to bring to cover up the stench of urine.

When Jay brought me those lilacs, there was a cut all along the underside of his forearm, a line of valor like a red road on a map. I had to wrap my arms around myself at the sight of it. I thought it was the most romantic thing I'd ever seen. But that was nothing.

I've thought: his name should have been a little longer. Lionel. Joshua. Richard. Then when he signed the checks for the bills he was going to mail on the way to work that morning, it would have taken a little longer. And the ice would have fallen before he got there. He would have walked around it, admired the cool blue color trapped in the white. I've thought: we should have made love that morning. He should have gone to the hardware store before

work. The dentist. He should have gone in earlier than usual. Often I've thought: this is for something I did.

This is what you do. Also, sometimes, you sleep.

After the conference about Jay going to the nursing home, I sat on the bed beside him and pushed his hair back from his forehead. "Hey, guess what?" I said "You're moving!" I felt like a very cheerful person saying to another, "Well! Your house has exploded! Isn't *that* nice!"

*I feel you sitting down beside me. I smell your hair. Is it . . . are we at the breakfast table, your blue robe? I nearly start the reach but then there is the other. A high whine of wind. Speed, this hurtling, forward. Red weeds standing straight below me, an evenness of the space between them. I see the black earth, mica, the start of stars. I am tunnelling deeper toward all that calls. Things move aside, let me in. Lainey, my bones have gone soft and flat, spread out into uselessness. I have to pay attention. I can't tell you. But I feel you. Stay.*

I LIVE IN a duplex outside of St. Paul. It's a big old house, on a city street lined by trees that survived the last round of Dutch elm disease. I had to have the place as soon as I saw it. I felt at home there, even with the rooms empty and echoing. I felt enveloped, at the end of some journey. I turned to Jay and said, "Yes, here." And he said, "I thought so."

Someone once told me she saw a house from the highway that she recognized, though she had never seen it before. She said she felt sure that if she went in, she'd know her way around, that she'd be able to predict where the line of sun and shadow met in every room. She didn't stop, though. She turned on the radio, changed lanes, sped up. As we do.

There's a lot of wood inside my house, golden oak. There are big bedrooms with creaky floors and high ceilings; a pantry in the kitchen, double windows over the sink. There are decals that someone put on the kitchen cabinets, featuring cream-colored mixing bowls with blue stripes and dancing wooden spoons. I like those decals. I have an ongoing romance with the time that they were popular. I like everything about the forties: the music, the flowered tablecloths, the snub-nosed cars, the skirts on the voluptuous armchairs, the purses with the handles that you carried when you wore gloves and open-toed heels and a hat with a veil. I always tell everybody that's my real time, the forties, the time I was meant to live in. Jay says I did. He says he lived then, too, and we were sweethearts, and he was killed in the Solomon Islands during World War II. He was kidding. Kind of. We play a lot of big-band music: Glen Miller. Tommy Dorsey. Les Brown. Harry James. We play records of Peggy Lee before she sounded like Peggy Lee.

There was an old wringer-washer in the basement when we moved in, and I left it there. I like to imagine a ghost woman standing beside it, wearing a loose-fitting housedress and an apron, the pockets holding a floral

handkerchief and bobby pins and the tiny fortune of coins pulled from behind the sofa cushions each day. I like to think about her catching a severely flattened shirt as it came from the wringer, then putting it in a wicker basket and carrying it outside to hang on the rope clothesline. When it got dry and scented by air and sunshine, she would iron it, sprinkling it first by dipping her fingers in a pan, then shaking the drops around like holy water. After she slid the warm shirt on to the hanger, she would hold it at arm's length, inspect it with the fond strictness of a mother.

I like to imagine this woman's whole life in this house: the line of hair escaping to blow across her face as she stood on the steps calling the kids in to dinner, the smell of her roast in the oven, potatoes browning and carrots curling in the blue-and-white-speckled Dutch oven. She wore long white nightgowns to bed; I won't have it any other way. She wrote out her grocery list with a stubby yellow pencil her husband brought home from the insurance company where he worked. Ovaltine, she wrote, in school-correct script. Butter. "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" came from the yellowish-white radio on top of the refrigerator. At ten-thirty in the morning, her phone would ring, the black and clunky phone sitting on the hall table on a doily, a fat phone book on the helpful shelf below. "Hello?" she would say, and then she'd listen to an invitation to have coffee with a neighbor. "That'd be swell," she'd say, and she'd take off her cleaning kerchief and walk across the street. She would sit at her neighbor's kitchen table with her legs crossed, talking, talking, hearing the pleasant china sound of her cup nesting into the saucer.

The women were home. They got to talk. I'm not sure it wasn't better. Think of it, the luxury of talking to another woman and feeling your three-year-old idly pressing his head into your stomach, instead of being fined for picking him up late at day care - again.

I don't know. I keep these things mostly to myself. I keep the ghost woman for myself. Oh, I've told Jay how I think it