

The Lady Who is Prepared for Death
Y York

"I was prepared for death; I greeted the news with a kind of relieved sigh, oh it's only death, thank goodness it isn't something else I have to put up with. Or as I say to my students, something else up with which I have to put. What I was not prepared for was the perverse reactions of my friends who demonstrate a behavior with which I am totally unfamiliar. Jamie and Flo bring me the personals, and prod me into reading them. This they do in my hospital room at 6 AM prior to surgery. I want them to leave. I want to ask my doctor things. I want to know how many of these surgeries he's done and the statistical success rate, I want a private moment with my soon to be removed organs, I want time to mourn, I want to linger over each thought in case it is my last one, but I don't get any of this because I'm reading aloud the mournful cries of men seeking women. The very last thing I do before the anesthesia takes hold is chuckle. The very first thing I do coming out of anesthesia, is chuckle. I think about my friends a lot those next weeks. Why do I need a boyfriend now that I have fewer internal organs, I was doing fine before. In my friends' eyes, this death isn't going to count unless some man mourns me. This is tragic. But this simmering notion of romance is, I am sure, the reason I reply when this guy speaks to me at the A&P. "Don't I know you?" he says. He does know me, in spite of my initial doubts. I was on a panel about community-police relations and he was in the audience. He remembers what I'd said. This to me is remarkable, I don't remember what I said, I don't remember what anybody says. So he reminds me what I said on the panel; I'm tired, I want to pay for my groceries and walk home; he picks up my bag and walks with me. Offers me a ride, but he's a stranger, what should I do? I think, hey, you're dying, what difference does it make, but I don't want to go out as a headline. I leave his license plate number on my answering machine with him watching thinking I'm giving it to my mother. Now, everybody knows that if you really call your mother with a license plate number, she immediately calls the police. It's not until I get in the car that I notice that this guy, this man, is very cute, and he's smart. And not just because he agrees with my politics, but that doesn't hurt. He takes me home, takes the groceries up, he wants to call me. I don't think so. Am I married, am I seeing someone, am I gay. The only conceivable reasons for not wanting him to call. Well, at least the male ego hasn't changed. I wish I could have feigned this disinterest when I was looking for a mate, but you can't feign indifference when you're interested. You can only feign indifference when you're not interested. This guy is crushed. I can't stand to hurt people's feelings, this is why I stayed married so long. Sure, sure, call me.

Call me, call me.

These are magic words. For me. Magic. I go back to the center, start teaching my class again. I start wearing makeup. I get my roots done. I think about going to the dentist. The meanest thing I did was when they diagnose me - I wrote to my friend Kazzy and said, 'well the good news is I will have my teeth for as long as I live.' I hadn't entirely gone to pot, I just stopped washing. The rejuvenated, clean me goes in for tests. They tell me I'm better. I wait for the real shoe to drop, for them to say yes, illness A is gone, but now illness B is killing you. No, I'm just better. I'm better, I feel better, I look better, I am better. And I've been having these ... dates. No sex, but dates. I never dated anybody this old, but I was never this old before, either. When you're this old you don't just go to somebody's house and stay the night. You have to pack. And it's very hard to pack ... spontaneously. My guy doesn't know I'm sick, but hey, I'm better. See, I don't tell him. At first I don't tell him because, who's he that he has to know my personal life. Then I like him, and don't tell him because I think it might make him sad, then I don't tell him because I like him and I don't want him to go away. I really don't want him to go away. We have a date to see art, we get into this amazing argument, which is rare because mostly we agree about stuff, something about, this made me livid, he wants to limit the food that food stamps will purchase to healthy foods. I'm furious, and blind with rage as we walk into, you guessed it, a restaurant, I'm screaming about his pretentious liberal holiness when we run into Jamey, my friend Jamey. Who gives me a hug, and then turns and hugs my guy. They work together, side by side. We're all excited and surprised, except me who's just worried that Jamey's going to spill the beans. We join Jamey and James, I hate their names, but know for a fact that they didn't invent them. The anticipation doesn't last too long. We sit down and James asks if I have to have any more operations. I say, no. He panics and says "they haven't given up, have they?" I say, I'm taking pills, and then we all order and eat dinner. With me and my guy not looking at each other, not once, not for a second. Silence on the way home in the car. My house, he stops, we turn, stare. I tell him. Everything. That I'm better, what they do for it, why I didn't say, then why I didn't say, then why I didn't say. You see, the trouble with this kind of information, is that it makes a person have to decide something about you, well, about me, a person has to decide something about me, and it's too early for decisions. We're on the back burner, in a pot, on simmer, with no decisions imminent. Now he has to decide if he's in for the long haul, and if he is, the long haul might be very short. Of course, also, in my twisted brain I figure that this might make me more attractive. The possibility of a very short, intense, passionate, tragedy is very attractive to some men. And some women. This is a very sexy moment, but apparently he doesn't think so because I go inside and he drives

away. It is not possible to go inside somebody else's brain, particularly when somebody else isn't there. I don't try. I go into my brain, have a look around. What I find is this happy person with a whole stack of papers to grade. If he calls, if he doesn't call, I'm still a happy person with papers to grade. Boy, I hope he calls. I need to say thanks."