

# **Sleepless Nights Study Guide**

**Sleepless Nights by Elizabeth Hardwick**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Sleepless Nights Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Part 1.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Part 2.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Part 3.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Part 4.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Part 5.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Part 6.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Part 7.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Part 8.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Part 9.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Part 10.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>



## Plot Summary

When she is in her fifties, Elizabeth looks over the memories of her life and sees a string of people that she has known, many of whom have died by now. She examines her memories and thinks about what she has learned from various experiences, from her childhood in Lexington, Kentucky, to Amsterdam as a young woman, and New England as an adult.

When Elizabeth is a child, she is one of nine children, in a family that is obsessed with horse racing. They especially love the Kentucky Derby, and, in fact, Elizabeth has two brothers who die around the racetrack. Elizabeth gets along with her father, but she never really comes to understand her mother, who seems to accept all that life sends her way with a tired grace. As an adult, Elizabeth is still haunted by a desire to know who her mother really is. Many of these thoughts are composed as letters to Elizabeth's friend "M." When Elizabeth is a young woman, she gets involved with some Communists, but this does not last for very long.

Elizabeth has several boyfriends, but none of them leave a very permanent mark on her life. She moves to Amsterdam with one boyfriend, where she spends a summer observing the passionate love affairs of a Dutchman named "Dr. Z." "Dr. Z." cannot choose between his wife and two other women, but in the end, only his wife stays with him. Back in New York City, Elizabeth becomes enchanted with the singing of Billie Holliday, whom she goes to see sing as often as she has the chance. For a while, she has a pseudo-married relationship with "J.", a gay roommate that she lives with for a year or two. A few times, she sleeps with her friend Alex, who is an eligible bachelor who finally settles down as an older man. She lives in a boarding house for single women for a while.

When Elizabeth is older, she becomes more jaded about the way things tend to progress in life. She spends time living in Boston, Maine, and New York. Elizabeth knows several humble cleaning women, and is moved by the diligent, regular rhythms of their lives, usually punctuated by tragedy. Elizabeth wants to make sense of her memories, and create some sort of pleasant, coherent picture of her own life. She realizes that the best she can do is to tell her own story, and try not to lie too much.



# Part 1

## Part 1 Summary

Elizabeth thinks back on many of the moments in her life, giving impressions rather than telling entire stories. She begins to reveal what her childhood was like, growing up in the South, mostly in Kentucky, as part of a family obsessed with horse racing.

Elizabeth jumps around in time a lot in her narrative, which reflects the way in which she has moved around a lot in life. Her storytelling is more like the reminiscing of someone who is going through an old drawer of mementos, explaining the little anecdote that goes with each one. Some items seem unimportant, and are just moments in a life. Others have had lasting significance, but Elizabeth has been around long enough to recognize the folly and struggle of everyone's lives, and she does not romanticize any particular moment, unless she admits that she is being self-indulgent. Elizabeth often does not bother to give a name to the characters she encounters and remembers, but imagines story lines for strangers that she passes, and often imposes upon a stranger a role that is very significant to her. She reads over snippets of old letters, most of which talk about the location in which she has just found herself, and how it feels to be there. Since she is telling the story from later in life, she is well aware of the final destination of every character, and often refers to the cemetery that is waiting.

Elizabeth finds herself in the dining car of a train moving through the winter night, surrounded by drunken businessmen who are trying to make their gaiety last a little longer. In her mind, the men are synonymous with frat boys she remembers fighting off in college, and she feels violated by the men's proximity, as though she has slept with each of them. Then again, as she regards them more, the men become her own brothers, and she remembers wanting to get away from her siblings as a child. She recalls how all of the children in her family secretly wished to be orphans. She remembers one brother telling her that if she makes a lot of money, she can always follow the horse races, but now she has left that all behind.

Elizabeth calls to mind her first experience with the sinister nature of bribery, which always wants to take more, as she thinks about an old man who "kindly" buys chocolate and movie tickets for Elizabeth and her friends when she is a little girl. The man turns out to be a child molester, yet Elizabeth thinks of the episode as more a story about trust, and less one about sex. She also remembers a man in his thirties, who seeks out new experiences, and has affairs with any loser girls he can find. At eighteen, Elizabeth unceremoniously loses her virginity to this fellow, who drops her off a block away from her house to increase the illicit nature of their encounter. A few years later, the man jumps to his death off a bridge, in a burst of spontaneity.



## Part 1 Analysis

Hardwick writes like poetry, packing nuance and meaning into each phrase, so that the impression given by a sentence is greater than simply what the words say. This helps the reader feel more enveloped by the setting of the book, but it also makes the actual plot less clear. The haphazard order in which events are described, with no regard for chronological order, gives the reader the feeling that it is not so important in what order the events happened, but what changes these events have caused in Elizabeth. She very much gives the sense that there is no going back and changing the past, but that we can look over old memories, and see what lessons we can learn from them. Elizabeth openly talks about the setting, referring to it directly, as though she knows that she is a character in a novel. Many of her observations seem tongue-in-cheek, as though she sees herself as a fool for not using these life lessons the first time around, but only catching on years later.

Elizabeth refers constantly to the many books that she has read, through nights of sleeplessness. This is obviously connected with the title of the book. Elizabeth is fond of quoting books that she has read, and examining the meaning of the quotes, and how they apply to her life and to the people she has known.



## Part 2

### Part 2 Summary

Elizabeth thinks about how many people she has known who died young, especially in her youth in Lexington, Kentucky. She says that many of the people from her youth died before the age of twenty-five. Elizabeth focuses on the sad tale of Juanita. Juanita is the much-loved, only daughter of a railroad stationmaster, who is cared for in her childhood by her doting family. After high school, Juanita becomes a prostitute for no apparent reason, wandering around the town aimlessly, with no regard for her own safety. She spends the nights in the filthiest motels, and drinks heavily, so that she is terribly hung-over in the mornings. Through all of her self-destructive behavior, her family still supports her and tries to take care of her, but she ends up with some venereal disease. While the neighbors gossip about what Juanita has caught, she dies in much pain and suffering. The thing that upsets the townspeople so much about Juanita is that she does not appear to need the money from prostituting herself. As far as they can tell, Juanita ought to grow up to be a nice, normal girl.

Elizabeth points out that most objects and people resent the boundaries placed on them, but eventually grow to accept these things, gaining a stubbornness in their acceptance. Her primary example of this is her own mother, who gave birth to nine children. Elizabeth remembers her mother as being constantly pregnant, as though her fertility were a garment that she never took off. When Elizabeth thinks about whether her mother minds all of this birthing, she sees the strength that her mother has gained, by having as many babies as nature intends, without worrying so much what will become of them. She takes care of her brood more out of habit than out of determination. Elizabeth thinks that the childbearing patterns of herself and her siblings reflect how they feel about coming from such a large family. They love their mother intensely, and do not criticize her for her choices, but they all have small families themselves, not wanting to repeat the pattern.

Elizabeth notes that many people think that they can predict the course of a life, but they are often mistaken. For example, people regard old spinster schoolteachers in a certain way, imagining that their lives are dull and predictable, with no romance or sex. In fact, Elizabeth has known enough of these spinsters to know that they often carry the love of someone who has been lost forever, or have wild sex lives that no one suspects. She points out that these women might be far more interested in the low-class, bad-boy drifters who come through town, than a gentlemanly suitor.

### Part 2 Analysis

Elizabeth talks a lot about death, as the final destination of us all. She opens the chapter talking about how a coffin feels toward the earth that is piled upon it, and then says that she remembers so many people who died young, although she only describes



the sad case of Juanita. This gives the impression that everything in the chapter must be related to death, even things that have no obvious connection. She concludes the chapter by describing the anticipation and cooling-off periods of the Kentucky Derby, which is a major event of her childhood. After the race, the horses are led away to their stalls, but no one knows how they feel about having finished the race. This can be seen as a metaphor for death, and the way that no one can communicate from beyond the grave. Whatever someone has accomplished in their life, will someday be lost to humanity, confined to a coffin. Elizabeth sums this up by saying, "Flaubert wrote in a letter to Louise Colet that he could never see a cradle without thinking of a grave," (Part 2, p. 25).



## Part 3

### Part 3 Summary

Elizabeth thinks back to the time she spent in the 1940s, living in a sleazy hotel in New York City called the Hotel Schuyler. There she lives with "J.", a fastidious gay man with whom she has been friends since childhood. Their roommate relationship is filled with drama and irritation, and it becomes very similar to a marriage, in the way that Elizabeth and "J." find fault with one another's idiosyncracies. "J." is very neat, and he always has to brush his teeth after a meal. Elizabeth sees his life as being chained to the disciplined habits that he has developed. He has always been very queer, from the beginning, and he avoids sports, but one day he decides that he should start exercising. He begins a disciplined regime of lifting weights, and Elizabeth is disturbed by the physical changes that result. When they finally split up after a couple years of sharing their hotel suite, it feels almost like they are getting a divorce.

Elizabeth and "J." love going to clubs to hear Billie Holliday perform. This is practically the only way to hear Billie's music, since at the time there are not many records of her singing. Elizabeth goes to hear Billie again and again. She and "J." even go to Billie's hotel room one time, looking for her, but she is not available. Billie is never alone, always accompanied by others who are fascinated by her, yet she has no real friends or lovers, and is closed off to people who might want to get close to her. When she comes to visit Elizabeth and "J." once at the Hotel Schuyler, they do not know what to talk about. Billie's closeness and regard seem to be reserved for Mister, her gigantic dog, that she always gets one of her admirers to walk. Unable to make many recordings, or perform at packed concert halls, Billie has to perform at small night clubs night after night, and instead of having a home, she just has a string of hotel rooms that she stays in for a night or two. Although Billie loves singing, it is a lot of work to get ready for the spotlight every night, and entertain people until dawn.

When Billie's mother dies, Billie is late for the funeral, but she makes it. It is strange to see the faces of the mourners, who are mostly performers, and whose faces rarely see the light of day, much less the morning. Billie and her mother could hardly have been more different from one another, as though Billie were a changeling, exchanged at birth. Billie deals with her problems, and the crushing weight of having already achieved the pinnacle of her art, by indulging in lots of drugs, mostly heroin. She does not seem apologetic about this, even though she ends up in prison for a little while on drug charges. She lives her life like a piece of passionate, excruciating art, pushing herself to new limits, and not worrying how much she damages herself along the way. In the end, Billie Holliday dies at the age of forty-four, of health problems resulting from her heroin addiction.





## Part 3 Analysis

To Elizabeth, the Hotel Schuyler is a sort of Mecca of failed artists who still think that they are going to succeed, despite obvious evidence to the contrary. They all give in to their powerful vices, thinking that they are finally about to get their big break, but it never leads to anything. The tenants are all night-time people, who shun the light of day, and devote the evenings to their bad habits. Elizabeth glosses over the experience of her own abortion, giving it only a vague paragraph, as if such an event could be only a side interest amid such goings-on. In some ways, it seems like an abortion is just a standard blip in the life of a penniless bohemian, and as if Elizabeth finds Billie Holliday's singing to be far more interesting than Elizabeth's own troubles. Realistically, though, it is more likely that the abortion is a painful enough subject that she would rather focus on exciting things, which nonetheless have the sad air of new beginnings that quickly get derailed. It is as though all these observations are metaphors for the abortion. Elizabeth finds it surprising when the abortionist hands her his business card afterward, showing that he also runs a funeral home. This is another reference to her earlier connections of birth and death, the cradle and the grave.



## Part 4

### Part 4 Summary

Years later, established in New York with "successful" people who have professional or academic careers, Elizabeth attends dinner parties with various young, cosmopolitan people. Many of the party-goers are divorced, and Elizabeth thinks about the way people regard divorce, as another logical step in a marriage. For many of them, there is a trend of a young married couple buying an old house, renovating it, and having the children from a previous marriage come visit on the weekends, until the stress of mortgage payments causes the couple to split up.

At one party, Elizabeth finds herself talking with Judith, a woman who is very unhappy about her lot in life, but who regards her misfortune with a kind of cheerful resignation. Judith always says "of course," and "naturally," when she is telling about something bad in her life, as though nothing good can ever be expected. She tells Elizabeth about her grown son, who has psychiatric problems, and is now living with a married pair of psychologists, as therapy. Judith remembers that it is Thursday night, meaning that she must go call her son, who does not want to hear from her. Judith knows that the two psychologists also do not want her to call, so she really feels that it is important, since they will be sure to notice if she forgets.

Elizabeth has a neighbor named Miss Cramer, who is a singer and teaches music lessons. Miss Cramer is a snob, living with her two poodles and her snobbish, elderly mother. She loves to go away for the summer in her fancy car to vacation spots, leaving behind all of her pupils. As the years go by, Miss Cramer falls into sad decline. Her mother dies, and there are fewer and fewer music students. When she runs out of money, she moves from her beautiful, two-story apartment to a very small place down the street, in a bad area. Elizabeth sees many years' worth of lovely souvenirs from Europe, Asia, and America being thrown out with the trash, because there is very little room in the new apartments. When Miss Cramer's dogs die, she cannot really recover from the loss, and she wanders around the streets in the same dirty old clothes every day. Elizabeth watches as Miss Cramer approaches a bag lady, noticing that the two are similar in that they both represent the powerful wreckage of humanity. Since they cannot see what they look like to outsiders, the two old women do not recognize that they have anything in common.

### Part 4 Analysis

There is a marked contrast between the people in Part 3 and Part 4. The people in Part 3, at the Hotel Schuyler, have abandoned responsible ways of life, and are sure that success is just around the corner. There is a sadness in their weak self-deception, which tends to continue until they reach the point of despair. Despite all evidence to the contrary, these people believe that life is just waiting to give them that Big Break that will



change everything. On the other hand, these other New Yorkers are responsible and have careers. They invest in taking care of their children, and they have nice houses that are perfect for hosting dinner parties. Many of these people have a Ph.D., and many have been successful enough to have recognizable names, to people who are in the same field. Yet these people seem no happier, and are no more truly successful, than those at the Hotel Schuyler. For instance, Judith is a doting mother who puts real effort into staying connected with her son, but he has no desire to talk with her or tell her what is going on in his life. Elizabeth seems to feel that the problem with achieving success is, how does one return to normal life, knowing that one's life may be all downhill from that point? Elizabeth can not really tell whether more happiness comes from hoping for success, or from having already achieved it.



## Part 5

### Part 5 Summary

Elizabeth runs into her old friend Alex on the street in New York, and writes about it to her friend "M." Alex is a perennial bachelor, the kind of man who puts a lot of effort into looking good, and is very handsome. Alex has spent his entire adult life cultivating the lifestyle of the attractive bachelor, dating many women, but always letting them know that they are not the only one. Elizabeth herself has slept with him a few times, and is intimidated by his sexual prowess. She thinks about other bachelors she has known, some of whom were gay, and how they have cheated the status quo a little bit, by getting to live selfishly, in their own apartments, doing what they want and not worrying about how the wife will feel about things. Many wealthy older women become Alex's girlfriends and patrons, financing his flattering, stylish clothing and supporting him while he works on writing a book. Sometimes these women try to marry him, which never works.

A year later, Alex is late arriving for an evening at Elizabeth's apartment, and she can tell that he is very upset about something. He reveals that his long-term girlfriend, Sarah, has left him. After fifteen years of taking care of Alex and waiting for him to be ready to commit, Sarah has eloped with a family friend from her childhood. Now, Alex regrets that he never married Sarah. Even though he is once again free to live alone and unfettered, Alex has taken on the air of a family man, and for the first time, he wishes that he had settled down. Soon afterward, he marries another woman, and becomes a professor at a university.

Elizabeth mentions a man named "G.", who becomes a widower after many years of marriage. She talks about how sad it is to see him, having finally finished creating his dream home, sitting sad and alone on the front porch. She points out how retired people seem to be chasing after perfection, fixing up their houses better than ever before, as though they can finally achieve perfection in life. These people do not know how to keep functioning when their spouse dies or leaves them.

### Part 5 Analysis

It is not clear whether Elizabeth thinks that it is better to marry, or to be alone. She knows married people who do not make one another happy, or who think that they will be together forever, and are stunned when they find themselves alone again. She also knows people, like Alex, who enjoy being alone, and who intend to spend their entire lives that way, but who suddenly find themselves lonely. Elizabeth herself does not like to hold on to lots of photographs and mementos of her love affairs, because it makes it so much more painful to get over when the love affair ends. She does not seem unhappy that Alex does not want to be with her, since she has known for years that she could never hold on to him.



## Part 6

### Part 6 Summary

When Elizabeth is eighteen, and still living in Lexington, Kentucky, she starts reading a lot of Communist propaganda, and has several friends who are Communists. She remembers a serious man and woman coming down from Cincinnati, trying to spread the gospel of the Revolution. There are not very many locals who support the cause. One Appalachian family has a very sick son named Lyle, who lives for the thrill of discussing Communism, although he can hardly ever leave the house. Lyle has one friend, a man named Mason, who likes to schedule Communist meetings that very few people ever attend.

Another Communist is Marie, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, who sees no hypocrisy in her own stinginess about tipping, and her desire to bring about the Revolution. Elizabeth wonders what Marie really thinks Communism is, but imagines that Marie is going for fat-cheeked schoolchildren singing praise of certain revolutionaries, while joyous farmers thresh the bountiful harvest. For quite a while, Marie has a lover named Bernie, a blue-collar fellow who does not seem to fit well in her neat, orderly world. When Marie eventually goes to Europe, she has no interest in the museums and churches, because her background is too wealthy for her to have been taught to appreciate such things. There is an Italian man named Benito who is perhaps her lover for a while. Twenty years later, Marie seems confused that the Revolution still has not come. She is still waiting.

### Part 6 Analysis

Elizabeth finds Lyle's life to be very sad. His family is very low-class, and when they convert to Communism, they seem to have found something to function as a driving force, and this is certainly the most important factor in Lyle's experience. Lyle loves to read about the world around him, but always through the lens of Communist propaganda. He wants to change the way the world is run, and yet he himself is barely capable of interacting with the world at all. Lyle wants to be a revolutionary, but only the mailman asks after him. After many years, Lyle's family moves out of the house, but Elizabeth does not know where they have gone. She asks where one looks for people who have never been in the phone book.



## Part 7

### Part 7 Summary

Many years later, in the 1970s, a young woman named Louisa, who is a friend of a friend, comes to stay with Elizabeth for several days. Louisa is in town for a job interview, and in her free time, she sits on Elizabeth's couch being bored, as if that were an activity. When Louisa is not being aggressively bored, staring off into space, she talks about how hard it is for her to sleep at night. She is tortured by insomnia, and talks about it at length. Louisa lies just enough during her interview to land a good job as a sort of secretary. Elizabeth thinks about the uninteresting course of Louisa's life spread out before her, and thinks about her own mother.

Elizabeth feels that she can understand her father somewhat, but not her mother. Mama seems rootless, having moved around so much as a child. One of her many siblings is a brother named Robert, the smartest of the bunch. Robert ends up in a mental hospital, and sends Mama beautifully written letters which sentimentally glorify patriotic holidays. Elizabeth does not think that these letters are evidence of insanity. Elizabeth also notes that Mama's children loved the races in Kentucky, and two of Elizabeth's brothers died around the race track. However, Elizabeth also describes the death of a horse in the same paragraph, as though the horse's death is just as important to Mama as that of her own sons. Thinking back over the many years, Elizabeth wonders which thoughts her mother, dead now, will forgive her for thinking. Elizabeth thinks of Mama's faults, and decides not to dwell on them, deciding in the same moment not to judge Louisa too harshly for her youthful narcissism.

### Part 7 Analysis

Elizabeth openly refers to the fact that she is writing a book about her own life. She starts out by saying that she is not going to make her father into a character, but then goes ahead and tells of her experiences with him, describing the kind of man he was. She treats this as though it is merely a way of trying to understand her mother, who was married to him for so many years. Elizabeth also mentions how family members might complain about her not changing her own name within the book (since the author's name is Elizabeth), so that it is not obvious what is fact or fiction. She acknowledges that some of the events and characters are very real, but not all, and that some things have been changed. In this way, she explains to the reader that she has chosen to tell her own life story, as though it were a fictional account with a heroine. By saying that her father will not be a character, but then talking about his life, she is telling the reader that she is presenting her father accurately, with no embellishments. Since she does not really understand her mother, it is necessary to make up some details, trying to piece together some meaning from the memories she has of her mother.

## Part 8

### Part 8 Summary

The nurse and Simone hate one another, and Simone tries to get "Dr. Z." to fire the nurse. Although he claims to break up with the nurse, he does not, and so his love life is always filled with passion and jealousy. Simone begs him to leave "Madame Z.", but he never does. After many years, the nurse moves away, and eventually, even Simone breaks off her affair with the doctor. "Dr. Z." finds himself in a monogamous marriage, quite by accident. Years later, he finds out that Simone painted many portraits of him. The most famous of these features the doctor in his office, with three skeletons hanging behind him.

In the 1970's, "Dr. Z." and his wife come to New York, and are visiting with Elizabeth. "Madame Z." gets drunk and goes off on a monologue about how much better the French are than the Dutch. Elizabeth thinks about how, in her disheveled, drunken state, "Madame Z." has never seemed more Dutch.

### Part 8 Analysis

It seems at first to "Dr. Z." that all of his love affairs are managed well enough, with no lasting, painful consequences. Later in life, he knows better. The pain that all three women feel about his infidelity is represented by the three skeletons hanging behind "Dr. Z." in the portrait by Simone. Although his marriage is still intact, and the mistresses have gone by the wayside, the bitterness of many years of neglect and infidelity haunt his interactions with his wife. After years of putting up with her husband constantly courting other women, "Madame Z." finally has him all to herself, but all she wants to do is get drunk and complain about him. Throughout the description of this friend's love life, Elizabeth analyzes her own relationship with her boyfriend, who is not even important enough to get a name or pseudonym. It is almost as though the long-lasting, failed relationship of "Dr. Z." and "Madame Z." is held up in contrast, to show how unimportant the boyfriend is now to Elizabeth.



## Part 9

### Part 9 Summary

Elizabeth thinks about cleaning women that she has known over the years. Two especially stand out in her mind: Josette and Ida. Josette cleans several houses a week, making the possessions of wealthy people shine and sparkle, and going home to a tiny apartment with cheap furniture. She often talks with Elizabeth about her sister, who has health problems. Once, Elizabeth and Josette go to see the sister, who is fiercely proud of her diseases, and has grown so fat (from not moving around) that she cannot get out of her wheelchair. The sister is sometimes taken care of by a young man who boards with her. When the sister finally dies, Josette does not know how to react, since she both loves her, and resents her for being so lazy and whiny. Josette has a nice husband named Michael, who approaches his work with love and zeal. He and Josette finally achieve their paradise of living in a little trailer park in Florida. Josette is very sad when Michael drops dead while working.

Ida is a laundress, who takes in laundry from people all over town. She seems to love doing laundry, being a strong, burly creature of habit. She also loves fighting and arguing, so no one ever wants to complain to her about the condition of the laundry. When Ida's boyfriend, Herman, steals all of her money, she is so enraged that she has to go to a mental asylum for a while to recover. Many years later, Elizabeth goes to Ida's little house to visit her, and is horrified at the gross old woman that Ida has become. She is still taking in laundry.

### Part 9 Analysis

Elizabeth has examined how life tends to go for people who are born wealthy, who expect great things to come to them with little or no effort. For these cleaning women, it is the opposite. They are born into poverty and struggle, and do not expect anything different, unless they are very lucky and work very hard. Such women are so accustomed by habit to hard daily work, that they are able to keep grinding along like machines. They work around their health problems, around physical obstacles, and around personal tragedies, and they keep working until they stop breathing. They do not expect fabulous blessings from life, so when they find something to be thankful for, they appreciate it as long as they have it.





## Part 10

### Part 10 Summary

Elizabeth remembers living in an all-female boarding house, occupied by young graduate students, and older, single women with jobs. The woman that she remembers most clearly is Miss Lavore. Miss Lavore gets through her days of drudgery in order to enjoy her evenings. Every night, after Miss Lavore eats dinner, she changes clothes and emerges in brightly-colored dancing dresses and costume jewelry. She adores her dance lessons, which she has been attending for ten years. One night, as Miss Lavore is riding the subway home from her dance lesson, Elizabeth happens to be riding the same car, and Miss Lavore does not see her. Looking at the large woman who drifts to sleep in her fancy dress, Elizabeth feels sorry for her, and thinks that "Miss Lavore" is probably a stage name. Elizabeth notices the sad attitude of most of the women living at the boarding house, who keep hoping to create a pleasant life for themselves, but instead just pass days and then years by working.

As Elizabeth thinks back on all the memories she has had, she tries to decide what is the correct focus in her reminiscing. Part of her wants to only remember the happy times, and part of her is glad that some details slip away, so that she is finally able to let go of ancient hurts. She would like to only remember an idealized version of her story, but wonders if such an illusion could have much value. After all the people she has known during her life, she decides that she must continue to invest in the lives of those around her.

### Part 10 Analysis

The women who live at the boarding house all seem to be waiting for something to happen, that will start their lives. Some of them see it as a stepping stone in their career, a temporary place to stay while they get their degrees. The older ones seem to be still hoping that something will come along and change everything, but they focus on little things, so that they will not notice that life is passing them by. Elizabeth has come to realize that things do not go as we expect them to, but history tends to repeat itself. It is not that she has learned to fathom the mysteries of life, but she has learned to be content with not knowing. Understanding that life is finite and that she has little time left, she wants to make it count.



# Characters

## Elizabeth

Elizabeth is a fictionalized version of the author herself, Elizabeth Hardwick. She openly refers to the fact that she is writing a book, and that some of her relatives have complained because she did not change her own name in this book, so that some family stories are brought out into the public eye. However, she has changed some details when it suits her purposes, and she admits that truth and fiction are mingled together. This, then, is a meditation on how she sees herself. Elizabeth is in her fifties, and by now she is well aware of her habitual faults. She does not want to be too hard on herself, so she tries not to be too hard on others in her memories of them. However, when her petty or selfish side makes itself known, she openly acknowledges it. Elizabeth grows up in Lexington, Kentucky, as one of nine children. As a child, she is always following the horse races, but as an adult, she leaves that behind and travels to New York, Europe, and New England. She is open-minded toward people who live different lifestyles, and she spends time with people of different classes, from cleaning women, to night club entertainers, to high-brow intellectuals.

## Mama

Elizabeth's mother, Mama, is born Mary Ramsey, and is the youngest of many siblings. When she is a very young child, both of her parents die very suddenly, and so her brothers and sisters raise her, constantly moving from town to town. As a result, Mama never has much of a sense of being rooted in any place. She seems like an exile, and she loves to look over old mementos of the past, and learn about her ancestors, as if to prove that she really came from somewhere. Her grandfather wrote a book called "The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century," which she loves to remark upon, although she has never read it. She marries young, and is pregnant almost constantly for many years, giving birth to nine children, whom she names after her siblings. Two of her sons die as children. Mama always seems tireless and resigned to her fate, and a little passive-aggressive. She is affectionate and very fertile. Elizabeth never really understands her mother, but she thinks about her often when she is old. Mama has a crazy brother named Robert.

## M.

"M." is Elizabeth's friend, to whom she writes many letters. Usually her letters inform "M." about what her new living quarters are like.



## **Miss Cramer**

Miss Cramer is an old music teacher who lives near Elizabeth. When she gets old and senile, she wanders the streets like a bag lady.

## **Josette**

Josette is a cleaning woman that Elizabeth is friends with. She has a husband named Michael.

## **Ida**

Ida is a laundry woman in the town where Elizabeth grows up. She is a large, swollen woman, who loves to fight.

## **Alex Anderson**

Alex is a longtime bachelor whose girlfriend finally leaves him to marry another man. He finally settles down and gets married.

## **J.**

"J." is a gay man who is Elizabeth's roommate for a while. They are friends from childhood, and their relationship is rather like a marriage.

## **Louisa**

Louisa is the friend of a friend of Elizabeth's, who comes to stay with her for a few days while she is in New York for a job interview. She makes an activity of being bored.

## **Billie Holliday**

Billie Holliday is a famous jazz singer. Elizabeth is a huge fan, and goes to hear her sing as often as possible.

## **Dr. Z.**

"Dr. Z." is a Dutchman who has a wife and two mistresses. He loves the drama of his affairs.

## **Papa**

Elizabeth's father works only enough to enjoy his free time. Elizabeth feels that she understands him far better than she understands her mother.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Lexington, Kentucky**

Elizabeth's childhood home is in Lexington, Kentucky.

### **North Carolina**

Mama is from North Carolina originally, although she moved around constantly as a child.

### **Boston, Massachusetts**

Elizabeth goes to live in Boston in 1954.

### **Columbia University**

Elizabeth goes to college at Columbia University in Columbia, New York.

### **New York City**

Elizabeth lives in several different places in New York City.

### **Hotel Schuyler**

Hotel Schuyler is a sleazy New York hotel where Elizabeth lives with "J." It is filled with people who will probably never be successful.

### **Amsterdam, Holland**

Elizabeth lives in Amsterdam for a while, with a boyfriend. "Dr. Z." and his wife also live there.

### **Des Artistes**

"Des Artistes" is the name of a large apartment building near Elizabeth's apartment. It is supposed to be used by artists, so each apartment contains an art studio.



## **Keeneland**

There is a racetrack for the Kentucky Derby at Keeneland.

## **The Boarding House**

For a while, when she is young and single, Elizabeth lives in a boarding house for women only. It is a depressing place.

## **Maine**

Elizabeth lives in a house in Maine for a while, but then she sells the house and fixes up the adjacent barn into a house.



# Themes

## What Do People Expect From Life?

Since Elizabeth is telling her story from the vantage point of being in her fifties or sixties, she can tell how many of the earlier stories are going to turn out. Although people she has known may have expected one thing in youth, Elizabeth now knows whether their dreams were going to come true, or if they would die an early death. Some people, who consider themselves to be great artists, expect life to make them into a star, although Elizabeth can easily see that they do not have the talent or drive to make their plans come true. Others actually put forth the effort to build careers for themselves, but many of these people find that they are not very happy with what they have accomplished, and many of them sink into mediocrity, once they have distinguished themselves by doing something great. Although many children try to rebel against their parents, Elizabeth thinks that most people simply follow in their parents' footsteps, saying, "So many are children who from the day of their birth are growing up to be their parents. Look at the voting records, inherited like flat feet," (Part 5, p. 66). Some people, who are born into poor, hard-working homes, do not expect anything in life to be easy, but expect to work hard as a matter of habit. Elizabeth thinks that one of the most devastating blows life can send is when a couple thinks that they are going to be together for the rest of their lives, but then one of them dies or leaves the other. These people are stunned, and cannot find a way to enjoy the perfect life that they have built with the one they love.

## Love As a Parasitic Relationship

There are many relationships, family or romantic, in "Sleepless Nights," that have the feeling of a parasitic or sometimes symbiotic relationship. Sometimes it is not clear whether many couples have strange, unbalanced dynamics, or if Elizabeth is many times referring to the same relationship. One common type that she describes is an attachment between a wealthy older woman, and a younger man, who may be charming, or low-class. These women buy clothing and food for their young men, taking them out on the town, and sometimes leaving them money when they die. Sometimes this seems completely one-sided, but the old ladies often get the pleasure of a handsome young man who does art. More parasitic are the relationships of the cleaning women to the people who leech their meager funds. Ida, the laundry woman, has a shiftless boyfriend who lives for free in her house, eating her food, and who one day steals all of her money and valuables. Josette, a cleaning lady, has a sister who, because of her health problems and laziness, is unable to get out of a wheelchair. This sister is very proud of her sickness, and demands as much sympathy and care as Josette can give her. "She was unparalleled indeed; one of those possessive, demanding persons who can demand and receive, can throttle and enclose others in a way undreamed of by the reasonable," (Part 9, p. 126). Josette resents this treatment, but is overwhelmed by her sister's pleading. From Elizabeth's observations, it seems



that she has learned that in a love relationship, whether romantic or with family, one person often puts in more than the other. This can be worth it, if the relationship is healthy, but it can also drain the one person, so that the relationship is harmful to them.

## Reminiscing

Elizabeth begins and ends her book by talking about the nature of memory and reminiscing. On the very first page, as she begins, she says, "If only one knew what to remember or pretend to remember," (Part 1, p. 3). This indicates that she thinks that some of her memories are significant, and wants to pull out the most important memories. It also implies that, sometimes, the lesson learned from an experience can be more important than actually remembering the event itself. She does not want to remember everything, because some moments seem irrelevant, and others are too painful to be revisited. The way the story flows feels much more like a casual session of tea with an older relative, who pulls out a memento and identifies it, briefly telling the story of the object, and then telling another story about the same theme, before moving on to comment on how times have changed. Throughout her reminiscing, Elizabeth does not make it clear how valuable an action she thinks it is. She knows that sometimes, people seem to have dull, pathetic lives, to which they try to lend more significance by carefully storing and thinking about old memories and mementos. Since they have evidence that they once accomplished something, it does not seem so bad that they are not likely to accomplish much else. Elizabeth observes the boring, lonely existence of Miss Lavore, a middle-aged woman living in a boarding house, who carefully stores her trophies from ballroom dancing competitions, which are her reason for living. Elizabeth imagines Miss Lavore's room with "Happy memories, triumphs, the long ledger of her life, displayed on tables and dresser tops, tucked away in tissue paper. Adding up," (Part 10, p. 145). This shows that Elizabeth knows that reminiscing can be deceptive, allowing one to remember events as being better than they really were.





# Style

## Point of View

The story is told from the point of view of the author herself, Elizabeth Hardwick. She does not even change her name, but refers to herself as Elizabeth. However, this Elizabeth is a semi-fictional version of Hardwick, as she confesses candidly to the reader. Elizabeth seems to be a middle-aged or old woman, who is looking over her memories like going through old photographs in a drawer. She tells the stories of her life as they come to her, with no regard for actual chronological order, or continuity of storyline. Elizabeth speaks in first person, sometimes even when she is telling a story about other people, as though she is imagining someone else's inner thoughts. Elizabeth tries to honestly examine her own motives at different times in her life, but she is aware that she can never return to the point of view of her younger days. However, after many years, she has seen a lot of life, so she examines her experiences from the perspective of an old woman. She knows that life will not last very much longer for her, and she wants to learn what she can from what she and others have been through.

## Setting

Elizabeth is born in Lexington, Kentucky. Her family has nine children, and the big thing that everyone looks forward to is the Kentucky Derby, and horse racing in general. There are a lot of Appalachian families, and a few of them are Communists. When Elizabeth is old enough to go to college, she goes to Columbia University in Columbia, New York. She also lives in various apartments in New York City over the years. When she is younger, she lives in poorer housing, with people who hope that their lives are going to get better. She lives with a gay male roommate at the Hotel Schuyler, a bohemian place filled with people who never see the light of day, because they stay up all night performing or watching the performances. Everywhere that Elizabeth lives, the weather is extreme.

Elizabeth spends some time in Amsterdam, in Holland. There, everything seems very cozy, and for lack of space, husbands and wives who separate or remarry have to get along together still. Later in her life, she moves around New England, in Boston, Massachusetts, New York City, and in Maine. In New York, her apartment is much nicer than when she was younger. In Maine, Elizabeth decides to sell her house. She renovates a barn that is also on the property and moves into it.

## Language and Meaning

Hardwick has an extensive, descriptive vocabulary, and there are far too many vocabulary words in the book to be included in the vocabulary section. She paints pictures with words, allowing the reader to feel that they are also transported to the places mentioned in the book. She uses a lot of metaphors, and often leaves something



out, in order to emphasize its absence. Toward the end of her story, Elizabeth reflects on her own storytelling, admitting that "Sentences in which I have tried for a certain light tone—many of those have to do with events, upheavals, destructions that caused me to weep like a child," (Part 10, p. 151). To certain events, like an abortion that she once went through, Elizabeth devotes few words, most of them joking, like noting that the abortion doctor is also an undertaker. This shows how painful the memories still are, that they must be masked in jokes. Elizabeth often uses metaphors to describe what someone's life has become—comparing two senile old ladies to pieces of trash, blowing in the gutter, or saying that a certain couple has become a Dutch painting.

The title, "Sleepless Nights," can have many connotations. Elizabeth herself says that she has stayed up many nights reading. Her houseguest, Louisa, is obsessed with talking about her own insomnia. Elizabeth goes through a period of time when she hangs out with nightclub entertainers, and others who rarely see the light of day. In the end, the sleepless nights seem to be when Elizabeth lies awake at night, trying to understand the mystery of her mother and trying to make sense of her life.

## Structure

"Sleepless Nights" is not laid out like a typical novel, or even, like a typical narrative. The storyline meanders across years and continents, with no clear chronological timeline and no obvious plot. Instead, anecdotes, wisdom and poetry are arranged according to theme in ten chapters. The loose structure of the book calls to mind a session of reminiscing with an old lady, who looks at one memento and begins a story, and then tells all of the stories that are related to it. Many of these stories are partial or disjointed, with Elizabeth having no idea what the end of the story is. In Part 1, Elizabeth begins to reminisce, and muses on the nature of memories and roots. In Part 2, Elizabeth talks about various people she has known who died young. In Part 3, she follows Billie Holliday in New York, while in Part 4 she deals with more respectable people, who seem just as unhappy. Part 5 and Part 8 both deal with the nature of romantic love and fidelity. In Parts 6 and 7, Elizabeth considers the influence in her early life of Communism, and some of the men in her family. In Part 9, Elizabeth examines the lives of cleaning women that she has known, and in Part 10, she goes back to thinking about reminiscing on her life.



## Quotes

When you travel your first discovery is that you do not exist. (Part 1, p. 5)

She hardly knew her parents; they died quickly as people did then, of whatever was in the air—pneumonia, diphtheria, tuberculosis. (Part 1, p. 6)

Canadians, do not vomit on me! (Part 1, p. 9)

While you are living, part of you has slipped away to the cemetery. (Part 1, p. 11)

Store clerks and waitresses are the heroines of my memories, those ladies cast off with children to raise; they keep things open, they keep things open, light up the night on Main Street, that paradisiacal center of towns then. (Part 1, pp. 11-12)

My mother's femaleness was absolute, ancient, and there was a peculiar, helpless assertiveness about it. (Part 2, p. 25)

The horses are led away to their rest, their feelings about the race they have run unknown to us. (Part 2, p. 27)

Secretive persons tend to generalized memories, discreet editings, and the inevitable seasoning of sugar. (Part 10, p. 143)

Onto the heaviest addiction to heroin, she [Billie Holliday] piled up the rocks of her tomb with a prodigiousness of Scotch and brandy. (Part 3, p. 38)

And then at last she must come forward, emerge in powders and Vaseline, hair twisted with a curling iron, gloves of satin or silk jersey, flowers—the expensive martyrdom of the "entertainer." (Part 3, p. 41)

All of her news was bad and so her talk was punctuated with "of course" and "naturally." (Part 4, p. 51)

They are gladiators, creatures of the trenches, accustomed to the streets at night, to the toughness of weather, the pain of stones, and the itch of dirt. (Part 4, p. 55)

It is time for cocktails. The moment for which all of New York works, lies, exercises, hurries, dresses. (Part 5, p. 57)

With the hesitant intellectual years fly by like a day; life is shortened by the yellowing incompletes. (Part 5, p. 59)

I was wrong not to marry the person I loved, he said, voice fading. (Part 5, p. 70)

My mother, whom I lived very close to for more than thirty years, is this morning dimmer to me than this friend of a friend. (Part 7, p. 88)



She had the idea that a gross, uncomplicated self-interest was the old truth [that] a new force or person were trying to disguise. (Part 8, p. 102)

Old accusations: that is the memory left by mothers and fathers. Or is it we, in recall, who are accusing? (Part 8, p. 108)

She was like an old glazed vessel, veined and cracked, but nevertheless in one piece. (Part 8, p. 115)

He and so many deprived others I have known seemed afraid of bothering doctors, of acting out of turn, of complaining . . . (Part 9, p. 131)

People without the room to breathe in take in lodgers and ill-fed people put up signs advertising breakfast. (Part 9, p. 127)



## Topics for Discussion

What do you think is the plot of this book? Does it have a plot?

How have the different people in Elizabeth's life changed her? Who do you think is the most significant?

What is Elizabeth's attitude toward her parents? What are their attitudes?

Elizabeth acknowledges that she (the author) is the main character. What parts do you think are fact, and what parts do you think are fiction? What do you think about this storytelling device?

Describe the order in which the story is told. Why do you think it is arranged this way?

Elizabeth thinks a lot about aging and death. What are some lessons in the book about death?

Why is Elizabeth fascinated by the cleaning women? What do they represent to her?

What influence does being from Kentucky have on Elizabeth's life?