

JILL MCDONOUGH

THE GOOD WORK

Before we brush our teeth and get dressed, before I take two kinds of blood pressure pills and three fiber gummies, put coffee in one kind of go-cup, kale smoothie in another, get into the car, I say *I want to have one more cup of coffee in bed and read you this Ellen Bass poem, but it's short and then we'll go.* I am always drinking 1% in my coffee and trying to tell Josey we have plenty of time. Josey wakes up saying *We're running out of time!* Which makes no sense. You can't be running out when it just started! But this time it is true and I am slowing us down with coffee, with Ellen Bass, and then we have sex, and then we're laughing, still in bed, still not dressed, and then she gets out the tweezers to help me with a hair I can't see, in the early good light, our shared readers, this happiness which is middle age, late middle age, even. 47 and 53, which I swear no one ever told me I would get. Not middle age, but its happinesses, grown-ups always looking so miserable, bitching and moaning about marriage, the mortgage, how tired they are, *youth's wasted on the young*, and *best years of your life*. Except Ellen Bass! Ellen Bass knew way before me. Or maybe the olds tried to tell me and I couldn't hear them above all the boring and old? When I was a kid the coffee-breath grownups, their doubleknit suits, joked about middle age, black balloons in front of somebody's house, a banner saying *Lordy, Lordy, Sharon's Forty!* Or *Over the Hill* with a cartoon gravestone reading *RIP*. The last letter I got from my PCP says my HDL's better, or something, so *keep up the good work*. The work of living, some daily acts of faith that if we move the sludge inside around, eat what they say, we won't die as soon as we would washing Cheetos down with gin, some Oreos. So I get on the treadmill, watch *Succession*, watch HBOGo.