

# BEAUTIFUL BODIES

*Laura Shaine  
Cunningham*

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212 772-8334 fax: 212 772-8358

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Shaine Cunningham is the author of seven books. Ms Cunninghams fiction and non-fiction have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New York Times*, and *The London Times*. Her memoir *A Place In The Country* was featured as a *New York Times* Notable Book. *Sleeping Arrangements*, also memoir, is now in its nineteenth printing, in the United States has recently been published in England (Bloomsbury 2005) and unanimously hailed by the English critics as “a modern classic”. “A contribution to the literature of childhood”, with “Dickensian resonance”. “This book is hot. It beats with the authentic pulse of childhood”. *Sleeping Arrangements* was a B B C “Book of the Week”.

BEAUTIFUL BODIES leads a dual life as a novel and a play—the novel, was published in the United States by Washington Square Press (Simon and Schuster) to extraordinary reviews in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Observer*, and many other publications. The U K edition of *Beautiful Bodies*, published 2004, by Bloomsbury, is also acclaimed—“too exquisitely written for the reader to break away for an interval.” London *Daily Telegraph*. *Dreams of Rescue* was published in hardcover, by Simon and Schuster (Atria Books) in 2004 and was hailed in *Publishers Weekly* as “her best novel to date,” and praised in *The New York Times Book Review* as “ agile prose that

is an admirable vehicle both for internal anguish and hard-fought victories.

*Plays by Laura Shaine Cunningham* contains BANG, BEAUTIFUL BODIES, and CRUISING CLOSE TO CRAZY and was published by Broadway Play Publishing in 2002. Laura Shaine Cunningham's plays have been produced at Steppenwolf Theater, Olympia Dukakis Whole Theater, and throughout the United States, as well as in England, Finland, Holland, India, Malaysia, Australia, Portugal and Russia.

Laura Shaine Cunningham has won many awards for her writing including two NEA fellowships and two NYFA fellowships, in two categories—literature and theater. Her works have been developed at Manhattan Theater Club, WPA, Ensemble Theater, Bay Street Theater, Playwrights Horizons and are widely performed in the United States and Europe. BEAUTIFUL BODIES is currently on tour in Russia. The novel now appears in six foreign editions.

In April 2005, a new novel, her first for young readers, *The Midnight Diary of Zoya Blume* was published by Harper Collins, and is a summer 2005 *Booksense* selection. As a screenwriter, Laura Shaine Cunningham has written feature scripts for Paramount Studio, Universal Studios, Pakula Productions (producer Alan Pakula), Touchstone Disney (for Bette Midler). Laura is a playwright member at The Actors Studio and Herbert Berghof Theater, and The Dramatists Guild. She has just completed her eighth book, IN THE HOUSE OF SPECIAL PURPOSE. Laura is also a frequent columnist for *The New York Observer* and an essayist and reporter for *The New York Times*.

BEAUTIFUL BODIES premiered at The Whole Theater  
(Olympia Dukakis, Artistic Director) in October 1987.  
The cast and creative contributors were:

JESSIE ..... Karen Allen  
NINA ..... Maria Cellario  
LISBETH ..... Ellen Foley  
MARTHA ..... Caroline Aaron  
SUE CAROL ..... Mia Dillon  
CLAIRE ..... Amy Van Nostrand  
*Director* ..... Vivian Matalon  
*Set design* ..... Michael Miller  
*Costume design* ..... Sam Flemming  
*Lighting design* ..... Richard Nelson  
*Production stage manager* ..... Kathleen Cunneen

## CHARACTERS & SETTING

*Cast: six women, all in their thirties:*

JESSIE

NINA

LISBETH

MARTHA

SUE CAROL

CLAIRE

*Setting: non-realistic NoHo loft*

## ACT ONE

*(The stage is dark. A sudden, single beam of light illuminates the figure of a young woman [JESSIE]. The momentary vision—a woman, kneeling in profile. Then: darkness. Next: A backdrop of lower Manhattan flickers into view. The effect accelerates as if dusk has fallen on the city and the downtown buildings have begun to light up the night sky. The view is that of a second floor loft in NoHo. We see the sparkle of high rise offices, the giant clock face. The night cityscape is close, dominating. Now, interior lamps begin to illuminate the loft itself. We now see that JESSIE is kneeling center-stage in her living room. The loft has been created from a factory space, and throughout, JESSIE's warm, beautiful touch does battle with the industrial design. The set should not be strictly "real" but can be stylized: seating platforms instead of sofas, a token Deco floor lamp: artifacts of more gracious times. The loft is not slick, but still raw. Only as JESSIE's rose-colored lampshades light do we enter her softer world. We see a kitchen area, stage left, with a meal in progress being cooked. Also stage left: a bathroom door. Down stage right: a freight-style elevator door. The loft has been prepared for an informal gathering: odd chairs or floor pillows form a semicircle. In the center, an antique bassinet. JESSIE kneels to arrange this bassinet, then moves with increased speed to finish her preparations for the party. She drops a hen or two on the floor, rescues them, and wipes them clean. She tries to "hide" cooking mess, stashing pots, shoving trash bag aside. She fusses with the answering machine, sets her cell phone on the coffee table, then conceals it in a small purse. She turns*

*on her C D player—a fugue sounds. Instantly, she switches to something lighter. She runs around, applying last-minute touches. She pauses, stares at herself in a wall mirror. For an instant, she is soulful, reflective. She touches her hand to her left breast, sets it down. Shakes her head, as if to bring herself from reverie into the business at hand. As she places a toy—a baby lamb—in the basket, it begins to baaaaah.)*

JESSIE: *(Ironic)* Jesus.

*(She is trying to silence the baah-ing lamb, when the door buzzer shrills.)*

JESSIE: *(As she runs to answer the door)* Who is it?

NINA: *(Offstage)* Me.

*(NINA enters. NINA is also thirty-three, but is an altogether bigger woman: bigger voice, bigger breasts. She even wears bigger rings. NINA is tall but somehow helpless-looking; she tries a touch too hard to be cheery. She enters, bundled for winter weather, shivery as if she was caught in a bitter wind. As she removes her heavy coat, we see she is faddishly dressed in a designer outfit that is almost too small. She carries shopping bags and a cake box. NINA and JESSIE kiss, ritually, missing each other's cheeks. They trade pleasantries in unison.)*

JESSIE & NINA: You look terrific. *(They inspect one another.)* I mean it. You look terrific.

JESSIE: You've done something. Your hair. Your hair was never red.

NINA: It oxidized.

JESSIE: It suits you. It is you. *You* look great.

NINA: And you? Are you *pink*? You have the look. Did you meet someone?

JESSIE: I'm not talking. *(She beams.)*

NINA: You don't have to say a word! (*She grabs her and dances a little.*) Oh, I'm so happy for you! You've got to tell me. So who is he? He was obviously wonderful.... Someone you met on assignment?

JESSIE: I'm not talking. You look great!

NINA: Oh, I can't stand it when you're discreet. I tell you everything and you never talk! (*A breath*) A bum molested me on my way over....

JESSIE: Really? No one molests *me* anymore.... (*Suspicious*) Was he wearing a military greatcoat, and a hat with earflaps? And his pants kind of...hanging down unzipped...?

NINA: Yes.

JESSIE: Oh, I know the one. He's always on this block. I don't know how he can expose himself in this cold....

NINA: Last part of a man's body to freeze. He waved it at me, Jessie: Does that count as molestation? He didn't touch me. ...He just made noises.... (*She imitates lip-smacking, kissing sounds.*)

JESSIE: He used to do that when I walked by. Now, he offers me drugs. (*She sighs.*) "Ecstasy." Until recently, I found him...disgusting. Now, I feel sorry for him—tugging himself in below zero weather, yanking away for what...some carnal consolation? To forget some old injury, some psychic pain?

NINA: Boo Hoo. Save your sympathy for me. (*Handing her the cake box*) Here. It's a flourless collapsed chocolate soufflé cake with a fondant center.

JESSIE: Oh, a chocolate cake!

NINA: Don't let me eat any of it. I baked it but I won't eat it. It's for all of you. (*Pause*) I'll just watch. (*Pause*) I can't eat till Thursday. (*She waves a Diet Center packet.*) I'll just mix up my little packet when you all eat. I

haven't had solid food since I had a Hebrew National kosher frank with everything on the Fourth of July.

JESSIE: No! You have to eat! I've stuffed five Cornish hens. (*She gestures toward kitchen.*) It looks like a Cornish hen mass murder in there.

NINA: It's okay. ...I still take pleasure in watching others eat. It's become a kind of spectator sport for me.

(*JESSIE's cellphone beeps in her purse. JESSIE startles. Grabs the purse, drops the phone, strains to hear.*)

JESSIE: Hello? Hello? I can't hear you.... (*She sets cellphone back in her purse.*)

JESSIE: Static. Sounds like an attack on Mars. Damn thing. I swore I'd never get one, and now I have. It's always beeping. ...For a second, I thought my purse was talking to me, the voice of materialism speaking up for itself.

NINA: You jumped for that phone like your life depended on it.

(*JESSIE stares: maybe her life does depend on it.*)

JESSIE: Don't be ridiculous.

NINA: You're expecting him to call?

JESSIE: I wait for no man!

NINA: Yeah. Check your email? That's what I love about today.... There are so many more ways for a man not to get in touch.... (*She squints.*) from across The Post Coital Divide. Funny, huh, how a man mates, and then cannot dial your number... So what time did he say he'd call? Has he called since you came back to New York? Après sex, across the country—that's another zone. There should be a special calling plan. *To make him call.* I would pay extra for that...Friends and Families...and Lapsed Lovers...So come on, when did he say he would call?

JESSIE: I'm not talking. (*Weakening*) Not for another hour. And he's out West, so maybe, it will be even later....

NINA: Rocky Mountain Time. Oh...wooo*wee*. A cowboy!

JESSIE: Actually, an Indian.

NINA: Oh, my god. I love Indians! With the bone breastplates and the loin cloth?!

JESSIE: Don't be ridiculous. He's a civil liberties lawyer. He wears normal clothes.

NINA: Oh, oh, oh, Dancing with wolves! Come on, tell. I told you about the man in Miami!

JESSIE: I'm not talking. Come on, help me get ready... They'll be here in a minute...I'm going crazy; I thought I would have more time...I had to go to the grocery and the liquor store from the airport...I barely got here... to set this up...

(*NINA circles the bassinet, inspects baby shower decorations, preparations.*)

JESSIE: God, Jessie. You don't kid around.

JESSIE: I want Claire to have the whole thing!

(*NINA sets her gift boxes on the table. She looks askance at the display.*)

NINA: Am I going to have to "ooh" and "aah"?

JESSIE: Over every little bootie.

NINA: Omigod. You'll have to help me. I don't know if I can get through this. I haven't been to a baby shower since the Bronx....

JESSIE: They had a lot of them?

NINA: Are you kidding? That's what the boroughs are for. ...The boroughs, the suburbs, "the Island", Jersey... They're reproduction zones. God, it's fertile out there.

...Everybody reproducing. Half my high school *had* to get married. We didn't use birth control. We just denied sex took place. (*Pause*) Cynthia Greenspan didn't even make it to graduation. Her water broke in Social Studies. (*Pause*) Christ. Her kid must be fifteen. I could go out with him. (*She shivers.*) Almost. (*She moves away from the table.*) So who else is coming?

JESSIE: The usuals. Lisbeth. Sue Carol. Martha. Martha might be late. She had a closing uptown. And Claire of course.

NINA: I guess we had to invite Martha.

JESSIE: She would have been hurt.

NINA: She'll ruin everything....

JESSIE: No! I planned it perfectly. ...Martha's coming, but she can't stay....

NINA: Martha can always *stay*....

JESSIE: (*Laughing self-congratulation*) Un-unh. Not tonight. It's Donald's birthday. Martha's taking him to dinner at Vert. ...She's had the reservation for eleven months! She has to leave here by eight forty-five, or she'll lose it! (*Exalted*) So if Claire's late, they may miss each other completely!

NINA: (*Impressed*) God, you're some hostess. You're sure...she can't stay?

JESSIE: That's why I picked tonight. To avoid a disaster. (*Amending*) Oh, I feel guilty talking about Martha....

NINA & JESSIE: (Ritually, with humor) She's basically a good person. (*They laugh.*)

JESSIE: Here...have some wine before everyone gets here. Why don't you sit down?

NINA: I look thinner standing up.

JESSIE: Are you okay?

NINA: You want the truth or something we can both live with?

JESSIE: Nina! (*Low voice*) How's your mother?

NINA: The same. (*Moving away from the tragic topic*) It's not my mother. They say she's stable.

JESSIE: What then? Something's happened.

NINA: Oh, it's nothing. I saw a guy this afternoon. You know the guy in my mother's building? He's a Zen Buddhist but he's Jewish. He's invited me in for herbal tea a couple of times.

JESSIE: (*Knowing, dry*) One of the Celestial Seasonings guys.

NINA: "Red Zinger." I thought maybe he was some kind of monk. Or asexual. I put him in the "friend" category. You know—"nothing doing." Then, Sunday, I ran into him in the laundry room, and he said out of the blue—he had had a vision. He's been celibate for five years...so I thought—"I better go for it!"

JESSIE: He sounds like a good possibility....

NINA: Oh, he's unique! He had it all planned. We had to fast for three days first—that was easy for me—I was almost *there*. ...Then I could come to him—today—dressed only in pure non-synthetic fibers, and we'd be able to do it. ...It was such a cuckoo offer, I said "yes". So I went up there....

JESSIE: What happened?

NINA: Don't ask, and I won't tell you....

(*Buzzer shrills, interrupting what could be a confidence.*

JESSIE runs to the door.)

JESSIE: I better get this. Pour yourself some wine...

(NINA goes to kitchen area, pours from a bottle of Australian red Shiraz.)

JESSIE: Who is it?

LISBETH'S VOICE: It's just me. (*Wispy*) Lisbeth.

(*Door opens. JESSIE admits LISBETH, a malnourished, professional beauty. LISBETH floats in, carrying a large, fancy gift, and a bouquet of lilies. She wears an antique blouse, soft cashmere pants matching gray kid boots, and a coat. She enters, delicately wafting snow from her coat. JESSIE and LISBETH hug and sway in a ritual dance of greeting: a softer, more heartfelt embrace than the one shared by JESSIE and NINA.*)

JESSIE: (*Voice adapting to LISBETH's breathiness.*) Oh, you look beautiful.

LISBETH: You do. (*She squints at JESSIE.*) Oh, you've met someone. You're in love....

(*JESSIE nods, solemnly.*)

JESSIE: Oh, Lisbeth.

LISBETH: Oh, Jessie.

JESSIE: I love your blouse.

LISBETH: It's old.

(*From her station near the food, NINA acknowledges LISBETH.*)

LISBETH: Nina!

NINA: Lisbeth!

LISBETH: (*Excited whisper: a news bulletin*) I saw him. I just saw him.

JESSIE: ...Steve?

LISBETH: He was on my train.

NINA: That shit.

LISBETH: Please don't call him that...I love Steve! (*She takes in NINA's outfit.*) You look great. Is that new?

NINA: It was.

LISBETH: Your hair! Your hair! It's red!

NINA: It oxidized. ...So what's Steve up to? I thought that was over.

(JESSIE cautions NINA with a warning look.)

LISBETH: Over? Oh, no! We're just... (She fumbles.) ...in transition. He's going through something. When he's ready, he'll call and we'll get back together. (She lights up.) It was just so great to see him!

JESSIE: How did he look?

LISBETH: Well... (Halting) ...He was all the way at the other end of the car. (Faster) Thin. He doesn't look that well. His eyes...God, his eyes. (She bulges her own eyes.) They looked so...vacant.

NINA: Coked up. Or maybe crystal meth.

LISBETH: (More reportorial style) He's grown a moustache...and a beard. A weak, wispy beard.

JESSIE: I can't picture Steve with a beard.

NINA: Are you sure it was Steve?

JESSIE: I can't picture Steve with a beard.

LISBETH: It was his raincoat! I'd know that raincoat anywhere. With the torn epaulets.... (She smiles.) The pockets are torn, too. I used to put my hand in his pocket when we went for walks.... (Reverential) I could feel his thigh. (Becoming uncertain) I think it was Steve. I tried to get to him, but the train was so crowded.... (Halting) And then he got off. Well, it was nice just to see him. (Shrugging off the spell) Well, here...Jessie... I got you some flowers.

JESSIE: Oh, lilies! You shouldn't have! I better put them in water.

(JESSIE puts flowers in a vase. LISBETH moves to the baby gift display, sets down her present.)

LISBETH: I got Claire a christening dress. Hand-tatted. With a matching little cap.

NINA: Uh-oh. The first "little" of the evening. One "precious" or "darling" and I'll puke. (She offers LISBETH a canapé.) Here, eat something. Put some flab on your bones. How much do you weigh now? Eighty pounds? (She picks up LISBETH's arm. Mock shriek of alarm as she measures the bicep.) Huhh! Look at this! Look at this arm! Jessie! Look at Lisbeth's arm!

JESSIE: (Sadly) I've seen it.

NINA: Is this an arm? This isn't an arm! It's a pipe cleaner! (She inspects LISBETH's body.) Your breasts have shriveled. You have no ass.

LISBETH: I have an ass!

NINA: Not in the true sense. (She pokes out her own rump.) This is an ass. What makes me sick, is that I can remember when we wore the same size. Now you could fit in my pant leg.

(JESSIE pours wine, gives LISBETH a glass, offers her a plate of canapés.)

JESSIE: (To LISBETH) I'd love to know the last time you had a real meal. ...Try some of this cheese; it's triple creme.

LISBETH: (Dreamy) It was with Steve. We went to Manana. We started with nachos and *chalupas*...and then had the *combanacion* platters. (Wistful) Burritos. (Sigh) We ate from each other's plates.

NINA: You can eat without him, you know.

LISBETH: He always ordered for me.

NINA: So now you're going to starve yourself to death?

LISBETH: I eat!

JESSIE: What?

LISBETH: Triscuits.

NINA: I'm surprised you still get work. I never thought I'd say this, but you're too thin for *Vogue*.

JESSIE: No one's too thin for *Vogue*.

NINA: Well, too *limp*. Their thinness has some oomph. They're always leaping around, extending their legs on boulders.

LISBETH: Oh, I haven't done fashion or editorial in months. I haven't been in *Vogue* since the April issue. I'm mostly in *JAMA* now....

JESSIE: *JAMA*?

LISBETH: *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

NINA: As a case history?

LISBETH: I'm a Zoloft model. (*She slumps into dejected pose, rag doll-limp, hands trailing.*) "Feel walled in by loneliness? Trapped and helpless? When life's simplest problems seem unmanageable ...Give her Zoloft."

JESSIE: You're good!

LISBETH: Working my way up to Paxil. (*More animated*) The work is easy, and I'm making a fortune! (*She kids.*) Somedays, it's even hard to look depressed. (*Feigning higher spirits, she arranges her gift on the display.*) I hope Claire likes this. I got her a beautiful antique nightgown. It sort of matches the baby's dress. I picture her holding the baby...both of them, all in lace.

NINA: I can't picture Claire in lace.

LISBETH: Well, this will bring it out in her. ...Don't you think? (*A bit concerned*) God, maybe I should have gotten her something else....

JESSIE: I'm sure she'll love it! (*Relieved*) I'm just glad Claire's coming. It's not like her not to see any of us for this long....

NINA: ...Something's wrong. We've never gone six months without getting together...I finally got her on the phone. Yesterday.

LIBBETH: Well, how did she sound?

NINA: All right. But she might have been faking. She said she was "grotesquely fat."

JESSIE: Oh, Claire could never get fat! I'm sure she looks beautiful.

NINA: No! ...Didn't Martha tell you?

(*They respond "no".*)

NINA: Martha saw her on Fifty-Seventh Street last week, and she said—she's unrecognizable! Claire was wearing old clothes and no makeup and her body was completely misshapen and her hair had turned totally gray!

JESSIE: That's impossible. Not in a few months!

LIBBETH: It can happen. "Trauma."

NINA: And she was so obviously depressed that she didn't even hear Martha screaming to her from across the street. She got on a bus, but Martha got a really good look at her, and she says her face is *gone*. She's all striated with a ropey neck, and enormous bags under her eyes.

JESSIE: That's ridiculous! If she was that unrecognizable, I'm sure it wasn't Claire!

LIBBETH: It's weird no one's seen her. She dropped out of ballet....

JESSIE: Well, she's in her seventh month, for God's sake.... What do you expect: a grand jeté?

NINA: She could still pli .

LISBETH: Half the class is about to deliver. It's starting to look like a Lamaze group. *(To JESSIE)* Well, how did you talk her into *this*?

JESSIE: I insisted! When I finally got through to her on the phone, I told her everything had been done. *(She gestures toward the food, the bassinet. Lighter)* I'm sure she's fine.

NINA: No! She's avoiding us. It's peculiar. The last time I saw her, she had just met this man, and then, suddenly, she goes into hiding....

LISBETH: *(Wistfully)* ...You know how it is when you're really in love. You can stay in bed for a year.

NINA: No. She won't even talk about him on the phone. It must be too awful.

JESSIE: I had the impression it was too wonderful. She was "saving it" for "in person." She *did* say she's grotesquely fat. Oh well, even if she is, I'm sure she'll lose the weight, after she has the baby....

NINA: Oh, they all say that. I haven't lost the weight, and I haven't even had a baby. I can't get my figure back after a meal.

*(Doorbell buzzes: JESSIE runs for it.)*

JESSIE: Who is it?

MARTHA: *(Offstage)* Martha.

NINA: Whom do you think she'll get first?

*(They laugh, each one points to the other.)*

*(JESSIE opens the door to admit MARTHA, whose stolid form matches her flat voice. The most conservative of the group, MARTHA is dressed for success—she wears an exotic cape, made from endangered goat hair [the infamous Shahtoosh], designer suit and shoes. She looks prosperous, groomed. She*

*enters hopping on one foot, and deposits a large gift carton inside the door. With a gesture she indicates more gifts in the hall.)*

MARTHA: A wino pissed on my shoe! Right downstairs!

*(MARTHA hops to the sink. The others fetch the remaining gifts: a massive assortment of boxes.)*