

DISAPPEARING ACTS



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For Solomon, years from now

*. . . You say it's good we love again. The acts
the houses, the abyss vary insignificantly
Only plants grow by specific will
"implacable," but without knowledge when they fail.*

—The Field for Blue Corn
Mei-mei Berssenbrugge

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D I S A P P E A R I N G A C T S

Franklin



All I can say is this. I'm tired of women. Black women in particular, 'cause that's about all I ever deal with. Maybe a fine Puerto Rican here and there, but not much. They're all the same, that's for damn sure. Want all your time and energy. Want the world to revolve around them. Once you give 'em some good lovin', they go crazy. Start hearing wedding bells. Start thinking about babies. And want you to meet their damn family. They make you come and you'd swear they struck gold or somethin'. And the prettier they are, the more they want. Well, I don't play that shit no more. I try to make it clear from jump street. I ain't serious. I got enough on my mind right now without getting all hung up and twisted up with another woman.

Every time I turned around, my phone was ringing off the damn hook. "Hi, Franklin," one would say. And I would sit there and try to guess which one it was. "Whatcha doing?" What a stupid-ass question to call somebody up and ask. It oughta be obvious that I wasn't thinking about her, or else I'da called her, right? But naw. It don't work like that. They hedge. "You feel like some company?" And don't say, "No, I'm busy." All hell'll break loose then. "You got somebody over there?" I wanna say, "None of your fuckin' business," but that would be too cold-blooded. They wanna know what you doing every fuckin' minute of the day you ain't with

them. Can't just be by yourself. They always think if you don't wanna see them, then it's gotta be another woman.

And I've been out with some of the stupidest women. I swear. Usually don't find this out until after I've fucked 'em. What was her name? Gloria. Yeah, Gloria. This chick had a ass like butter, moved like a roller coaster, but when it came to brains, she was missing about sixteen cards. Worked at the welfare department, but she shoulda been a case herself. I shoulda known better when all she talked about was getting her nails done and was forever blow-drying her fuckin' hair. She couldn't even figure out the easiest puzzle on "Wheel of Fortune." I remember one night we'd had a pretty serious session, and I had to go to work in the morning, but since it was election day—Koch was running again for mayor—I got up extra early so I could go vote. I looked down at her. "You voting today?" I asked. "I ain't voted in years, Franklin," she said, just grinning and shit, like she was proud. You stupid bitch, I wanted to say, but I didn't. It wasn't worth it. "You gotta go," I said. "Now." She acted like her feelings was hurt, but I didn't care.

And all this complaining women do about men not knowing how to "make love" is a bunch of crap. A lot of 'em don't like foreplay and just wanna get fucked. Ten minutes after our clothes is off, and a few kisses later, some of 'em begged me to just go ahead and put it in. Personally, I like to take my time. If all I wanted was some pussy, I could buy some. If I like the woman, I wanna enjoy the whole experience. Coming ain't everything. Naw, I take that shit back. But it's a whole lotta women out here who don't know nothin' about passion. They do the same shit them how-to and self-help books and Cosmopolitan magazine tell 'em to do, but a man can tell when a woman's heart ain't in her moves. The shit feel rehearsed, like she do the same thing the same way with every man she ever been with. This kind of fucking is boring—which is when I usually just take the pussy and run.

One chick, I liked her a lot. Her name was Theresa, and she hated it when you called her Terri. Now, Theresa had something on the ball. Worked at a bank, and not only could she cook her ass off but she liked sports. We used to lay around all day on a Saturday

or Sunday and just make love during halftime and watch every game that came on TV. She knew a call when she heard one too. And she gave the best head I ever had in my life. I don't know who taught her, but I wished he'd give lessons to a lot more of 'em. The only thing about Theresa was she wore a wig and I couldn't stand to hear her talk. She had this squeaky-ass voice that drove me nuts. It was real high like Alvin and the Chipmunks or something. Sometimes I wanted to say, Would you just shut up! And when the girl came, I swear to God, it was embarrassing. I don't remember what happened to her, to tell the truth. She just faded out the picture, just like Karen and Maria and Sandy and Amina and all the rest of 'em. All except Pauline.

Pauline. Now that woman. She was the last one. The one that broke my heart. Don't never fail. The one you always want is the one that always leave. Pauline was soft and sexy. She had the prettiest titties in the world. They was round and full and stood straight out. She was the only woman I ever met that could come from just me licking 'em. Pauline was a hundred percent grade-A woman. Lived in the projects with her two-year-old son. Treated me like a whole man. She was going to secretarial school so she could get off welfare. That's one thing I really liked about her. She tried. And Pauline had pride. She never called me, it was always me doing the calling, and I didn't mind. Some women you just want, ain't satisfied till you get 'em. Don't ask me what happened, but a few weeks ago when I called, she said she was busy. Busy? I let it go. The next day, I called back. She still busy. "What the fuck is going on?" I asked her. She didn't say nothin' for a minute. My chest was heaving. "Pauline, don't play with me." Then I heard her mumble something like, "I met somebody else." Met somebody else? What? Who? I heard her say some shit like she was sorry, but I just hung up the damn phone. A man don't need this kinda shit. What kinda dude could she possibly have found that could make her feel better than me? I hate this shit. I wanted to marry this woman. To tell the truth, my head was all fucked up, 'cause I kept sitting around wondering who the fuck it could be. And what he was doing for her that I wasn't doing. Didn't do. I kept drawing

a blank, 'cause when I love a woman, I try to treat her like she's the only woman in the world. Sometimes, I guess, that ain't enough.

That's when I decided to take a vacation from all of 'em. They think they're the only ones who can go without sex. Well, that's a lie. A man's mind is about the strongest thing he got going for him. Let women tell it, you'd swear our brains was all in the head of our dicks. Sometimes this shit is true, but right now I'm trying to get my constitution together. I've made too many stupid mistakes, too many bad decisions. I guess dropping outta high school was the biggest one. I ain't never liked people telling me what to do. I couldn't sit still for another two years, listening to that boring shit about America and how to write a fuckin' sentence. Couldn't just learn to add, subtract, and multiply. Naw. They had to make the shit even more confusing. But woodshop. Didn't miss a class.

This was just one more reason for my Moms to despise me. She started with my Pops and worked her way down to me. But he's so damn henpecked, I still don't know how he feel about me, really. To tell the truth, I ain't never been all that crazy about them either. But when you're sixteen years old and already six foot two, ain't much they can tell you. My Moms would lay it on thick, just running her fuckin' mouth to hear herself talk. "You gon' end up with a bullet hole in you, boy. You stupid, just like that sister of yours. Y'all shoulda been twins. Can't do nothing right. Nothing. Sit up straight. Naw, just get outta my face. Make me wanna shoot you my damn self." Pops usually stood in the background, pretending like he was doing something else, like he didn't hear nothin'. He always ended up in the pantry, where he kept his scotch. But there was only so many more stupid I was gon' be. One day I was gon' punch her damn lights out.

So I did what I wanted to do anyway. Shot dope. Played hooky. Fucked whatever was pretty and was willing to give it up. It took me fifteen years to get my GED. But I got it. Didn't take me that long to give up dope. That shit got old. Had to scramble for it. Five nights in jail once, and that was enough for my ass. It wasn't the kind of life I pictured for myself, that's for damn sure. Neither was marrying Pam when I wasn't nothin' but twenty years old. She was

so fine and so sweet, I couldn't get past it. Everybody warned me. "Leave them West Indian women alone, man." She was from Jamaica. Two babies later, Pam was a different woman. Fat as hell. Never felt like making love no more; we stopped that after Derek was born, and by the time Miles got here, we wasn't doing nothin' but screwing. I was working two jobs. Post office at night, construction during the day. She took care the kids, I busted my ass. And what kinda thanks did I get? "I'm too tired." She was just too damn fat. Pam's thighs felt like blubber, her waist looked like a old inner tube, and what used to be firm full breasts that I loved to suck and massage, shit, now they fell down flat and limp on top of that gut. It got to the point that I didn't want her, couldn't stand the thought of touching her. The only thing she had energy for was them damn soap operas. And food. It took me three years to leave, 'cause the kids was growing up and wasn't going nowhere no time soon. But a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. This was about my sanity.

That was six years ago. Never did get the divorce. I'm waiting for her to do it. She waiting for me. I see the kids once in a while, but don't want 'em to see me like this. Living in a rooming house with a whole bunch of other dudes. But all I need right now is a room. I ain't no woman. Ain't no interior decorator neither. What I got is what I need. A bed, a dresser, a TV, a worktable for my woodworking, my fish tank, and my music box. I can't see spending my whole damn check on no rent, 'specially since some weeks I don't get no work.

Now, the dudes that live in this rooming house is real losers. Some of 'em been put out, some of 'em got a habit, some of 'em just fuckin' lazy—wouldn't work if you gave 'em a job. The rest of 'em just lost, don't know what else the fuck to do. Grown men on welfare. Now, that's some ridiculous shit. I ain't nothin' like 'em. And they know it. I've got definite plans for my life. They ain't crystal clear to me right now, but that's why I'm working on my constitution. A man needs one. Needs to get his priorities straight. Right now it don't feel like I got no foundation. I feel more like Sheetrock. Like mortar. Can't nothin' make your life work if you ain't the architect. Took me long enough to realize this shit.

My life is pretty simple. I like to get drunk on Friday nights, but only if I worked a full week. No pay, no play. Usually go to the bar, but I don't socialize too tough with none of these dudes in here. They ask too many damn questions, just like women. Wanna know your whole damn history. But I don't give up no information. "You got a lady, man?" I look at 'em like they faggots and say, "Why?" Nosy motherfuckers. "You got any sisters?" I got two, but I'll be damned if I'd introduce Darlene to these losers. Christine is married, which is where she should be. "Naw, I ain't got no sisters. Why?" They look like they ready to run, and then say, "I was just wondering, man. That's all."

On the weekends, I like to sit in here and watch whatever game or fights is on TV and do some woodworking. Pussy don't even cross my mind when I got a piece of wood in my hand. Get myself a bottle and stay up all night chiseling, measuring, sanding, making a scale model—don't make me no difference. You tell me what you want, and I can build it. Beds, couches, lamps, tables, wall units. And the more complicated the shit is, the more I put into it. Ain't nothin' like a challenge, especially when it turns out prettier than you expected.

But I'm slow. I like to take my time and not rush when I'm working on a piece, which is one reason I don't make big pieces for people no more. They started bugging me, wanting me to hurry up and finish it. Christmas was coming up—something. How can you hurry up when you trying to create a work of art? If the shit turned out fucked up, then I'd have to hear that shit—"I paid all that money for this?" These days, I make what I feel like making for anybody I feel like making it for. Mostly myself.

At least three days a week I work out at the gym. Hell, working construction, I can't afford to get flabby and outta shape. Naw, it's more to it than that. I love my body and wanna keep it that way. Faggots seem to love looking at it too. A six-foot-four jet-black handsome niggah? Get the fuck outta here. I swear, I would get so much satisfaction outta whopping one of 'em in the face if they was to so much as say a word to me. But they ain't crazy. Sometimes, just to fuck with 'em, I swing my dick when I'm in the shower. But

seriously, the gym is kinda like my sanctuary. I go in there and pump iron, flex, and sweat. Love to sweat. Play a few rounds of racquetball or basketball, then put on some shaving cream and sit in the steam room for about a half hour. Skin feel like satin, and the razor just slide right over it. Don't get no bumps. I feel clean inside and out when I'm done with my routine. Then I lay down and take a nap for about a hour. Shit, you can't beat it.

Only problem is afterwards I always feel like fuckin'. But just the thought of walking to the phone booth to call up some chick and talk shit for a few minutes takes most of the desire away. I got my phone turned off after Pauline, so nobody would bother me. The truth is I wish I could just stop by the corner store and say to Muhammed, "Let me have five cans of some instant pussy." Sometimes all I need is to get fucked. I don't wanna have to talk, lie, or bullshit, just come, roll over, smoke a cigarette, and watch TV. Some women fall for this shit, depending on how bad they want you, which just means it's been a long time since they had some or they just curious as hell if what they see is as good as it looks. I could just tell 'em that it is. But some of 'em wanna be more than just wham-bam-thank-you-ma'amed. So I try not to give it to 'em too good, 'cause they wouldn't never wanna go home.

Basically, I guess I'm a loner. Ain't got too many friends. Ain't too many people worth trusting. Jimmy, a dude I grew up with, stops by every now and then to borrow a few dollars. I don't never have to worry about catching up on nothin', 'cause all Jimmy do is deal dope. Cocaine. He's small-time, thinks he's big-time, but he ain't, 'cause if he was, he wouldn't have to borrow no money from me, would have a permanent address and drive something besides them curled-over Stacy-Adams he wears. He don't offer me none of that shit, 'cause he know, as far back as we go, I don't wanna be around nothin' that even smell like dope. Gimme the damn creeps. Make me think about jail. Me and Jimmy both almost OD'd once. We was some stupid motherfuckers. We was—what? Nineteen? At the dope house, of all fuckin' places. The shit was better than we thought it was, and in those days we was greedy as hell. We decided we was gon' get blasted and then play strip poker with some chicks

we had picked up at a party. Shit. If it wasn't for them chicks, we'd both be dead. Jimmy's a stupid little fat fuck, but he's still my home boy.

Lucky is the only dude in this building that I do associate with. He's also the only male nurse I ever met in my life, and he ain't no faggot either. Motherfucker always in white. Work the midnight shift at some old folks' home. We play cards. Spades. Poker. Sometimes dominoes. Lucky is smart as hell too. He reads everything, which is why we get into some heavy debates. Like the shit that's going on in the Middle East and Nicaragua, should Jesse Jackson run for President in '84 or not. That kinda shit. I like being around people who think. Who read the damn paper every day and know what's going on in the world. Lucky's biggest problem is that he lives at the track. Horses is his middle name. When he gets off work, he'll catch two buses, four trains, whatever's running, to get to the track. I hate to take his money, but hell, when you play and lose, you lose and pay. "You can suck my dick, little girl," he always say when he losing. I just laugh and say, "Put on some more music, motherfucker, go get some Kleenex, and stop crying." Lucky's got a helluva music collection too. I mean serious. That's another reason I like to sit in his room. Shit. Get us a bottle, order some Chinese food, debate about damn near anything that come on the news, and listen to Herbie Hancock or Cole Porter in the background. You can't beat it.

And I play my music loud as hell, 'cause that's how I like it. Once in a while one of these dudes'll knock on my door to complain. "Say, man, would you mind turning it down a taste?" If I'm drinking bourbon, doing some woodworking, I'll say, "Maybe," or just ignore 'em. They don't fuck with me either. Maybe it's 'cause I am six four and weigh 215. I don't know.

Shit, I'd crack up without my music. It's the best company you can have, really. It don't say "no" or "maybe," or ask no questions. Don't want nothin' in return except your open ears. And sometimes the words seem like they was written for you. Side Effect. Aretha. Gladys. Smokey, and L.T.D. If I'm in a good mood and ain't doing

nothin' in particular but, say, putting up my work clothes or just playing with my dick and reading the paper, and one of these dudes knock on the door, I'll usually say, "No sweat, man." They probably think I'm a schizoid or something.

I do know I can be a pain in the ass, but that's my nature. I just like to test people, see what they made of, where they coming from. I got discharged from the navy because of my temper, lack of cooperation. Couldn't carry out, let alone follow, orders. And didn't give a shit. Didn't wanna go in the first damn place. A black man got enough wars to fight at home. When they said "draft" and they meant army, I said, "Not me." Let me go somewhere halfway exciting. Submarines and ships and shit. Everybody thought it would do me some good. But how can taking orders from the white man, killing people that ain't never done nothing to me personally, do me some fuckin' good? It took me two years to get out.

My whole family disowned me. If I was white, I probably woulda been disinherited. My Moms said, "You's just lost, boy, always was, always will be. Why don't you just go somewhere far away and leave us alone?" The bitch. And my Pops. I don't know the right word to describe him. Weak. That's close enough. "You could've had a future if you'd have followed the rules, son. That's all it takes to make it in this world, playing by the rules." Yeah, right. Look how far it got you, I wanted to say. A fuckin' sanitation worker. His dream in life. Shit, I didn't get no dishonorable, just a general discharge. I can still get some of the fuckin' benefits. And Christine, she's a year older than me. The perfect word for her is dumb. Just plain old dumb. How she graduated from high school I'll never know. My folks worship Christine, and you'd swear she was the only child they ever had. That's 'cause she'll lick the ground they walk on. "You got too much anger in you, Franklin. That's your biggest problem," she said. "You're hostile and don't know what the words cooperate or compromise mean. Why you so mad at everybody?" She don't even know me. Maybe if I was high yellow like she was and didn't never have to worry about dealing with white folks, scarin' 'em half to death 'cause I'm so big and black, I

would be happy as a little fuckin' lark too. That's what it boiled down to. Color.

Me and Darlene was the black sheep in the family. Took after my Pops, and we got treated like black sheep too. Even now, Christine live right across the street from Moms and Pops in a "Leave It to Beaver" house with her "Father Knows Best" husband and four "Brady Bunch" kids. In dull-ass Staten Island. And Darlene: "If you'da just made it through high school, Franklin, you could be playing for the Knicks. They've got hardship cases, and you know it. You wouldn't have had to go to college. Could be making boookoo cash right now." She pissed me off. Thinks just like everybody else in America. Why is it that if you happen to be black and over six feet tall, everybody thinks you supposed to play basketball or football? But I let Darlene off the hook, 'cause she's as nutty as a fruitcake, thanks to my parents. She change jobs like some people change their clothes. Don't know whether she's coming or going. She ain't never got no man. Living up in the Bronx, drinking herself to death. She don't think nobody know it, but I know it.

I ain't seen none of 'em in almost a year, and that's just the way I like it, really. All except for Darlene. I worry about her. Every now and then I'll call her, just to make sure she still alive. She already tried to kill herself once. And you think my folks would go up there and see her?

All they ever wanted from us was to go along with their program, which meant don't never disagree with them about nothin'. Shit, they forgot that kids had opinions too. And it ain't no secret that they had it in for me from jump street. All they ever felt for me was disappointment. Not love. And me being their only son, you'd think they'd be more understanding. Shit. That would be too much like right. They would love to see me drive up in a brand-new car, walk in their house wearing a suit and tie, flashing credit cards and proving to them that I didn't turn out to be the fuck-up they thought I would. But even if I ever got to that point, I wouldn't give 'em the satisfaction of knowing it, since they never gave me none.

But time can do some wild shit to your mind. For one thing, it