

TERRY McMILLAN

How Stella
Got Her GROOVE
Back

ALSO BY TERRY McMILLAN

Mama

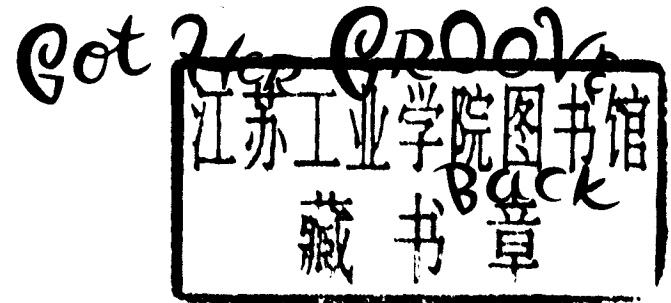
Disappearing Acts

*Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary
African-American Fiction* (editor)

Waiting to Exhale

TERRY McMILLAN

How Stella



VIKING

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents

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for Jonathan P.

Acknowledgments

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Author's Note

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I HADN'T PLANNED ON GOING ANYWHERE. ALL I knew was that as much as I loved my son, I was glad to see him disappear after those doors to Gate 3 closed this morning. Quincy's on his way to Colorado Springs to visit his daddy and now I have the house all to myself. Finally, some peace and quiet. And three whole weeks of it. Of course there are a million things I want to do and now I can do them without being distracted. Without hearing "Mom, can I . . . ?!" every fifteen seconds.

Thank God it's Saturday. And thank God it's summertime. School's out. No more three-day-a-week Little League

practice (rain or shine) or those long-ass games. No week-on/week-off revolving carpooling and forgetting it's my week and being afraid to call the parents of the abandoned children who are all standing in the rain for an hour after I forgot them because they are all—including my own son—too dumb to call somebody else. And thank the Lord there's nowhere I have to be: no can't-wait portfolios to review and I don't have to pay attention to any of the four computers in my office, I mean I can actually be off-line for a change and I have no meetings no planes to catch, *nada*.

I've got about a hundred books I've been meaning to read since last year and I figure now I can probably read them all. I've got a house full of trees and straggly vines that need to be transplanted which is what I'm planning to do today but of course when I go out to the garage I have no big pots and just a drop of potting soil and not a single pair of those gloves with the little rubber dots on the fingertips, all of which means I have to go to Home Depot. I hate going to Home Depot because I always end up going down the plant rug toilet or sink aisles when I have enough plants rugs toilets and sinks already. But by the time I get to the checkout I usually have to exchange my cart for one of those flatbed numbers and then I realize I didn't drive the truck so I have to have them put my stuff to the side until I come back and as I'm driving home it occurs to me that they're probably going to switch some of my merchandise and not think I'll notice but by the time I pull the truck up to their automatic doors I'm usually totally pissed at myself for buying all this shit I don't need because despite the fact that I am not a landscaper handywoman or carpenter I have all these useful new tools with which to express my fantasies of do-it-yourselfness and what is really bothering me is that I have most likely spent somewhere in the neighborhood of a thou-

sand bucks which seems to be my going rate here and at Costco and which is also why I am right this minute changing my mind about going today. I'll go tomorrow. With a list and the promise to buy only what's on it.

I look around the house and realize that the housekeeper does a pretty good job—for a sixty-one-year-old Peruvian man—of keeping it clean. He fixes everything that breaks around here, and since he is ultrareligious and I think maybe even a participating Buddhist, out of respect I sort of watch my mouth in my own home. He cleans under and behind everything which is the main reason I have no Saturday morning cleaning to do. I believe from the bottom of my heart that dusting polishing and vacuuming are entirely too tedious never-ending and boring tasks and there are so many other things I would rather be doing which is why I hired Paco in the first place. He is worth the money.

I open all the blinds and notice that the windows are pretty grungy-looking from all the rain we've had here this past spring. Flooding and mud slides wiped out hundreds of homes all over northern California and I felt lucky to be way out here in this boring little valley. I don't do windows which is why I make a mental note to call Of Course We Do Windows first thing on Monday. Paco tried doing them once but he couldn't get up high outside and if he fell and hurt himself I would feel terrible.

I go into the kitchen and make myself a latte and as I stare out into the backyard the first thing I see is Phoenix, our free-from-the-pound chocolate Lab, swimming in our black-bottom pool as if it's his. Then I look over at what is now a storage shed that I was told was once a guesthouse and then I turned it into a studio but of course that was when I used to be this creative person and I had energy and a thriving spirit and I would design and conceive and

sometimes actually manufacture what I used to call functional sculpture aka handcrafted furniture that people in fact solicited and paid me real money to make for them out of everything from aluminum copper steel wood whatever, but then it became so hard to like pay the rent and then this husband I ended up saying yes to when I should've just said no convinced me that I could use that MBA I got and like combine it with that MFA I also had which of course all by itself was worthless and who could afford this eccentric one-of-a-kind so-called furniture when a normal person could like just go to Thomasville or Levitz or Ikea and of course I didn't know how to mix commerce with art and so I failed at working with my hands. I went with the brain and forged figures inside my economic head and did the total business beat. I have been doing this now for like hell I don't even know how many years but it is another reason why right this minute, looking out at the dog at that clear black water at the little salmon-colored bungalow where I used to pray and dream and invent, I am getting a sudden overwhelming urge to run the vacuum through my mental house and chill out, sit down long enough to smell the cosmos the zinnias the coral bells hell the fucking coffee (which I actually *can* smell right now), so when Quincy comes home I'll be more poised balanced composed than I've been in years. The generic term for it is relaxed. Maybe I can even acquire some of that stuff commonly known as patience that I haven't had in a long time. I'd like to be able to sit down next to my son and watch one of those moronic TV shows that he's always begging me to watch but after a few minutes I always find myself jumping up to do something during the commercials and I repeat this up-and-down business at least five times during a mere half-hour show which means I'm not exactly setting a good example for someone who's always telling her

child how he needs to learn to sit still long enough to give something his undivided attention. All I do when I get up is move things. Dishes go in the dishwasher. Or they come out. Never-read magazines newspapers and last week's mail are tossed into the compactor for crushing. Clothes pulled out of the washer get pushed into the dryer. Now let's fold. Make stacks. Everything has to be in its place. Because if I don't do it, it won't get done.

But I'm tired of jumping up. Tired of running. I would like to be able to just sit there with my son without moving without wishing I were somewhere else doing something else without thinking about something else and I'd like to just hold his hand or put my arm around his narrow shoulders because I know in a few more years he won't want me to sit on the couch with him and watch anything and he probably won't want me to touch him.

I walk from the kitchen into the family room and sit on the red leather love seat and I look around and see all this color all these different textures—those golden maple floors those celery concrete floors these purple plastered walls that teal suede sofa that black oak pool table that eggplant leather floor in my office and this silver slate under my feet—and I am proud that over the years I have made my funky little California castle suitable to my needs my tastes and I have rigged equipped and outfitted it in such an unorthodox way that it might actually be impossible to sell even though I am not even thinking of moving anywhere but for some reason today like right this minute I am feeling imposed upon by all of it as if I went too far and now all this color all these juxtaposing textures are backfiring instead of soothing as they always have even until just yesterday but not today and as I sit here and watch Phoenix shaking himself dry, I decide that today maybe I should shake myself up a little too.

But how? And where do you start? I look down at the coffee table and notice Quincy forgot the stationery I bought him so he could write to me and his homies while he's away. Maybe I should write a few long-overdue letters or something to some folks. That's it! Yeah, I'll write to a few long-lost relatives and to some folks I haven't seen or talked to in ages. Just little notes. Some maybe-you-think-I've-forgotten-you-but-here's-a-gesture-to-let-you-know-I-haven't notes. Hell, I remember when I used to write tons of letters. Now who has time to even call anymore? A lot of times when I do call I'm secretly hoping the person won't be home and that I'll get the answering machine because I know there's something else I could or should be doing that's a helluva lot more productive like washing clothes or doing something in the kitchen but the portable phone is too staticky in the laundry room and kitchen which means I have to stand in one place and talk which is why it's so much easier to leave a two-minute message (if they've got a decent machine) than it is to talk for a half hour or longer, depending on where they fall in your chart of closeness, trying to cover what has happened to you both over the last week month year or two.

I know I'm not alone because I'm forever getting messages from estranged friends and relatives who are pissed because I haven't returned their phone calls from whenever and they say things like, "Girl, I could be dead and you wouldn't know it what kind of fucking friend are you Stella we used to be close did I do something that I don't know about" and I shake my head no or they say we just had a baby or I finally got my divorce and I just wanted you to know that I don't live in Atlanta or Memphis or Los Angeles anymore, and oh by the way, I've got a brand-new grandbaby and did you get the pictures if you did you didn't

say nothing about how cute he is and hell, he's got three teeth now or he's walking or in kindergarten and this is the MCI operator with a collect call from BENNIE please press one if you accept and two if you decline and sir the party's not at home and he says okay but can I leave a message anyway and then there is a click and he is just one of my many relatives who call from the penitentiary but then there's hey yeah Stella this is your cousin Rafiki As-Salaam-Alaikum my sister peace be unto you all praises are due to Allah and hey I know you surprised I ain't calling collect but my lady let me use her calling card for a month and you still ain't sent me no pictures of you and I'm still working on my own defense and I was wondering if you could send me fifty dollars for some toiletries and such cause my mama ain't been up to see me in over six months she mad at me and my lady ain't got no mo transpo to get way out here and I been in the hole for the past month for something I ain't even did but it's all good and anyway let me know if you can do that and baby, this is your aunt Junie calling and I don't know if you know it or not but Miss Willamae's in the hospital and I know you remember her cause she used to baby-sit you when you was a baby and you know she got cataracts and she had to have that operation finally that she been putting off because of her having all them insurance problems and everythang but you remember her she's Miss Bessie's cousin's sister from her first marriage to Silbert what used to live on the corner of Moak and Fortieth Street, right down the street from Ms. Lucy when she was living and anyway you went to school with her granddaughter but I can't remember her name right now but pray for her even though she's doing much better now and I just wanted to touch base don't get to talk to you much no more and how is Quincy these days? I bet he's tall as you and how old is he now (there is a long pause because

she's waiting for an answer) and like a fool I say, "He's eleven and a half, Aunt Junie," but even though you don't stay in touch I want you to know that you both are in my prayers and the Lord is watching over you and I'm gon' call your sisters as soon as I hang up since the rates is low. Love you, baby. I wonder if her machine is gon' get all this and Stella? Did you get this whole message, sugar?

I also don't get very many letters either—maybe five or six a year and that's counting the preaddressed prestamped envelopes I give Quincy when he's away at camp—and shoot, I know at least a thousand people and at least five hundred of them live more than five hundred miles away. Far enough away to write.

It just feels like nothing is the way it used to be anymore and it's not that I'm on some nostalgic trip or anything but I just wonder if I'm feeling like this because I can't believe I'm really forty-fucking-two years old because people tell me all the time I don't look forty-two and to be honest I don't have any immediate plans of really acquiring the *look* if there is a way to look when you're forty-two and I certainly don't feel forty-two even though I don't know how I'm supposed to *feel* being forty-two and what I do know is that I'm not *angry* about being forty-two but it feels like I'm slowly but surely catching up to my mama because she was only forty-two when she died and I'm thinking how is this possible that I could ever be the same age as mama? I wonder if I could secretly be having a midlife crisis?

Ever since Walter and I split up I guess I have been a little numb. I don't dislike him or hate him for being who he is but I certainly stopped loving him because of it. He bored me to death. Living with him was like living in a museum. It was drafty, full of vast open spaces and slippery floors. He wasn't a bad person, but I just didn't care for his attitudes

and later on his principles turned out to be on the opposite end of the spectrum from mine. He wanted me to be just like him. I wanted him to respect our differences. I ended up telling him that he should've married himself, and later that he should try fucking himself. And this is what we basically argued about. Who we were. We never seemed to come to any neutral turf where both of our feelings and positions were acceptable or at least tolerable. We sort of kept this demerit scoreboard for the last eight years, until we ran out of space. He and I both knew that our time was up, so we didn't make a big tadoo about it, we just agreed to stop this before we ended up hating each other.

We were both running on high octane and barely had time for sex anymore and when we did we were both so exhausted the thought of actually being tender and sensuous and playful was not something that even crossed our minds. Or hearts. We just did it to get off, to relieve some of the tension. Some of the stresses and strains of the day that we brought home with us. At times I felt like his prostitute and I'm sure on occasion he probably felt that way too. It got old. And after a few years of this, I started wondering if I'd ever feel any excitement or passion toward him or any man again, and now that it's been a few years since our divorce, I'm pretty much feeling the same way.

Nobody has rocked my world, as the saying goes. Nobody has made my heart flutter like it did when I first met Walter, or even when I fell in love with Chad, and I don't dare go all the way back to high school or college when the world stopped spinning when Nathaniel kissed me. All Dennis did was smile at me and I was like Elvis: all shook up. I didn't know the power of love was so powerful. But I liked it. Liked feeling like I was full of clouds. Like I could probably run a marathon without ever training for it. Like I

was “on” something that was causing me to have a continuous flow of energy, making me feel excited about and see beauty in just about everything. I could walk down the street and feel myself grinning and people would look at me and simply grin too. This is when I thought I understood what God intended for us to feel.

But then the bullshit always had to enter the picture and contaminate everything that had been so beautiful. Like where were you and why do you have to do that all the time and how come and when are you and I don’t really give a flying fuck if you do but because I felt like it and if you can’t handle it tough shit but as much as I wish I could I can’t even begin to imagine but just the thought of you don’t no not anymore but we could if you weren’t so damn stubborn because hell I can’t help it if I was and yes you are trying to change me into something that I’m not and want to see how long I can resist this shit want to watch me repel and don’t remind me how much we used to have that’s the past and it’s gone baby live in the here and now and check it out this is getting too thick for me and I’m like sinking somewhere low and my heart weighs a ton here lately and as a matter of fact the mere sight of you being in your presence for any length of time depresses the hell out of me and I don’t need this shit who needs this shit so I’m like out of here.

All I know is that I was sort of already using my reserve tank when he left and afterwards being alone took some getting used to. A person can get on your last nerve, drive you to drink, but you still kind of miss their sorry ass after they’re gone is what I found out. That empty space he left sort of turned into an ache for a minute, or I should say a few months, maybe even a year. It was like this secret longing I felt to replace the void he left with something or someone else. Only I didn’t have the energy. Quincy took up a

different kind of space, required a different kind of love. It wasn’t until a year and a half ago that I realized I had not felt the warmth of a man’s body next to mine, that my lips hadn’t trembled, that my breasts hadn’t throbbed or between my legs hadn’t been wet from anybody’s hands except my own, and it made me sad, but I didn’t know what to do about it. I was waiting for *him* to knock on the front door, I guess, and just say, Here I am. Your worries are over, baby. I’m here. But there has been no knock. I haven’t even bumped into him. Haven’t seen him. Haven’t walked past him in an airport and felt any current radiate from his body to mine. Not at all. Not anything close.

But it’s okay. Because all I know is that marriage wears you out and I’m not sure if I have the energy left for it. All my married friends are mostly miserable. They’re just in it because. They started it. Those kids. The money would be all fucked up. Lifestyles would change. Alimony. Child support. And that fucking mortgage and all those cars and visitation and fuck it, let’s just stick it out. Some of them don’t even sleep together. Some of the men—a lot of the men—are into serious affairs but unfortunately the chicks on the side don’t have a clue that most of them have no intention of leaving. The men just need a reprieve. Want to break up the monotony. Smell somebody new. In some cases it’s the only way their dicks can get hard and blast off anymore and hell to them it’s worth it.

Which is why I have pretty much come to the conclusion that marriage itself is a dead-end institution. I’m not doing it again. All I want is a little companionship. No ring. No “I do till death do us part,” because I said that once and we’re both still very much alive. Folks expect too much from one another and when you don’t won’t or can’t deliver you fall short and eventually begin to piss the other person off and

years go by and the two of you simply tolerate each other. I wasn't born to live like this, and especially with a man. I know God didn't have some master plan where we were supposed to fall in love and then work our asses off to make it work and then it doesn't and then we end up feeling worse longer than we felt good. There's something inherently wrong with this whole notion. It seems like everybody is striving for perfection. The perfect fucking spouse who will make you feel perfect. But I know for a fact that no such person exists. I know for a fact that I am far from perfect, but there have been many instances where I didn't believe that. I fought hard for the right to be right. All I was doing was trying to preserve my right to my own self-image, but I'm here to be whoever I am and if I happen to be a little fucked up then accept me fucked up as I am or leave me the fuck alone. Because if there's ever going to be a change in my behavior or my personality I will do it myself and I don't need you nagging me telling me how fucked up I am because you know what? you're pretty fucked up too.

I don't know how long it's going to take for me not only to fill back up again but to get my engine started. I've been divorced now for almost three years and haven't been on a legitimate date in almost a year even though I have a number to call when I just have to have some even though it's not passionate but purely maintenance-oriented sex and I thank God he's married because I wouldn't want him any other way and these last few months have been tough because he's turned into such a lazy fuck and he's pissed at me for not returning his calls and hiding from him really but I'm tired of having sex with him for the sake of getting off because I have to work too hard and he's started banging me the way he probably bangs his wife, like he's a slug, and I don't like kissing him one bit and I'm at the point now where I just

can't do it anymore. Sex should not be cumbersome. And I don't like the idea of searching for love or trying to conjure up passion. Which is probably one reason why it feels like I've lost a lot over these last few years. I know things can never be the way they were (and I wouldn't dare want it back) but there are a few relatively simple things I've stopped doing that I want to put back in my life.

I wish I could call Delilah. But I can't. She'd only been my best friend since college and we only talked on the phone every other day and she was the most brilliant person I ever met and we could talk about anything and she lived all the way in Philly and then last year she decides to surprise me and die suddenly from some stupid liver cancer that she didn't even tell me she had until she was in the fucking hospital and then she was gone the next week and there was a lot of shit we still needed to talk about. A whole lot of stuff. Years and years' worth of stuff. She knew I was going to miss her ass and I *do* miss her black ass and the only way I can make the hurt go away is to do one of two things: pretend that she's still alive and that we're just not on speaking terms, which we went through from time to time, or pretend that she never existed. Trying to do both has required a great deal of effort and imagination and whenever I'm not looking my heart plummets down real low and I can hardly tolerate the longing.

So over these next two weeks I want to try to do some make-Stella-feel-good stuff. Which is why I'm planning to do some things I've been meaning to do but haven't for one reason or another. Mostly because I'm always too busy. Always doing something. Work alone has been kicking my ass. It's been said before, but I'm here to give new meaning to the phrase "I hate my job."

I might actually call up a few old friends and sit in a chair

and not roam around the house while I talk but give them my undivided attention, listen to what they have to say, what they've been going through, how they've been feeling. These are people I do care about but now they're just on the B list. My life has gotten too busy. And it's time for me to slow it down.

I will also cook. I used to cook all kinds of interesting and exotic meals, but after Walter left, if Quincy couldn't identify it he didn't even want to try it. A double Big Mac and supersize fries and a nine-piece Chicken McNugget with a medium Sprite and apple pie is his meal of choice. I miss cooking. I miss smelling new smells and stirring new sauces and being surprised by the taste of something different. I will cook. I will make it a habit. I will even make some of those low-fat meals from a few of the fifty or sixty cookbooks I've purchased over the years and have yet to ever open.

For the last two or three years I've been meaning to make a computerized printout of all my relatives' and friends' birthdays and even their kids' and have it printed on a specially made calendar so that each day when I walk into my office all I have to do is look up and see whose birthday is coming up, and their card and maybe even a gift depending on their age and who they were would be a surprise and on time.

I'll also plant some flowers in the front and back yards since I've been reading about the Zen of gardening and how gratifying it can be, and since it's been a while since I've had sex I'll take whatever form pleasure comes in. At any rate, I've heard that this gardening stuff can relax you and even give you some of those endorphins like people get when they exercise.

This too is something I'd like to improve upon while my

son is off to the Rockies with his how-did-I-ever-love-his-lifeless daddy. As it stands now, I am almost ashamed to tell people that I hired a personal trainer who comes to my house three days a week to make me pump and grind and sweat because the bottom line is that I'm lazy and have no willpower and have woken up too many mornings from dreams in which I worked out so strenuously and was truly too beautiful for a woman who'd just turned forty and I put stars like Cher and Tina Turner and Diana Ross to shame but it wasn't until a year later after having a series of such dreams that I realized I had never broken a sweat let alone panted. It has taken me another year to get into the rhythm of working out and there are many mornings when I'd just as soon call in sick, but as a result of my desire to improve my health with the real motive being pure vanity I now am almost in shape although I still have my unfair share of cellulite, but it's not as much as I used to have thank the Lord and I actually do have a number of muscles and my butt is higher and firmer than I ever recall it being but since I'd been paying the health club \$105 a month for two years and had actually only been inside to give tours to visiting friends and relatives and inform them that whenever I had the time this is where I usually worked out though the truth was I'd only gone in there to sit in the steam room but since I now have two steam rooms—here and in my cabin at Lake Tahoe—there was really no need to waste my gas driving there so why bother, so last year I admitted to myself that I was bullshitting myself and since I have had a difficult time visualizing myself fat and slovenly and just plain old I decided—like they do in any twelve-step program—to turn myself over to a higher power. Her name is Krystal and she makes Cindy Crawford look like a zero and she only charges fifty dollars an hour. I used to use drugs that cost me

more per minute. Which is one reason I could never run for public office. If anyone ever did a background check on me they'd be in for a big shock. But then again, they are always shocked at everybody else's background when they're running for public office, aren't they? No one who has really lived should have a sterling background, in my opinion. My sister Angela is the only baby boomer I know who's never tried any drugs at all. She's missed out on a lot of good shit if you ask me.

But those were the good old days. Times have changed. Twenty years have passed. I am a grown-up. In every sense of the word. I have responsibilities. I am responsible. I am a good mother. I am raising a black male child by myself and trying to be a mother and father and do my very best so that he'll grow up to be a strong proud and confident black man who knows his own worth and value and is not afraid to love and show his feelings and yet he'll be strong as steel on the outside and as soft and sensuous as a cashmere sweater inside. I spend a lot of time being a mother.

I am also a fancy-smancy analyst for one of the world's largest investment banking institutions and I make a shitload of money and my family is proud of me because I'm the only one who has actually made it to the top but all I know is that it is lonely as hell up here and I don't particularly like it. At this point in my life, I'd settle for being in the middle. My job is dull and boring. I just always assumed that a person could have more than one talent, more than one skill, and you could display as many of them as you had available, but I've learned that this is not necessarily true. It is difficult to be taken seriously if you are an artist, but playing with numbers gets quite a bit of attention. I've also come to realize that the price I'm paying to get paid a lot is a little on the high side. It seems to me that once you get past the two-

hundred-thousand-a-year mark you are constantly being appraised and as a result always trying to prove your worth. It wears you out and at the same time no matter what you do or how good you think you are at it, as long as someone ranks higher on that hierarchy than you it makes you expendable. It's too hectic up here and the race is always on. It's always rush hour but I haven't figured out when to put on my blinker because it's safe to change lanes and I'm also not sure which exit I should take to get off this track altogether.

I know there's still room in my life for steel and suede for copper and leather for brass and wood for marble slate glass and material in general, but I just don't know how when or where to put it back in. Mostly because I'm scared. I've always been good at making things that serve a purpose, that perform, that function, but art is so iffy and then there's the mortgage and I'm not sure if I could recapture regain or pick up where I left off, if I'll ever have the guts the chutzpah hell the balls to leave my job.

My divorce and starting all over has taken most of the bite out of me for right now and I don't know exactly how long it's going to take me to get my groove back on as the young kids say. All I know is this: Loss is hard. Starting over is hard. Which is why I'm just trying to get from one day to the next, why I'm on the straight and narrow, and it's probably the reason why most of the time my life is not fun.

Right now I'm tired of thinking about how uneventful my life has been lately and I wish I knew what I could do to put the fizz back into it. How to resurrect myself. How to shoot some vitality into my heart, my mind, this house of soul I live in. I haven't always been dead. I used to live a somewhat exciting life. I used to take chances. I used to do some crazy shit and didn't give a damn because I wasn't

hurting anybody. Fifteen years ago my life was interesting because I didn't know where I was going I just knew I was going somewhere. It was exciting because I hadn't arrived anywhere yet. And the journey itself was exhilarating. The detours. The uncertainty. I used to change my mind about things right in the middle of doing the shit. Made mistakes and was woman enough to admit I made them but didn't slay myself for it. It was usually some bullshit that was reversible anyway. Back then I did whatever I felt like doing that gave me pleasure. When did I stop? And why? After or during marriage? Motherhood? My so-called career?

I walk outside for a minute to think about this and when the dog runs up to me with his wet dog-smelling self I pat him on the head and go back into the house. My latte is cold and I step inside my office to pick out a book but out of the thousand or so I have it doesn't seem as if any of them suit my mood. I don't want to read anything too lighthearted or too deep either. I close the door and head back toward the family room because I'm not so sure that I really want to escape my own world. That I want to be engaged.

Part of my problem is that I'm always doing something and if I'm not then I'm looking for something to do. I decide to lie down and take a nap. To simply stop moving. For a change. So I sink into the thick cushions on the red love seat and I close my eyes but the leather is cold against my skin and I'm not exactly exhausted because I haven't exactly exerted any real energy today except what it took to decide on what I was and wasn't going to do.

Without even trying I find myself springing up and decide that I'll watch a little television, something mindless, and it's the one thing I rarely do except maybe by accident like the accident I'm causing right now. I don't even know if I have HBO or Showtime and I'm hoping I do and even though

my watch says it's now twenty to one in the afternoon I don't care if I tune in to the middle of a movie because I'm like an intelligent enough woman who should be able to figure out how something started but I guess all I really want is to hear some noise since Quincy's not here making any or maybe I'm just so used to being distracted I need something to stop me from thinking so hard about my own mundane redundant predictable but good little life.

I try three remotes before one works. And as soon as the TV comes on of course there's a commercial and without looking up I hear this melodic baritone voice almost singing "Come to Jamaica" and I swear it seems as if he's talking to me and when I look at the fifty-five-inch screen it is filled with turquoise water and hot white sand and a blazing yellow sun and then a bronzed white man in a flapping white cotton shirt and baggy white linen trousers strolls along the shore and a tanned white woman in a straw hat and sunglasses is stretched out on a chaise longue with a book resting across her chest and they are both holding tall frothy glasses filled with something melon-colored and I think I can smell the papaya juice the pineapple juice and coconut oil and that tropical breeze is whispering in my ear and when I look closer that white woman's legs begin to turn brown and she is wearing my chartreuse bathing suit and my good straw hat and that's my Swatch watch on her wrist and my Revo sunglasses and when I look closer at this woman who now looks like she could be my twin sister I realize it is me lying on that chaise on that beach and when that lilting voice once again says "Come to Jamaica," I sit up then stand up and I say to that man, "Why the fuck not?"

"WHO'RE YOU GOING WITH?" ANGELA ASKS. SHE'S MY younger sister by twenty-one months and she's still about ten years older than me.

"Nobody."

"You can't be serious, Stella."

"I'm very serious."

I can hear her slurping up something. She's always putting something into her big mouth and I guess it's because she's sort of pregnant with twins. "Hold it," she says. "You mean to tell me you're gonna go all the way to a foreign country by yourself?"

"Yes. What's the big deal?"

"Who you gonna do stuff with and what if somebody realizes you're alone and tries to take advantage of you and why do you have to go all the way to Jamaica?"

I knew I shouldn't have told her first. The most outrageous thing Angela's done in years is buy a BMW station wagon. Even though she and her corporate lawyering spouse are in the process of brewing two children they actually went out and bought a completely furnished five-bedroom model home in a semicustom home subdivision which is surrounded by nothing but tract homes and Angela and Kennedy decided to be bold and had the outside repainted a pale gray instead of the other million different shades of gray like every other house in their neighborhood. My sister would be lost without her garage door opener her sprinkler system her trash compactor, and Kennedy'd be disoriented without the landscaper the handyman and I know for a fact that he does not know how to use everyday tools. And like a real fool, Angela cleans her own house since she's in it all day. She likes the predictable. She is truly an all-American girl. But she doesn't watch enough Oprah.

Apparently Angela didn't hear a word Mama said when we were growing up. "Never let a man run the whole show. Never let him know if you're holding the trump card. Never tell him how many men you slept with before him and never ever let him know how much money you got and keep some of your business to yourself cause he'll hold it against you later long after you think he forgot." You think she would've learned after going to the altar once before. But nope. She likes to repeat herself. The first husband (and I can't even hardly remember his name but does it really matter?) caused her to bear a handsome buck whose name I do recall because he is my favorite (well, my only) nephew and

he is away at college and well over six feet tall and the only black hockey player I've ever heard of. Evan is twenty. Last I heard he was also smart. He has told me to my face that he thinks Kennedy is a punk but he tries to get along with him because his mom loves the dude. Angela handed her entire soul over to Kennedy for safekeeping when she married him. He is only the second man she has ever slept with. He writes, produces and directs all three acts of their lives on a daily basis and she basically goes along with his program because I truly believe that Angela feels like she's nothing without a man. Unfortunately in her case, it's true. She needs guidance, direction from somebody, and boy does she get it from Kennedy. She doesn't have to think about too much on her own because he takes a scientific mathematical approach toward life in that he's got everything all figured out before the shit even happens. So basically Angela just connects the dots.

She worships her husband. I loved mine. Marriage to her is the end of the rainbow. I wanted it to *be* the rainbow. I wanted each day to be fresh, warm, sprinkled with something redeeming, something that would make me feel good about being here, that this is nice, that the longer I know you the more I like you and as a matter of fact this bond is even getting stronger and it feels good to trust someone and I'm glad you've got my back and you know I've got yours and each morning when I wake up and feel you next to me I am so glad we are here together and when I look at you when I think about you I smile because we both pay attention to each other's needs respect appreciate them and all I know is that I'd like to continue doing this. I think Angela negotiated the terms of her marriage with Kennedy, and being a litigator, he pretty much won.

She's still my sister and I love her like a sister and the main reason I called her first was because she's under the A's on

my speed dial and my other sister—Vanessa—is of course way down in the V's.

I am in my car on my way to the mall to buy a few new bathing suits, a few pairs of sandals, some basic resort wear and a couple of somewhat sexy sundresses.

"First of all, the main reason I'm going to Jamaica is to get away from everything and everybody, so I can lie on the beach and read and chill out without being distracted. If I went with somebody I'd have to negotiate with them about what we're going to do each and every day, and if I don't want to do what they want to do then there'll be tension and I'll spend my vacation compromising and I do enough of that at home and at work and for the first time in years I feel like being totally selfish."

"I think it's ridiculous. Even though I'm four months pregnant and might not be much fun I'd be happy to go with you and you could do whatever you wanted to do."

"I told you I don't want any company."

"When are you leaving?"

"Wednesday."

"Wednesday? Today is already Sunday!"

"I know it. That's why I'm on my way to get some new rags."

"What about Quincy? What if something happens to him while he's with his dad and you're not even in the United States of America?"

"Bite it, Angela. This is the first time I've taken a vacation without Quincy in six years and it's the first time I've done anything this spontaneous in about a hundred. His daddy hasn't exactly jumped over any hurdles trying to get here when Quincy's been sick. I've handled it. Now it's his turn. I'll leave him a number, Angela. Damn. It's also the reason why God invented airplanes. Six hours is all it takes."

"Where exactly are you going?"