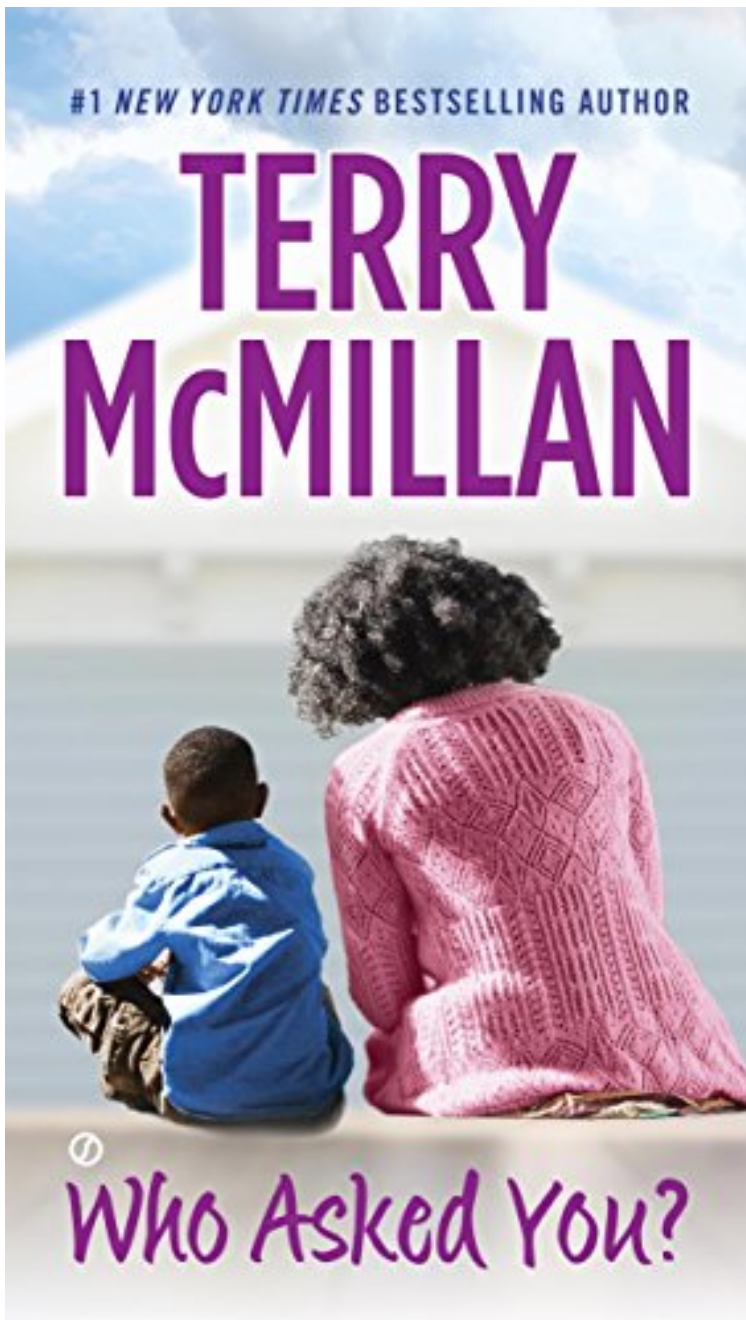


[Free read ebook] File size: 19.Mb

Who Asked You?



Par Terry McMillan
ebooks | Download PDF | *ePub |
DOC | audiobook

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #287135 dans eBooksPubli le: 2013-09-17Sorti le: 2013-09-17Format: Ebook Kindle

[Free read ebook] Who Asked You?

Par Terry McMillan : Who Asked You? before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Who Asked You?:

 Download

 Read Online

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom the #1New York Times bestselling authorRemember Getting to Happy, Waiting to Exhale, and How Stella Got Her Groove Back? Well, you wont likely forget Terry McMillans Who Asked You?either (Raleigh News Observer). When Who Asked You? begins, Trinetta leaves her two young sons with her mother, Betty Jean, and promptly disappears. BJ already has her hands full dealing with her other

adult children, two opinionated sisters, an ill husband, and her own postponed dreams all the while holding down a job delivering room service at a hotel. Her son Dexter is about to be paroled from prison; Quentin, the family success, cant be bothered to lend a hand; and taking care of two lively grandsons is the last thing BJ thinks she needs. But who asked her? From the Paperback edition. Extrait I You Go First Betty Jean Its my day off and Im in the kitchen getting ready to fry some chicken. When the phone rings and I see my daughters name on the caller I.D. Im tempted to let it go straight to voice mail; the only reason I decide to go on and answer it is because Im worried it might have something to do with my grandsons. Plus, I dont trust her. Trinetta is not in the habit of calling just to chitchat or to check on her daddy. She always wants something. Her life is one continuous emergency. Since Ive got flour all over my hands, I wipe them on my red apron, pick up the portable, and tiptoe into the living room because the last thing I want to do is wake up Lee David. Ma, I need to borrow a hundred forty dollars today and I swear as soon as I get my check Ill pay you back, but the good news is I might have a job and I was wondering if I could bring the boys over for a couple of days so I can study for the test? Please say yes, Ma. Please. Did I miss hello? Hello, Ma. Is something over there getting cut off? No. But its important. I swear to God, Ill give you my check when it comes, Ma. I owe Twinkle and her rent is past due and if I dont give it to her by six oclock shes gonna get evicted. That girl who lives down the hall from you? Yeah. Her. Isnt she a drug addict? Twinkle? No. Shes got three kids. You and Twinkle seem to have a whole lot in common, then, dont you? I aint no drug addict, Ma. I might dip and dab every now and then, but Im a long way from being strung out. I know I didnt just hear you say aint on this phone talking to me. My bad. Im not a drug addict. Better? I rest the phone on my shoulder and brush my hands again on my apron. Why cant you get it from whats-his-name? His name is Dante. He moved out. Why? Cause the Section Eight people was gonna raise my rent. What a pity, and he was so helpful. Ma . . . please? I hate it when she begs. And I know theres more to this story than what shes saying, but since getting the truth out of her is damn near impossible, I just say, Ill write you a check when you bring the boys over. I cant do nothing with no check, Ma. Since when? Youve managed to cash all the other ones. I had to close my checking account. And please, dont ask. I swear to God, Trinetta. You just go from bad to worse. Yeah, well, I had a good teacher. What did you just say? I said I shoulda had better teachers. That is not what you said. Can we not go there today? Please? Im trying to fix a problem over here and I just need your help. About what time should I look for you and the boys? Between three and four. We gotta take the bus cause I had to let Dante use the car. I thought you just said he moved out? He did. But the only way he could move his stuff back out to his parents house was he needed a car. Has he ever heard of U-Haul? He didnt have that much stu Forget I asked. When is he bringing it back? In about a week or two, cause he might have a job opportunity, too. Well, wouldnt that just make you both lucky? Dont answer that. But tell me this. And dont lie, Trinetta. Did you pay the insurance like you said you would? I paid half of it. So, if you or Dante got in half of an accident do you realize who could get sued for their whole damn house? We both very careful drivers, Ma. You sound like a damn fool, Trinetta. You know that? Ill see you in a few hours. I just shake my head and head on back to the kitchen. I can hear these boards creaking under the carpet but I pretend I dont hear it. I didnt dare ask what kind of job she might be applying for that required her to study for the test, but Ill just cross my fingers I wont have to add it to the long list of things she didnt end up doing. Oh Lord. Did I just hear him move? Please dont let this be a Commercial Break Nap. He only watched four episodes of Dora the Explorer and hes got six more to go. Plus, I am not in the mood for entertaining him while I stand in this hot-ass kitchen in front of this electric stove in the middle of the afternoon with no air conditioner. Its broken. Just like he is. And Im right behind him. I can live without fried chicken. Im just doing this to make Lee David happy. He doesnt ask for much these days but he did manage to say, I want some soul food, and then flapped his bony little arms and made a clucking noise, which is why Im in here suffering. Its amazing what youll do for your husband, even if you never loved him but he convinced you he loved you so you went on and married him and had his babies. Hell, I could be ironing my uniforms or writing Dexter a long-overdue letter, or reading a good paperback instead of struggling to fix enough food to last two or three days, since I cant be Julia Child every day. Even though I propped that fan on top of four old encyclopedias and a phone book, its still not cutting it, so I go to Plan B. I open the door and slide a chair in front of it, then set everything on top of it, turn that oscillator on, but all its doing is pushing warm air on my behind, which is big enough to generate its own heat. I stick my head inside the freezer for a minute; inhale the cold, hoping itll spread inside my body, which of course doesnt work. I think I hear him stirring in there again so I lean my left ear toward the bedroom, but just to be on the safe side, I say, Anything I can get you, Mister? (Which is what I call him when Im talking directly to him.) While I wait for the response I hope not to get, I

tighten the strings on this apron, cup my chin in my palms, and press my elbows on the damp counter. I look out the window at the orange trees at the side of the driveway. Not a single leaf on any of them is moving. This feels too much like earthquake weather. I dont appreciate this kind of stillness. We hadnt been here two days back in 71 when that 6.6 sucker hit at the crack of dawn. We had come from New Orleans and I thought what a fucked-up welcome to California this was. But like fools, here we are almost thirty years later. You kind of get used to your house shaking, and you almost feel grateful if nothing breaks or the walls dont crack. He clears his throat. So I carry on, making sure the oil is hot as I flick a few drops of water into a giant skillet and jump back. When a geyser shoots up from it, I know its ready. I wish I could get rid of this big old electric stove and get a gas one. And a Kenmore. Stainless. It took years, but our Sears card has a zero balance and Im afraid to charge anything until I can be more certain about our future. I pick up the Ziploc bag full of flour and sprinkle some seasoning salt, garlic powder, white pepper, and paprika inside it. Chicken breasts and thighs are piled up on a floral platter. These are the only pieces Lee David likes. After thirty-seven years of marriage, Ive forgotten how much I used to love wings. I dip a few pieces in a bowl of whisked eggs, drop them inside the bag, shake them back and forth, and then place them in the skillet. I wash my hands in warm water, stand in front of the sink even though I should sit down, and start snapping string beans. Mrs. Butler? You got a big brown one from Dexter today. Want me to set it inside the screen door for you or leave it out here on the top step? Inside is fine. Thanks, Mr. Jones. And you have a nice day. Is that fried chicken I smell? I just chuckle. Mr. Jones has been our mailman since we moved into this house, and it doesnt seem like hes ever going to retire. Hes been a widower going on five years now. I dont know how he manages to do so much walking, especially in those thick black special shoes he has to wear. Stop back by when you get to Tammys and Ill wrap you up a couple of pieces. You are so very kind, he says. I walk through the dining room and living room and down one step onto the sunporch and pick up the mail. I recognize the bills by the color of the envelopes and set them on the buffet. I put Dexters big envelope inside the magazine pouch on the left side of my La-Z-Boy with a ton of his letters I have not read. I get one every week, sometimes two. I cant read them like I used to. Ill be the first to admit that I probably couldve been a better mother, and Ive got three grown children to prove it. It goes without saying that I do love them. Im just disappointed in how they turned out. Trinetta is the baby, and at twenty-seven she seems to have a hard time saying no to drugs and low-life men, which has made her allergic to working more than a few months at a time. Sometimes, its hard for me to believe shes the same daughter who lived on the honor roll all during junior high school. But then between ninth grade and junior college she fell in love too many times to count and lost her mind. She also loved beautiful teeth and was on her way to becoming a dental technician when she got pregnant. Over the years, Trinetta tiptoed back and forth, and the last I heard, shes only twelve units shy of being employable. I used to remind her of this small fact but she would just get defensive. She has given birth to three children. The last one was Noxema. Her daddy went to court and got custody after she drank some shampoo and had to be rushed to emergency. I wish he wouldve claimed those other two. Who they belong to is a mystery that may never get solved. In all honesty, Im one step away from calling Child Protection Services on her if she doesnt clean up her act soon. My oldest, Quentin, likes cracking necks and backs, getting married, and getting divorced. Hes a chiropractor and lives up in Oregon, where hardly any black people live, which has made it very easy for him to forget hes black. He enjoys being the token and hates the ghetto. He even calls me Mother, which gets on my nerves because it sounds so official, and he says it using the same tone as telemarketers when they ask for Mrs. Butler. Ive told him about a thousand times I dont like being called Mother, but he just ignores me. He was the same way when he was little. He doesnt bend. Does everything his way, which is what has made him so difficult to like. Somehow, somehow, he has made himself believe hes superior to most folks. I dont know how he got this way, and why he feels more like a stranger I just happened to give birth to. The only time I seem to hear from him is when hes getting married or divorced. Hes on his fourth or fifth wife. I cant keep up. One thing they all have in common is that theyre white. Not that I care. But why they all have to be blonde is what baffles me. On top of everything, Quentin has the nerve to act like hes religious. He does not go to any church that I know of but claims to read the Bible every single morning. He must be a slow reader. Then theres Dexter. Hes in the middle. Another smart one who fell in love with stupidity. Hes doing nine to twelve years for carjacking a Filipino woman in a Costco parking lot in broad daylight using a deadly weapon (which to this day he claims was just a flashlight and not a gun). He and his high school buddy, Buddy, thought this would be a fun thing to do since the bus was taking too long and they were both high on that marijuana and Bud Lights. Dexter said they were just trying to get out to Valencia so Buddy could go

see his girlfriend in the hospital who had just had his baby, and Buddy didnt want to miss visiting hours. Dexter swore up and down this was all Buddys idea even though Dexter was also supposed to meet his girlfriend, Skittles, at Great America, that amusement park right down the street from the hospital. Unfortunately, that marijuana mustve caused a temporary memory loss, because Dexter forgot that even stolen cars run on gas, which is why the highway patrolman didnt believe him when Dexter told him the bright yellow Jetta with Divina on the custom plates was his. If I had it to do over, I probably wouldnt have had any kids. Its too much responsibility trying to steer somebody elses life when youre still trying to navigate your own. Back then kids didnt come with instructions, so you had to wing it. And based on all these modern books full of recipes on how to be a deluxe parent and raise damn near flawless children, I guess Id have to give myself a C or a C because apparently I did a whole lot of things wrong. For starters, I didnt always put my kids first. I mean I had needs, too. Back then, between them and Lee David, I felt just like a pie. Everybody wanted a piece of me and barely left me with a little crust. Plus, I had to work. I did not talk to them in what they now call an inside voice. I talked to them like they were hard of hearing. It was the only way I could get their attention and let them know I meant business. Plus, I didnt like being a repeater. Saying the same damn thing over and over and over again and still not getting the results I was after. They were hardheaded. Im proud to say I did not swear at them, but every once in a while they did hear me say shit and damn and oh hell no, and five or six or ten times the F word. Apparently this was supposed to ruin them but I dont think that was what did it. I also said no a lot because many of the things they asked for were unreasonable. Or ridiculous. Time-outs hadnt been invented yet, which is why if they disobeyed me, I sometimes popped their little behinds. I didnt beat them, mind you, and never used any hand-held items. Again, my kids were hardheaded, so I doubt if sitting on a little stool in a corner wouldve worked on them anyway. Lee David might as well have been one of the kids, because he was just as needy and actually competed against them for my attention. I think he won. But my clock was slow: it took about twenty years to admit to myself how bored I was being his wife. He was pleasant enough and a reliable father and all but sometimes he felt more like a good friend who wouldnt go home. I guess it would be fair to say that I was just too lazy to divorce him. I also discovered that you can get used to a man, much like you do a household pet. My mama raised four of us and she made it look easy. (I shouldnt count Monroe, who was almost thirteen when she took him in after her sister died, and he was trouble from the start.) But Im here to testify: Raising kids is not easy. Its work. Hard work. And work you dont get paid for. The worst part is when the little suckers grow up and dont appreciate the time and energy you put into them. Mine seem to have major lapses in memory. What they remember most is how much I got on their nerves. What I didnt give them. Not what I did. And they blame me for the things they didnt bother listening to. As if I never taught them anything. Or, that it was useless. As a mother, you cant help but wonder where you went wrong and how much of your kids confusion is your fault. I probably shouldve read more fairy tales and more often instead of just on my days off, their birthdays, and Christmas. (Trinetta could already read by the time she was three and refused to let me hold the book.) It wouldnt have killed me to hug them every day instead of only when they did something that made me proud which Im sad to say was not all that often. And maybe I couldve got down on my knees and said their prayers with them instead of standing in the doorway listening. Then tucked them in like they do in fairy tales. Wished them sweet dreams. And kissed them on their foreheads. But I didnt. I wont lie. I wish Lee David and I could have been a little more like the Cosbys. That both of us had graduated from college and become professionals. That we lived in an upscale house in an upscale neighborhood. That our home was full of modern furniture, real art, and real plants., with a guest room we used for guests. That we went on cruises and needed passports in order to go to some of the places we traveled to, and went out to dinner where they had valet parking. That we had a car worth being valet parked. What I really wish was that we never had to suffer from any incurable diseases, we laughed all the time, and cried mostly at funerals. It wouldve been nice to have enough money left over to donate some. That our children would grow up and make us proud and we would die old and happy. Things dont always go as planned, especially if you didnt really have any plans, which is probably why Lee David spent thirty-nine of his sixty-five years lifting boxes at UPS and Ive spent twenty-nine pressing a little button on thousands of doors and saying Room Service! It doesnt matter anymore that it was (once) a five-star hotel in Hollywood, because in six more years I get to turn in my size-16 uniform and call it quits. And even though both of our pension checks and Lee Davids social security will keep us going, it wont be the same. I live for those tips. Unfortunately, Im the only one in my family who didnt get a college degree. But I do believe theres more than one way to get an education. Im far from dumb. I watch CNN and listen to NPR and I watch the

National Geographic Channel and nature programs. I read every chance I get. Mostly novels because they take me away from all the bullshit that might be going on around me and its a good way to escape my world and move in with folks I dont know. I dont like murder mysteries or whodunits because I dont need to read about death when I can go right down the street and see it. I dont like romance novels because you always know how theyre going to turn out and I am not interested in grown-up fairy tales because I know for a fact that life is hard and there is no guarantee youre going to have a happy ending. But I do believe that even if you make a left when you shouldve made a right, theres still time to make a U-turn and go in the right direction. Fifty-six might be old to some folks but I think I still have time to improve myself. I just want to have something besides kids and a husband to show for my life.Ive been entertaining the idea of taking early retirement, depending on whether I can afford to live on it, and if I do, I might take some kind of college course or courses, depending. I have no idea what they might be, because I dont exactly know what I like, or hell, what I might be good at. One thing Ive learned is that I can change my mind and the world wont come to an end. I have never had a vacation unless I count twelve years ago when we went to see our families in New Orleans, but that trip ended up costing us about as much as it probably wouldve to take a trip around the damn world. Begging, broke relatives mostly on Lee Davids side of the family came out of the woodwork thinking that just because we lived in California we must be rich. Anyway, Im so sick of sunshine and palm trees I dont know what to do. I want to go somewhere cold. I have never seen snow up close. Standing on Vermont Avenue looking up at those snow-capped mountains doesnt count. They look like they belong in Hollywood. I dont want to see anybody on skis, either. Dont ask me why, but I have always wanted to make an angel and throw a snowball. Of course, all Lee David always talked about was buying a condominium in Palm Springs, but I told him I did not want to spend the rest of my life in a desert, burning up around old white people. But then ten years ago, when he was just fifty-five, he started forgetting little things and then things he shouldnt have had to remember. It scared me and it scared him, so we had him tested and the doctor said he was in the early stages of Alzheimers. I thought he was too young, so we got a second opinion, and the diagnosis was the same. Lee David was pretty calm about it. When it gets so that I cant do for myself, BJ, put me somewhere comfortable. I dont want to be your burden. Then he started laughing. And if its before you turn sixty, get yourself a boyfriend.I remember thinking: A boyfriend? I started laughing too. Of course hes been slipping downhill these past five or six years and my older sister, Arlene, has been trying to convince me to go ahead and put him in a facility. I just ignore her. I dont like anybody telling me what I should do, especially her. Hes not a burden. Plus, hes my husband. I cant just abandon him because Im tired.As things stand, Nurse Kim looks after him when Im at work. She used to take him on short walks but his arthritis got really bad and then he lost interest in nature. She sponge bathes him (thank God, because my sciatic nerve cant handle too much bending over). Nurse Kim is as sweet as she can be. Thirty years old and pretty enough to be on the cover of Essence magazine, not that Lee David even notices, but as soon as she walks in this house its like having a Christmas tree all lit up in here. Plus, she always smells like some kind of tropical fruit.On weekends, when I need to run errands, Tammy, who lives across the street, comes over and Lee-sits as she calls it. The truth be told, some days I feel sorry for Lee David and other days I get sick just looking at him. This is when I wish he would just hurry up and die so I could hurry up and grieve and then live out whats left of the rest of my life. Its a horrible thought, but one Ive had on more than one occasion, which is why I keep it to myself.Mister, you still in there sleeping?Yep, he says.After snapping all these doggone string beans, I put most of them into plastic bags and freeze them. I dont know why Im going to all this trouble for two people. Wait! I forgot about the boys just that fast! I get a can of chicken broth out of the cabinet and pour a little into a boiler, drop a few strips of bacon in it and a few slices of white onion, and once it boils, Ill put the beans I left out on the counter right on top of it. Sometimes I cheat and buy things I used to make from scratch and just doctor them up. Like Im about to do to this potato salad I bought from Ralphs. I pop the lid on the plastic container and dump it into my yellow mixing bowl, and right after I sprinkle a few drops of vinegar, a pinch of salt, sugar, and paprika and start stirring, the phone rings.I cant see who it is from over here but I pray its a telemarketer and not either of my sisters: Venetia, who can talk all day about nothing ever since I warned her that if she started going on about the Lord Id hang up, or Arlene, who likes to get you to talk about all the messed-up things going on in your life but wont give you a clue about whats going on in hers. She wouldve made a good talk show host. I move closer to the phone, since I dont have my glasses on. Its Claire Huxtable, a.k.a. Venetia. I stick the wooden spoon deep inside the potato salad so it stands up, and I answer against my better judgment. Hey, sis, I say, as upbeat as is humanly possible. Howve you been?Im good. Just checking in.And how are the kids?Oh,

theyre fine. Hows Lee David?The same. And Rodney?In the clouds as we speak. Headed to Tokyo.I pull the spoon out, do a quick taste test, and then start stirring again.Betty Bean, you still there? (Shes called me this since she was two years old. I like it.)Im here, but I hear Lee David calling me, so can I call you back a little later on?Absolutely. Ill be here. Love you.Talk about raising kids by the book? Venetia gets an A+. Shes thirteen months younger than I am but people often think shes the older one when were together. Her husband was rich when she met him, and I think that had something to do with his appeal because hes still a long drive away from being cute. They live in Encino, not far from the Jacksons. Venetia wasted six years going to college and getting an MBA because she chose to be a stay-at-home mom. She spends Rodneys money for a living, which is unfortunate because she doesnt have great taste and shes cheap, which is why she has a giant house full of corny stuff that doesnt go together. Its not too late to hire a decorator, but I have not figured out how to drop the hint.She has been a slave to two spoiled-rotten brats who grew up and turned out to be as nice as they can be: Lauren and Zachary. They both played soccer. Both play the frigging piano. Lauren speaks French. Zach chose Mandarin. I guess thats like Chinese. It goes without saying, theyre both honor students. Three million carpooling miles later, Zach and Lauren will be graduating in less than two years but Venetia still drops them off and picks them up. I cannot imagine what shes going to do when those kids go off to college and their elderly dog, Pepper, dies. And what does she do with so much free time on her hands, since her husband lives on airplanes and in hotel rooms? Cleans all day. Every day. Things that arent even dirty. I think she has orgasms doing laundry. She folds and irons everything. Even sheets. With spray starch! Of course she can afford a housekeeper, but claims she doesnt trust them.No sooner do I cover the potato salad with a plastic lid and put it in the fridge than here comes Arlene calling. But Im not falling for this. I wouldnt be surprised if Venetia had called Arlene and told her to call me just to see if I would pick up the phone and have a long drawn-out conversation with her so then Arlene would call Venetia back and tell her and Venetia would know that I was just blowing her off. So I dont answer it.Sometimes I think they both think they know more about me than I know about myself. Arlene is my least favorite out of the whole clan but I tolerate her because shes my sister. She is the one person who can get on all of my nerves at once.

Why? Because she thinks shes smarter than everybody since she got a masters in psychology from Pepperdine. Venetia went to a state college and Arlene thinks Venetias credentials are inferior, but of course Arlene has bothered to share her true sentiments only with me and not Venetia because she is two-faced. Arlene also loves to tell people how to live their lives based on her standards, which is why I try to keep as much of my personal life as is humanly possible from her. I do share some things with Venetia because shes been saved and doesnt believe in gossip. Its too bad Arlene hasnt used any of the stuff she learned at Pepperdine on herself, which is probably why she now sells real estate. She was a therapist for years but in the black community you can go broke giving bad advice. Thanks to Arlene and Venetia, it has become obvious to me that getting a college degree doesnt necessarily mean youre smart. Or stable.Im not one to hold grudges, but some people who are mean-spirited as children grow up to be mean-spirited adults. Arlene is one of them. Forty-five years ago she looked at me and said, That hairstyle was not meant for you, Betty Jean. I think youd look much better with short hair, and that little bitch took a pair of pinking shears and cut off seven inches of my hair. Maybe not, she said after looking at her handiwork.I love her. But she has other qualities that have made it hard to like her. She thinks shes better than us folks who live down here in the hood, as they now call it. She bought a split-level house thirteen minutes away, up there in Baldwin Hills, where black folks with two-car garages, palm trees in their front and back yards, gold credit cards, and money in the bank live. She has never been married, but that didnt stop her from screwing other womens husbands (I wonder what page this was on in her psychology books) and it didnt stop her from having a baby either. That baby is almost six feet tall, twenty-eight years old, still lives with her, and has never paid rent, but thats because its hard when you cant seem to keep a job longer than a few months. Arlene always thinks the employer discriminates against Omar because hes fat. She talks to him like hes still fourteen, but I would never say anything to her about what I really think.I tell Tammy. Shes my best friend. Lives right across the street. Shes ten years younger and happens to be white but she feels more like a sister to me than Arlene does. Shes a good listener and we can share our thoughts and feelings about things without judging each other.Personally, I try to avoid friction at all costs and dont like to argue or fight with Arlene or anyone else because it takes too much out of you. And what exactly do you win? Sometimes, I will clear my throat at the post office if somebody is taking all day to pick out what stamps they like, and even though I get to church only two or three times a year, I start humming Just a Closer Walk with Thee while standing in that long return line at Wal-Mart when the person ahead cant find their receipt, or I squeeze my toes together when I

take my grandkids to the playground and Trinetta acts like shes forgotten what Clorox and lotion are for. Arlene and Tammy have never gotten along because Tammy married a black man. The whole interracial thing has never really bothered me. Who you love is your business. Plus, I never knew love was a color. My biggest concern was always their kids. I felt sorry for them having to explain what they were year after year after year. And now, that theyre out of college, they still dont know what box to check. I used to like her husband, Howard, but he broke Tammys heart. Thelma? he yells from the bedroom, which is pretty much where he lives these days. Thelma is my name today. She was the girl Lee David was going to marry back in New Orleans but then Thelma apparently attracted to the family genes ran off to Shreveport with his brother.

Thats when Lee David turned to me. And at nineteen I decided to skip college in exchange for a chipped diamond ring and a chance to live in California. What you need, Mister? Lord knows I wished I couldve called him baby but the opportunity never presented itself. I wanted my knees to buckle when he touched me, but they always stayed stiff and strong. I wanted my heart to light up and maybe sizzle, but it was a no-show, too. I wanted to feel like I couldnt live without him. But I knew I could. Even still, I have enjoyed his company. I could use another beer, he says, pointing to his plastic glass, which means he wants a refill for his tea. Be right there. I open the white cabinet, the one with the loose brackets, and pull a straw out of the mayonnaise jar I keep them in. I get the pitcher of tea out of the refrigerator, pour it into the light blue plastic glass he likes, and drop the straw inside. Here you go, I say, and hold it up to his mouth. It looks like midnight in this room but I can still see the bags under his eyes and they look three times bigger behind those bifocals. Thank you, he says, without taking his eyes off the TV screen. Of course hes watching Dora the Explorer, like he does every day, all day. I had to go out and buy the DVD because he would get upset when it went off. All he has to do now is press the remote to start it over. Im learning how to speak Spanish, he said rather proudly when he was still able to speak in long sentences. Perry como usta senora? Can I get you anything else? He flips the blanket up as his way of asking me to slide on under. You really do think Im

Thelma, dont you? I say, and walk out of the room. Dementia affects him only from the neck up. Sometimes I have come into the bedroom, like now, in broad daylight and hell be lying there with a small tent in his lap and the stupidest grin on his face, which makes me want to gag. Sometimes I do it just to make that thing go down. But right now, Ive got six or seven more pieces of chicken left to fry. I wrap a breast and thigh in aluminum foil for Mr. Jones and put them in a small lunch bag I keep for the boys snacks and set it on the table. I finally sit down, since Ive been on my feet now for way too long. My right knee is throbbing but I dont feel like taking a pill. Im still sweating like a pig and I think I might have to break down and use that Sears card. Sometimes, like now, when its quiet, I like to sneak and take a few minutes to think about my life. What Ive done wrong. What Ive done right. And where I am now. Truth be told, I think I can rightly blame some of my kids problems on this neighborhood. Years ago it was nice here. White and black folks lived side-by-side, and just like it was on Leave It to Beaver and Father Knows Best, we borrowed a cup of sugar or a teaspoon of coffee from one another; our kids played together without ever hearing the words nigger or honky or peckerwood. We were all working-class families, proud of our small homes. And it showed. We had smooth driveways. Even some two-car garages. We had velvet grass in our front yards. Sprinkler and drip systems. Every color flower imaginable. Our hedges were all sculpted. The screens dirt-free. Windows vinegar-clean. Our front doors never had to be locked. But then in the early nineties, the drugs moved in. And the gangs. Which is when most of our homes started limping. The majority of white families started leaving. Kids had to play in the backyard unless a grown-up was sitting outside watching them. Low riders drove slow and blasted rap music and dared you to complain. Folks began to look like they were always hesitating. We swept and hosed our sidewalks, picked up trash on the curb, and people prayed longer and harder but it didnt seem to help. For most of their childhood, I couldnt let my kids wear blue or red because our neighborhood didnt belong to us anymore. * * * Where you at, Ma? Im coming, I say, and get up. I mustve fallen asleep back here when I fell across Dexters old bed because Lord knows I didnt want to chance being seduced by Denzel Washington. I hear the boys running over that shag carpet and I walk out to greet them. Luther will be eight this year. Trinetta claimed she named him after Luther Vandross because she always had a crush on him. I dont know who she named Ricky after, but since I doubt she ever slept with Rick James, I dont think she had him in mind. He should be six. He was born with slight drug-baby issues and he takes medication thats supposed to help him be able to do more of some things and less of others. He acts all right to me. He can be a little hyper sometimes, and quiet at others. I dont trust those pills, and only time will tell how long they keep him on them. Trinetta never put much thought into how she was going to take care of her kids. She just had them. She has treated them like they were mistakes. Which is one of the

reasons they're over here so much. Well, hello there, my little chocolate kisses, I say, even though they're two different shades of brown. Fudge and maple syrup. Both of them are cute in a peculiar way. Luther's forehead is big and his head on the square side, but I can tell he's going to grow into those looks one day. Ricky's features all coincide with one another but he always looks like he's thinking about something. Hi, Grandma, Luther says, and he almost makes me lose my balance when he gives me a long hug. His arms don't fit around my hips. Ricky just waves, sits down on the couch, and starts looking for the remote between the cushions. He keeps busy. Hey, Ma, Trinetta says, and gives me a phony kiss on the cheek. So, you got what we discussed? She sounds just like a drug addict. She doesn't sit, which means she's either high or in a hurry or both. That's why I decide to make her ass wait. I wish she would cut those damn dreadlocks off. They look like they need to be shampooed. I used to think people wore them because they had a sense of pride, being black and all, but for some, like my daughter, it's obvious that it's just another hairstyle. Trinetta is also disappearing. I can see her collarbone, and even though she's brown like me, her skin is so thin I can see green veins running up and down her arms like branches on a winter tree. Tell me, what kind of job is it this time? It's a sales position. She can lie on a dime. But I am not in the mood for watching her act antsy so I go ahead and reach inside my purse and hand her some folded bills I keep hidden for emergencies. Thanks, she says, and stuffs them in her bra. And that's all I can tell you right now. I've already started studying for the test. Tell me a lie I can believe, Trinetta. I ain't lying this time, Ma. Cut me a little slack, would you? Where's Ricky's medication? Luther, you got Ricky's meds in your backpack like you supposed to have? Yep! he yells from the bathroom. Why didn't you bring some clean clothes for them? I can drop some off later. And should I hold my breath? I thought they had enough stuff over here. Is your cell phone working? It'll be back on tomorrow. I would really like to ask you a lot of things, but I'm not even going to bother. Good, Trinetta says. Cause I'm really not in the mood for a lecture. Is he in his usual spot? He is. I don't know why she has such a hard time calling him Daddy and I'm sick of asking. She walks over and sticks her head inside the doorway. Hey there, Mr. Butler, she says, but he doesn't answer. I'll be glad when you put him in one of those places, she says, then walks into the kitchen, looks at the chicken, and comes back empty-handed. You're wasting perfectly good money on that nurse who looks more like a ho if you ask me, and you already said the doctor is only giving him two years at most, so what's the point? You need to mind your own business, I say as she goes into the bathroom. It's no wonder these kids talk the way they do. I turn my attention to them. Luther is now sitting next to Ricky on the sofa like they're little strangers waiting for a train. I look above their heads. That sofa is still ugly. It's a shade of gold I've never seen anywhere else. Except for Guldens mustard. The glass coffee table has been cracked about six years and even has a broken leg. The beige shag carpet is almost insulting to walk on these days. And those burgundy brocade drapes with the sheer nylon curtains behind them aren't fooling anybody. This is no castle. I don't know why the fake artwork I bought at the swap meet suddenly looks fake. Now my grandsons look like they're sitting inside an old photograph because everything in this living room feels wrong. Except them. I wish there was a way I could save them from their mama. But I can't. She may have some bad habits, but she doesn't hit them. They're well fed. And always clean. But that's about it. Which is precisely why I go get them every chance I get. It's my way of keeping tabs on what my daughter is and isn't giving them. The least I can do is help them see that the world is bigger than their neighborhood. And so they don't have to watch it on television. It does take a lot of energy to handle two little boys. Believe me, I already know this. I make sure to take my vitamins before we go anywhere. And go we do: to the park, the zoo, the Tar Pits, and every museum in Los Angeles. They love Kamu. Said they want to live in Disneyland. I don't know how many of those kiddie movies I've slept through, because Trinetta makes them watch them all on video. And that Ricky is a fish. I have to make him get out of the tub and the pool. I'm too scared to let them go into the ocean, because I never learned how to swim, but I take them over to Tammys. Her pool is small, but to them it's Olympic size. Luther is a bookworm. He loves going to the library. Ricky's too loud and likes to run up and down the stacks. We've been asked to leave on too many occasions. They wear me out, but it's the least I can do, since they didn't ask for the life they got. I don't hear the toilet flush, but out she comes. Looking a little frazzled. Say goodbye to your mama, boys. They wave. I can tell they're anxious for her to leave. And before I can say another word, Trinetta is out the front door. Hello, Miss Trinetta, I hear Mr. Jones say. But I don't hear her say hello back. I pick up the lunch bag and take it to him. May God continue to bless you, he says. I look at my grandsons. Their hands are clasped together in their laps. They already look bored. I'm too tired to entertain them. But thank God I always go to Target and buy puzzles, crayons, and coloring books and keep them in my big drawer. So, what would you young men like to do? I would like to eat some of your food, Ricky says. Me, too,

Luther says. I love your fried chicken. How do you know that's chicken you smell? I ask. Everybody knows what fried chicken smell like. Come on back to the dining room, and I'll fix you both a plate. And then would you like to color or do a puzzle? Ricky nods. I wanna play video games, Luther says. Please? How about first thing in the morning when your grandpas sound asleep? Okey-dokey. Then can we put on our new pajamas now? he asks. I just look at him. Please? Lets wait until it gets dark and after you have your baths. Okey-dokey, Ricky says. He copied that off me. How many days we staying over here again, Grandma? Luther asks. Excuse me? He thinks about what hes just said. How many days are we staying over here, Grandma? Two or three. We wish it could be forever, dont we, Ricky? Ricky nods his head. I dont even want to think about how long forever might be. I make them wash their hands. They sit at the table. They put their napkins in their laps. They bless their food. Eat every bit of it. They take their baths. Put on their brand-new pajamas. They pile onto the bed next to their grandpa but do not like watching Dora the Explorer, so as soon as he is fast asleep they grab the remote and turn to a western. Lee David wakes up, looks at the screen, then turns and looks at them and says, Ride em, cowboy! On day three I dont hear a peep from Trinetta and her phone is still off. On day four, I wake up knowing the kids have to go to school and I have to go to work, so I call her again, hoping her phone is back on. When it rings, Im all set to cuss her out when a man answers. Who is this? I ask. Who is this? he asks. This is Betty Jean. Trinettas mother. Where is she and why are you answering her phone? She busy. Put her on the phone. Please. I said she busy. I can relay a message when she finished. Ask her when shes coming to pick up her kids. What kids? Hey, hole up now. You aint done here. I hear what sounds like tussling and then Trinetta gets on the phone. Hey, Ma, this Tri, and Where are you and what in the world are you doing? Im at . . . a friends house. Im still . . . studying. So. Would you mind? Keeping. The kids. A few. More days? Of course Im worried about my daughter, but shes grown. And knows exactly what shes doing. Im more relieved that my grandsons arent anywhere near her, so I say nice and slow like: Pay extra-close attention, Trinetta. Do not even think about picking these kids up until you can show me a few pay stubs and a clean drug test. Now. Suck. On. That. Tammy When I hear a succession of quick knocks on the front door, I know it cant be anybody but BJ, especially at this time of morning. I crack the door a few inches. Im standing in here dripping wet with just a towel wrapped around me, BJ, so you better not be here to tell me something neither of us can handle. Its Trinetta . . . I pick up my heart. Please dont tell me she ODD. Do I sound petrified or pissed off? Whatd she do this time? Wait. Dont tell me. What is it you need me to do, BJ? She didnt show up to get the boys and theyre on the sunporch waiting for me to take them to school and you must notve heard the phone when you were in the shower. Anyway, would you mind sitting with Lee David for about a half hour or so, until Nurse Kim gets there? But you and I both know she always runs a little late. Of course I dont mind. Im not due at the attorneys office until eleven. Why didnt you call in sick or take a vacation day and just keep them at home today? Because Lorindas relatives are visiting from Norfolk and shes taking them to Disneyland and Magic Mountain, so I at least have to go in for a few hours. These kids have missed enough school as it is. Ill be back in time to pick them up. I peek over her shoulder and see the screen door opening and closing and then I see a cute little brown face poke out. Thats Ricky. Hes looking for his grandma. Bless his cute little heart! Whose car is that in the driveway? BJ asks. Trevors. You mean you let that boy spend the night over here? Shes twenty-three, BJ. What difference does it make if its here or in his dirty bungalow? Just a minute, she says, and turns around since Ricky is apparently now banging the door shut and open. Luther! Make Ricky stop doing that. Please. Ill be right there! She turns back to face me. A sleepover, huh? So is this a sign shes serious about this one? I rolled my eyes.. And counting. Anyway, how long will it take you to put something on? Two minutes. So go! If you werent so doggone nose I couldve been over there by now. Thanks, Tammy. Pay me later. I throw the towel over a chair and run down the hall to my bedroom to get my terry-cloth robe. Lord knows Lee David isnt exactly Jack the Ripper, so if one of these droopy girls were to plop out, I doubt if hed even notice. I know the lovebirds are upstairs sound asleep, but I grab my keys and lock the front door out of sheer habit. Something we didnt have to do back in the good old days. The neighbors on my left are Korean, and they dont like anybody whos not Korean. They refuse to hire a gardener, which is why their yard looks more like a desert. I planted purple and white hydrangeas all along the fence just to give them a clue of what beauty can do. They have refused to take the hint. On the right are two black racists who have not spoken to me in the six years since they moved in. A dynamic duo: like father, like son. They let their avocados, olives, and lemons fall into our yard, hoping Ill complain. But all we do is eat them. I am not intimidated by black people anymore, and I refuse to apologize for being white. Here it is the new millennium when it shouldnt matter what color you are. But it does. Even here in liberal frigging California. For years, Ive wanted to say:

Hey, I never had any slaves, so stop holding me responsible for what happened two hundred years ago! What my neighbors dont know is that Ive got a black belt. So dont mess around with me. There are twenty-two homes on our street. None of them is worth a dime and only a handful are worth fixing up, and quite a few folks have done just that. Too bad money doesnt grow on trees, because thats one thing weve got plenty of on this block. Trees help block roofs that need to be replaced. Lee David had a new one put on right before he got sick. Im guesstimating its been about nine or ten years now. He painted the trim cocoa brown, which I didnt particularly care for but I pretended to love it. My own house is stucco, the color of cashews. The trim matches. Its ugly, too. I dont know how long roofs are supposed to last but it seems like mine didnt start leaking until I kicked my husband out a little over three years ago, after twenty-six years of marriage. Good thing Im not violent or hed be in a plot in a cemetery. For years, Howard had an on-again-off-again love affair with the crap tables, but the last straw was when I found out the hard way he had lost half of the kids college tuition. I walk on into BJs house and back toward their bedroom. Lee David is lying there with his hands clasped, smiling about something. The television isnt on, which is unusual. Good morning, Lee! I say loudly, even though hes not hard of hearing. He turns to look at me and frowns. You aint Nurse Kim, he says. Sorry. Im still Tammy, I say. Shell be here soon. Good. I want my snack. Then my lunch. It would do no good, of course, to tell him its morning and hell probably be having breakfast. I walk over and turn on the vitamin D light I talked BJ into buying because Lee David hardly ever goes outside anymore. When he squeals and holds his hands in front of his face like hes a vampire and I just held up a cross, this tells me to turn it off. Which I do. Sorry, Lee. I walk back out to the living room and sit in BJs La-Z-Boy, grab the remote, and the Today show is on. I never watch morning TV, but I am also not in the mood to sit here and listen to that Katie Couric. I cant stand the nasally way she talks, like people from Wisconsin and both of the Dakotas. I turn it off, lean back in the recliner, and pull out an Ebony magazine from the right pocket. But Ive read this one. I reach over on the left and my hand hits a big brown envelope that slides out and falls onto the carpet. I already know its yet another essay pretending to be a letter from Dexter. I used to read them while sitting here with Lee David. At first they just broke my heart. Thats because I watched him grow up. I remember when he used to help out anyone in the neighborhood who needed their grass cut, their driveway hosed down, or something from the corner store. He volunteered and most of the time wouldnt take any money. BJ didnt put him up to it, either, because I asked her. But like a lot of youngsters, he started sneaking and hanging out with the wrong crowd, and that was when he started changing. He stopped being available and it got so that BJ and Lee David couldnt manage him. Its hard to compete with the lure of the streets, and I believe in my heart this is how they lost Dexter. Dexter gave himself permission to become a criminal, which is why I cant read his letters anymore. Now he reminds me of my two brothers. Theyre full of shit, too, and dont apologize for anything they do wrong either. They live on our ranch in Billings. Our parents knew they were screw-ups when they were teenagers, always getting expelled, and then in their twenties, they thought the local jail was a hotel. Their thirties were nothing but a miniseries of the previous ten years, which is probably why our parents made me executor of the whole estate years before they both passed. All hundred and sixty acres. My brothers werent happy about this even though they got enough cash for anybody to live on for years. Just to be fair, I turned around and deeded them twenty acres each, including the house (which wasnt worth half as much as the land), since they wanted to live in it for what they claim were sentimental reasons. But a funny thing happened while they partied the years away: they blew their inheritance and are now flat broke, which is why theyve decided to sue me for what they call our fair share. Mine has been earning 3 percent interest. Its unfortunate that Jackson, the oldest, has yet to find steady employment even at the tender age of forty-eight. He claims to be handicapped but has yet to reveal what his disability is. Clay, a year younger, a high school dropout, never quite got the hang of working and has never demonstrated any marketable skills unless you count rounding up cattle. Theyve always resented me for marrying a black man and have never met him or the kids, which hurts even though I understand. Regardless, theyre still kin, so once I get this ordeal all straightened out, Ill most likely give them some more acreage to do with as they please, sell off the rest, give them just enough money so they wont kill themselves, and then maybe Ill move to a more pleasant neighborhood out in the Valley, and definitely get my boobs lifted. My moving to Los Angeles was not an accident. I dropped out of college to escape my family, boredom, and the brutal Montana winters with hopes of becoming an actress or a dancer whichever happened first. (I was also a gymnast, but a broken tibia prevented me from going to the Olympics in Mexico City.) I managed to become a professional cheerleader instead. Which is how I met my husband. Howard was a rookie point guard for the Lakers but got cut after sitting on the bench for three years. From

there he followed in his dads boots and started putting out fires. Last I heard, he retired the dice and worked his way up to captain. Instead of dancing, for the last twenty years, five days a week I have sat in a courtroom and typed into my steno machine some of the most horrific crimes imaginable when it comes to what folks do and dont do under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Some things they dont even remember. My daddy was a drunk. My mama was his memory. Everybody I knew played with guns. Especially my brothers when they were stoned out of their minds. Once, Jackson accidentally shot Clay in the foot. He didnt even feel it. Guns have always frightened me. All this stuff has added up to why Ive never tasted alcohol or smoked marijuana. I didnt want any of them to play a role in my life. After all Ive seen and heard, I dont think everybody who drinks a little too much on occasion is an alcoholic or that people who smoke marijuana on an occasional basis are potheads. I take that back. They are potheads. If you smoke only three cigarettes a day instead of the whole pack, youre still a smoker. It just always seemed easier and saner to deal with life with a clear head instead of one thats overcast. Lee David and BJ were the first people on the block to treat us like our mixed marriage was no big deal. Howard and I didnt really have that hard a time. We got an occasional stare when we went out. But black women have been the worst. Whenever we were in public, when his back was turned, theyd look me up and down quickly, then again slowly, as if they were trying to figure out what I had that they didnt nothing--and theyd cut their eyes at me or give me the finger or twitch their nose and lips to one side or mimic the word bitch, all while leaning back on one leg, either with their arms crossed or with their hands on their hips. Sometimes all of the above at once. I had never even thought about dating a black guy until I met Howard. It was his smile and the silk in his voice that caught my attention more than his skin color. He was also polite and warm and extremely sexy and didnt even seem to know it. No one was more surprised than I was how much I found myself being attracted to him. I fell in love with him and his blackness was just an added bonus. When the twins were still babies and I proudly pushed them around in their double stroller, some folks would do double takes. We got used to the stares, and white and black alike would ooh and aah and smile at the children, but most looked at me like they werent sure if they were mine. Sadly, it was mostly white people who would say, Arent they just adorable!

Their problems didnt start until elementary school but lasted through middle school. They were called niggers and half-breeds and nerds and got hit because a lot of the black children picked on them. On top of this, too many kids didnt believe they were real twins, because Montana looked like me, blond and blue eyes, and Max (short for Max) looked just like his dad: a beautiful root beer, with curly black hair. On too many occasions I had to leave work and go to their school, and there one or both of them would be sitting in the principals office in tears, sometimes with a busted lip or a bruise or some token of the hatred or anger they faced for being mixed. This is when we took them out of one and then another school and finally into what was called a charter school. It was full of every ethnicity we could possibly imagine, including so many varieties of mixed-race children we felt comfortable. The kids thrived there. And we slept good at night.* *I put the envelope back and look around this living room like Ive done hundreds of times. I love how the walls are covered with family photographs but then theres me and Howard and the twins, too. The Rainbow Coalition. When the doorbell rings, Im thinking Nurse Kim has finally realized that this is a real job and is not only on time, but early. Its open! I yell. Mom, its me! Tanna! What in the world is she doing here, and up so early? Lately, shes been working as a fitting model for wedding dresses because shes a perfect size 6, but they dont usually get started until ten or eleven. What in the world are you doing up so early? Is something wrong? Not for me. But maybe yes, in your eyes. I study her face to see if I can detect whether this is going to be something my heart needs to be prepared for. Her cheeks are rosy. Shes a dirty blonde. Im a bleached one. Her eyes are almost cobalt blue. Im pregnant and Ive decided to have it. I know youve been hoping Id become a model or an actress like you wanted to be but its not in my cards. Motherhood apparently is. Please be happy for me. And good morning. And she just stands there. Smiling. Shes too damn young to have a baby. Shes too damn smart to have a baby. Shes too damn stupid to have a baby. After graduating from Loyola two years ago in history, shes been trying to find herself since she decided history was not helping me grow. She sounded just like a little Valley Girl, when weve always lived in the hood. What about the fucking Peace Corps? She even has an interview coming up! And what about auditioning for American Idol? Shes got at least an Idol Top 10 voice, which she got from her fathers side of the family. I push the lever on this La-Z-Boy and spring up to a standing position. I tighten the sash on the robe. Im forty-six years old. Too young to be anybodys grandmother. Especially a babys. I clear my throat. Are you kidding me? She lifts her T-shirt to show me her belly. Its flat. Its in there. Growing. And how pregnant might you be? Six weeks. Be happy for us, Mom. Who is us? Me and Trevor. I want to say, Fuck Trevor. He can take his Italian ass back to

New Jersey where he came from. But I wouldn't dare. I take a deep breath. Then another one. I want to try to say this nicely. What in the hell are you going to do with a baby when neither you nor Trevor have a major source of income unless you count being a barista at Starbucks! What's it going to drink: lattes? I see her mouth quivering. Then, I thought you liked Trevor? He's a great guy. And I love him. We'll manage this. I do like him, Tanna, but that has nothing to do with it. Where in the world are you two or three going to live? She brushes the front of her T-shirt with the palm of her hand a few times and leans against the wall, bumping up against BJ's wall mirror that you can't even see a clear image of yourself in anymore. We were wondering if maybe you would let us stay in our house until we get on our feet. Trevor's acting classes are really helping and he goes to auditions at least two or three times a week. He's going to land something, soon, Mom. We both feel it in our gut. And don't worry, unless I have terrible morning sickness, which I'm starting to feel already, I can find something to bring home a few dollars, too. Like what? I'm still weighing my options. I'm speechless. Weighing her options? Why is it young girls get pregnant and decide to have a baby because it's romantic when they don't have any idea how they're going to take care of it let alone pay for it? Kids have like an eighteen- to twenty-three-year running tab. They are not a novelty. They are human beings. They live with you. You love them but they are guaranteed to get on your nerves and on some days you wish you could send them back. I look at my beautiful daughter standing there and, since it's obvious that not having this baby is not even up for discussion, I just look at her and say, I'm warning you right now. This is not going to be the Ritz Carlton. There will be terms and conditions. I just need a day or so to process all of this. She runs over and hugs me so tight I'm thinking that if she squeezed me hard enough maybe the little walnut would just pop right out through her navel and things would be back to normal. I can still try out for American Idol after the baby's born, but the Peace Corps is out of the question. It's pretty obvious to me that a college degree doesn't have much of an impact on your heart. But just to make sure, I pose another question. Are you sure about this? A baby? They grow up, you know, and walk across the street to your best friend's house in the early morning hours to tell you they're pregnant, expecting you to be excited for them, which you are but you're also very, very scared. I'm sure, Mom. Positively. And I love you, too. You won't even know we're there. Wait a second here. How soon does Trevor want to move in? Would today be too soon? You mean as in today, today? She nods and nods and nods. I hold my hand up and wave it like a white flag, and she runs over, kisses and hugs me again, and then dashes out to go give the baby daddy the good news. I flop down in the La-Z-Boy and pull the lever until it stops and lean all the way back. Up until a few minutes ago, I have always been proud of both of my children. Max was definitely the more focused of the two, though I tried not to compare them just because they were twins. When Max told me he wanted to study viticulture and enology at U.C. Davis, we were sitting by the pool with our feet in, and I started kicking (stalling). What in God's name is this the study of? He started laughing and dove in like he always did when we used to sit out there. When he came to the surface he swam over and said, For the record, viticulture is all about the science and cultivation of growing grapes and enology is the study of winemaking. They go together. How cool is that? He ended up getting a bachelor of science in this and then moved to France to study with some masters or heavy-duty vineyards or something. Miss Montana, on the other hand, flits. She changed her major five or six times before settling on history and would've changed it again but she had to declare or else. I don't know, sometimes these pretty girls in Los Angeles don't take themselves seriously enough. I almost jump out of this recliner when I hear the doorbell again. I'm sick of doorbells. It had better be Nurse Kim and not Trevor. He should be on his knees telling me Thank you. It's open! I yell, and in walks my favorite person, BJ's evil sister, Arlene. She despises me because twenty-six years ago I stole a black man from a nonexistent black woman. What are you doing here half-naked and where's my sister? She took the little ones to school and then she's going on to the hotel for part of the day, and for your information this is called a robe and I came here to sit with Lee David until Nurse Kim gets here, and if I'm not being too forward: Wouldn't it have been more considerate to have called first? She cuts those eyes at me as if to say, Bitch, who do you think you're talking to? I am not moved. So I cut my eyes back at her as if to say, Bitch, you. I would put my hands on my hips for special effect but I've already had one major surprise this morning. I wouldn't want to provoke my best friend's sister into doing something stupid. Plus, she doesn't know I'm a black belt. During this one-minute standoff, the screen door opens and in comes Nurse Kim in a denim miniskirt and a tight pink T-shirt with cleavage I would kill for and pink wedge sandals. She struts right past Arlene. Nurse Kim is one sexy nurse. Her legs are long and smooth. She's a pretty reddish brown, the color I'd want to be if I were black. Good morning, everybody, she says. I hope nothing's wrong, is it? I shake my head no and head toward the screen door to get out of what could potentially become an inferno. But Arlene beats me to the

punch and lets the door slam in my face. Nurse Kim winks at me, and then yells: Miss Arlene, hold up a minute! Arlene turns around like shes ready to jump into the ring. What? Please tell Omar I said hey! and she makes a soft fist and holds it next to her ear like its a telephone. I love her. *Revue de presse* Praise for *Who Asked You?* A well-crafted story of acceptance, forgiveness, and hope. McMillan deftly weaves her tale of a black Los Angeles familys disharmony around the narratives of bickering sisters Betty Jean, Arlene, and Venetia as they watch their kids stumble into adulthood. . . . Strong-hearted kids lead the family back to each other but McMillans story belongs to the middle-aged steel magnolias who value loyalty above all. *Publishers Weekly* McMillan writes jauntily and with customary good humor. . . . Her story affirms the value of love and family, to say nothing of the strength of resolute women in the absence of much strength on the part of those few men who happen to be in the vicinity. . . . A solid, well-told story. *Kirkus* s