

I HEAR YOU, GIRL

Terry McMillan reflects on the meaning of sisterhood

Marina twirled, modeling the outfit she was considering wearing on her date. "Do you think this dress is too tight?" she asked.

Of course it was, but instead of saying that, I told her, "I'm not crazy about that dress, especially the color."

"I'll change it,"

Marina decided. Truth be told, she'd gained 26 pounds, and the last thing I wanted was to make her feel bad. Because whether it was giving advice on the right dress or helping me recover from a disastrous love affair, Marina had always been there for me.

I've been close to some of my best girlfriends for more than 30 years. We listen to one another vent, rant, complain,

whine—without judging. We have never worried about who's the finest, who has the best body, the best job, who makes the most money or whose kids are the brightest. We are sisters on the same quest—to be the best we can.

I can tell when something's wrong with my girls by what they don't say. I have a way of drawing them out, because I know that sometimes friends don't want to burden you with their problems. I've been on that page, too. Yet even when my friends were exhausted from my droning on about my divorce, they listened anyway. "Uh-huh. I hear you, girl."

I'll always tell my girls the truth, because I trust them. And I know that if I was getting ready to step out in a too-tight dress, they would stop me with all the love in the world. Because that's what girlfriends do.

Terry McMillan wrote some of our most loved girlfriend tales, including her recent, *Getting to Happy* (Viking).



Woodson (right) and her partner, Juliet, play with their daughter in 2003.

AUNTIES

Jacqueline Woodson knows you're never alone when a village embraces your child

The morning after my daughter is born, a nurse appears at my bedside. It's nearly 7 A.M. In another half hour, my partner, Juliet, will return. The night before, the hospital had sent her home. No unmarried partners were allowed to stay overnight. Juliet cried as she kissed me and our newborn daughter good-bye.

The nurse, a small, pale woman, tells me why she's here. "We want you to speak to a social worker," she says. "You're a single mother, and we're concerned with the sense of isolation you're feeling." Her words drift off into that place where unbelievable words go.

"Isolated?" I turn to her, searching her face, ready for her to reveal the rest of the joke to me. The day before, this room had been filled with the voices of my daughter's aunts—women who had been there from the time our daughter was just a dreamy plan of someday. I take a breath. "I've never been alone," I say. "I'm only alone now because of some hospital policy that's intent on separating me from my family."

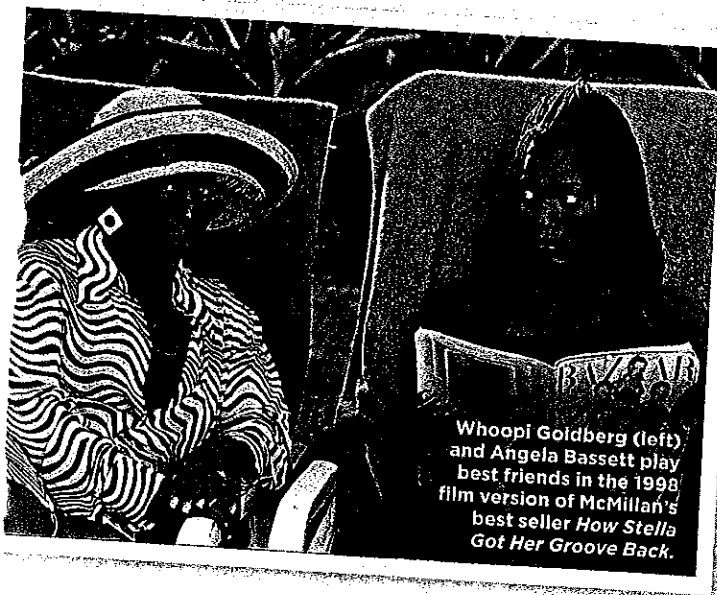
The nurse just looks at me. I realize I am meeting someone who has never experienced the everyday joy of a community of women. "Then I need you to sign a release—" she starts.

"Bring it," I say.

As the sun rises higher over the East River, I think about the women who in the weeks to come will make sure our home is stocked with food, will make sure that every dirty diaper is swiftly changed, who will call and come by and rub our shoulders and hold our child so that we can sleep, hold our child so that we can eat and grow strong enough to, in turn, hold their children.

When the nurse leaves, I pull on my slippers and head down the hall toward the nursery. Soon Juliet and all our sisters will come. I'll tell them this story and they'll shake their heads, *tsk*, and tell other stories like it. Not even a day old and our daughter will be listening in, drinking in the care of her aunts with each sound, each hand on her back, already coming to know what women many times her age may never learn—that her mothers and aunts and sisters are always with her, that none of us is ever alone. ▸

Jacqueline Woodson is the author of numerous award-winning books for children and young adults.



Whoopi Goldberg (left) and Angela Bassett play best friends in the 1998 film version of McMillan's best seller *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*.