



For her first *O* article, "Stay or Go?" (page 228), **Liz Welch** talks to five women about the measures they took to move their relationships—and in some cases, themselves—out of destructive ruts. She empathized with their stories: After two and a half years as an assistant at *Vanity Fair*, she left the magazine to risk the life of a freelancer. "I realized if I didn't act then, I could be 80 and still not writing," says Welch, who has built a thriving career in the ten years since. "I sold all the designer shoes I had accumulated, bought a pair of Birkenstocks, and thought, *There's no turning back!*"



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22

In "Your First \$1,000,000" (page 238), **Joni Evans** encourages women to set higher economic goals for themselves. "Of course, it's harder when you have a kid hanging off your knees," says Evans, a senior vice president in the literary department at William Morris. "But it's doable." That determination has gotten Evans (who doesn't have children) to where she is now. During a particularly difficult career transition, she spent three months unemployed. But instead of wallowing, or even relaxing, she volunteered her time—consulting for a bank that was opening a women's division and sitting in on board meetings for a nonprofit city improvement council. "It reinforced how fabulous my own field was," says Evans, who lives in New York. "And I realized I liked working much better than not."

In **Mayra Montero's** Aha! Moment (page 78), the Cuban-born journalist and author shares her profound experience at a voodoo ceremony 14 years ago. She traveled to Haiti to research the religion's practices for her novel *The Red of His Shadow* (Ecco). As a child in Cuba, Montero wanted for many necessities, but never books. "Maybe, for this reason, I am a writer today," she says. Her seventh novel, *Captain of the Sleepers* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), set in St. Croix and Puerto Rico—where she has lived for more than 30 years—comes out in English this month.



"You can't be what you can't see, so having a believable woman president on prime-time TV will go a long way in helping us envision that as a real-life situation," says **Marie Wilson**, who reviews *Commander-in-Chief*, a new ABC drama starring Geena Davis as the first female U.S. president (page 74). Getting a woman into the White House is one of the goals of Wilson's nonprofit,

nonpartisan organization, the White House Project, which she founded in 1998. Growing up in Georgia, Wilson had a role model in clear view: Her mother, a dental hygienist, was church hostess for a Presbyterian congregation of 14,000. "She kept members connected and took on the issues of the young people," says Wilson, the former president of the Ms. Foundation for Women. "In another time, if she'd had the education, she would have been mayor."

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Five women
who thought they
were stuck in
not-great-but-not-
terrible relationships
recall the sudden
flash that freed
them—for better or
worse—to make
the right decision.

BY LIZ WELCH

STAY OR GO

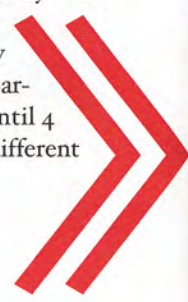
“I wanted to
believe him”

**Alexis Smith,* 39, fashion designer
and mother of three, New York**

ALEXIS MET GEORGE* IN COLLEGE — she was 20, a wild party girl studying fashion, he a shy art student. “We were attracted to what the other had to offer,” Alexis says. He moved to Manhattan to pursue an art career and asked Alexis to come along. She agreed, got a designing job, and, at 24, wound up pregnant. They celebrated with a potluck wedding, their two-week-old son in attendance. George started showing his work and the work of his friends—he had a knack for finding talent. “But then he gave up his own art,” Alexis remembers. “And blamed it on having to support a family.”

George opened a gallery, Alexis continued designing, and a daughter was born two years later. George’s new career meant late nights out hobnobbing with artsy types and monthly trips abroad. “He always had an excuse for not being with me and the kids,” Alexis says. “If it was a party, I’d offer to come, but he’d say, ‘You’ll be bored,’ and off he’d go.” Alexis suspected he was seeing other women, even asked him point-blank, but he denied it. “I wanted to believe him,” she said. The trips abroad got longer—“I’m doing it for us,” he’d say—but whenever he was home, he was edgy, “like he wanted to be somewhere else.”

After he opened a bar downtown, he had a real excuse to stay out late, and by then she’d lost interest in joining him. “I was getting my kids ready for school at 7 A.M., and he was partying with want-to-be artists until 4 A.M.,” she says. “We were living different



lives.” But Alexis still loved George, and he kept promising her that one day his hard work would pay off. “He’d say, ‘Be patient; your day will come,’” Alexis recalls.

In 1997 she began her own clothing line, which by 2000 was taking off, just when Alexis discovered she was pregnant again. George flipped out. “He didn’t want any more kids,” she says. “He said he felt suffocated.” Then an anonymous woman called saying, “George is having an affair.” Alexis confronted George, who confessed. “He said I wasn’t cool enough for his new life,” she says. “I was devastated. I thought, *Who would ever want me?*” The two split up, but Alexis told her kids, then 9 and 7, that Daddy was on a trip. “I couldn’t face the truth,” she says. When George begged forgiveness, Alexis took him back. “I was eight months pregnant and vulnerable,” she says. “I didn’t think I could manage alone.” Their third child was born. “Then September 11 changed everything,” Alexis says. Shaken, George agreed to buy a country house—Alexis’s dream. “It was bliss, while it lasted,” she says.

» the wake-up moment

Alexis and the kids spent all day decorating the tree on Christmas Eve, their first in the country house. George arrived late from the city in a bad mood, which Alexis ignored, and went to bed. At 2:30 A.M., something jolted her awake. “My heart was pounding as if someone had broken in,” she says. “I think it was my subconscious telling me to stop ignoring the truth.” The house was dead quiet, George asleep next to her on the bed, still in his clothes. She tore through his bag and wallet, looking for receipts, lipstick smudges, anything to back up her gut instinct—that he was cheating on her. She picked up his cell phone and dialed the last number he’d called. A woman’s voice said, “This is Lisa; leave a message.” “I was shaking when I woke him,” she says. “He said he was in love with another woman. I knew I had to leave him.”

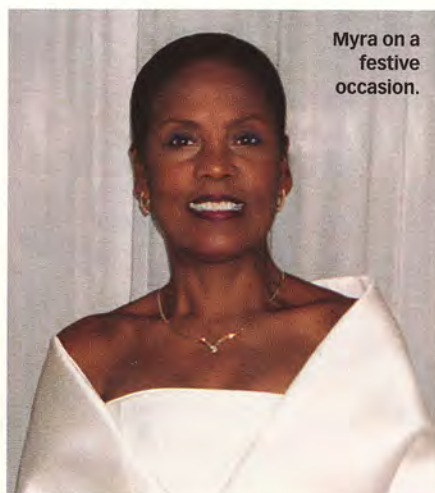
» resolution

The next day was the hardest of Alexis’s life. “We didn’t want to ruin Christmas,” she says. “So there we were, opening presents, taking photos—I still don’t know how I

**A pseudonym.*

survived.” The next hardest day was breaking the news to their kids. “My son said, ‘But you never fight!’” Alexis recalls. “And he was right—we were way beyond that.” George moved out, and Alexis was on her own. That’s when she realized she’d been on her own for years.

When the time came that George was once again ready to reconcile, Alexis had an epiphany: “If I go back now, I’ll lose any self-respect I’ve mustered over the past months.” Besides, life alone wasn’t really that different from being married to George—“just less washing up and hassle,” she says. “And I could finally make my own decisions.” She carried on building up her clothing line and then, unexpectedly, fell in love. “I never thought I’d find love again. Or that someone would love me for me.” •



Myra on a festive occasion.

“Seven years of invisibility piled up”

Myra Tillotson Nuriddin, 61, flight attendant, Atlanta

MYRA MET SULAIMAN NURIDDIN through a friend in 1991. Their romance was quick. “Sulaiman has a degree in counseling psychology, and I’d never been with a man who was so open about his feelings,” she says. “Or so handsome!” Myra, a 47-year-old divorcee and the mother of a grown son, made it clear early on that she wanted to remarry. Sulaiman was less certain—he had ten children, ages 7 to 22, living in Florida, Georgia, and Arizona, from three earlier relationships. That fact alone could have made Myra skittish, but she

loved Sulaiman in part because he was such a good father.

Myra prevailed, and the couple wed in 1993 at their home just outside Atlanta. “I decided against inviting all the kids,” Myra says. “I was trying to be sensitive—when my brother remarried, his daughter burst into tears at the ceremony.” That decision backfired. Her husband’s younger kids were especially hurt, which surprised Myra. “I thought they resented me for marrying their dad,” she explains, and that they wouldn’t want to come out of respect for their mother. She also thought they were too rambunctious to care. In fact, every time they came to visit, Myra, who calls herself a neat freak, had to brace herself. “Once, two of the boys were wrestling on my sofa and I yelled, ‘Stop!’” Myra recalls. “One stormed off, and I heard him sobbing in the den, ‘I hate her!’ and my husband saying, ‘Hate is a very strong word.’” To Myra he dismissed the incident as “kids being kids.” Myra felt that his kids were often disrespectful to her, and that every time one talked back, Sulaiman would philosophize. Myra would stew. “If I complained, Sulaiman would excuse their behavior,” she says. “I felt like I had no support.”

The tension continued a slow build for seven years—if the young kids were “mouthy,” her difficulty with the older kids was more subtle, like the time Jwyanza, Sulaiman’s oldest son, gave his father a trenchcoat and slacks for Christmas and Myra an R&B CD. Conversation often focused on events that predated Myra. “I felt invisible,” she says. “But if I brought it up with Sulaiman, he’d say, ‘Don’t play children’s games—you’ll never win.’ I’d fallen in love with his kindness and sensitivity,” she says. “Suddenly, it was working against me.”

» the wake-up moment

Sulaiman’s children were in Atlanta for Christmas 2000, and Myra invited them for dinner on Christmas Eve. She set four tables, spent the day cooking, and ordered a special wedding cake for Sulaiman’s recently married daughter. She asked people to come at 5 P.M.; by 6 only half had shown up. Myra’s anger was ready to spill over. “I felt like all my efforts were disregarded,” she says.

At 6:30 Jwyanza arrived and whisked past Myra. “Seven years of painful invisibility piled up into that one moment,

and I lost it," she recalls. "Don't you see me?" she remembers saying.

» resolution

That night Myra faced Sulaiman. "I can't do this anymore," she told him. She found a therapist who suggested that she and Sulaiman try an Imago workshop focusing on couples and communication. At the workshop, they learned how to "mirror" each other. "When I'm angry, Sulaiman repeats what I'm saying to him before he responds. That calms me instantly," Myra explains. "I realized that all I needed was for Sulaiman to say, 'You're not crazy; that must have hurt your feelings.'" She tried this approach with the children as well. "Jwyanza and I talked about that moment on Christmas Eve, and he told me my outburst made him feel as though we weren't family," she says. "Ever since we worked it out, he's been very prompt." For their tenth wedding anniversary, Myra and Sulaiman renewed their vows. "All the kids were invited," Myra says. "When I first said 'I do' to Sulaiman, I thought it was just the two of us. This second time around, I knew it was actually 13." •

"We'd get meaner with every fight"

Michelle Barrett, 37, stay-at-home mom, Oak Park, Michigan

MICHELLE MET JOE AT A RECORD STORE in Cleveland in 1995. "We were rival marketing reps for different music companies," Michelle says. Michelle was engaged at the time. "No one liked my fiancé, but everyone loved Joe," she says. "And my friends were right." Michelle hadn't realized she was in an emotionally abusive relationship until it turned physical. Badly shaken, she broke off with her fiancé.

She continued to run into Joe. "Like it was meant to be," she says. But Michelle was gun-shy. "I'd agree to go out with him, then never return his calls," she says. "I think I worried he'd find out I was damaged goods." When she finally called him back, they talked for three hours. Joe proposed a year later over ice cream cones in the park. Michelle said yes. But back home they got into a huge fight, the first of the many that would pockmark their

relationship. "I can't remember what it was about, only that we made up and I got pregnant."

They married in December, but their new jobs required that they live in different cities. The separation was painful for Michelle. "I cried every day," she says. "Here I finally found a good man, but I couldn't be with him." Joe ultimately got transferred to Chicago, where Michelle was living, in time for their daughter's birth, but the fighting continued. "We were constantly getting into stupid arguments that left me feeling alone," Michelle says. "We loved each other, but we weren't happy." She started seeing "therapists, ministers, support groups—you name it," trying to work things out. The arguments didn't stop.

After four years, she and Joe had a son. By then their fights—about trust, about parenting, about dinner—had escalated. "We'd get meaner with each fight," Michelle recalls. "I threatened to leave, and he called my bluff. That's when I got really scared."

» the wake-up moment

Michelle was exhausted. She had no idea how to break the cycle of fights. Her biggest fear was losing Joe. A friend mentioned a weekend "reconnecting" workshop for couples, but she'd burned out on therapists. Plus a workshop meant finding a babysitter and coming up with the money. "My mom offered to watch the kids and lend me the money," Michelle says. "And then she said, 'Michelle, if you don't do this, are you prepared to live with the consequences?'" That struck Michelle like lightning. "Joe and I were in a hurtful holding pattern," she says. "My mom's words jolted me into action."

» resolution

At the workshop, the first exercise was an exorcism. "We had to act out a scary childhood moment," Michelle recalls. "My mom had married my stepfather when I was 7—he was extremely verbally abusive to me, and my model for how men acted. So if Joe disagreed with me, I'd hear my stepfather and freak out." For the exercise, Joe pretended to be her stepfather and she wound up in a flood of tears as she told him how she'd felt growing up. "Neither Joe nor I had realized the impact ▶

how I got unstuck



Andrea Mitchell

CHIEF FOREIGN AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT FOR NBC NEWS

I had covered Ronald Reagan for eight years when my bosses transferred me to Capitol Hill. I was devastated, but changing my beat turned out to be the best decision anyone ever made for me. In contrast to the controlled environment at the White House, Congress was chaotic—reality TV for political junkies—with 535 eager sources. The new assignment prepared me for later adventures, when I traveled the world for NBC and found myself flying to Port-au-Prince or Hanoi without the resources (or the constraints) of the White House media machine. After being stuck in a narrower ambition—to cover the White House beat, with its special prestige—I was free to realize a greater one. Instead of being trapped in photo opportunities, I was able to tell stories about the way people really live their lives. I became the reporter I was trained to be, trailing a lead no matter where it takes me.



Michelle,
at home in
Oak Park.

this man had on me," she says. Michelle's biological dad had died when she was 15, so her fear of abandonment was real—the puzzle pieces clicked into place. "I was like a shook-up can of soda," she says. "After I spewed, I calmed down and there was still sweet stuff to drink."

Michelle confronted her stepfather, who apologized for treating her badly. At that point, he "became a dad." And now, she says, "whenever I'm mad at Joe, I ask myself, *What's this really about?*" As a result, the arguments don't escalate. "If I'm upset, Joe gives me a hug," she says. "Or if he's had a bad day, I'll let him go play his drums. We love each other too much to let minor blowups tear us apart." ●

"I wanted to help him get better"

Megan Davis, 32, graduate student, Minneapolis

MEGAN, 20, BEGAN DATING GREG*, 21, in 1993 in Australia, where the two Colorado State students were in the same exchange program. They hit it off immediately. "He was funny, smart, a free spirit," Megan recalls. "We gave each other space. I'd go traveling with friends to Europe; he'd go mountain climbing or fishing on his own." By their mid-20s, Greg had bought a house in Boulder, where they both lived, but the mortgage and a full-time job made him feel trapped. Megan thought it might help if she took care of the domestic details—from handling the bills to doing most household chores. That wasn't enough. "He needed time by himself, he told me. So he'd go off for weekends alone and I'd say, 'I'll be here when you get back.'"

When Greg was offered a job in a small town near Aspen, he asked Megan to move with him and to oversee the sale of his house. She agreed. "I was so often worried about his feelings that I would do all these things to make his life easier," Megan says. She found herself making up excuses to people for his bouts of anti-social behavior, like the time her sister came to visit just as Greg was taking off for another weekend alone.

Megan decided to go on her own trip to Asia for six months before she moved to Aspen with Greg. Right before she left, he told her he was depressed. "He saw a general practitioner, who put him on an antidepressant," she recalls. "And I was proud of him for getting help."

Greg met Megan in Taiwan in December 2000 and proposed on Christmas day. "I wasn't expecting it at all," Megan says. "But we'd been dating for eight years, and I loved him. It felt like the right thing to do." She threw herself into planning their September wedding—a dress made of Thai silk, roses for the bouquet, 100 guests, and handwritten invitations. Greg wasn't much help. "One day he was elated, the next day withdrawn," she says. "It was a stressful time, so I let him be."

Six weeks before their wedding day, Greg came home in tears, saying he was unhappy and wanted to postpone the wedding. "I was hysterical," Megan recalls. "Sad, but also humiliated." Once again Megan shelved her own feelings to deal with the responsibilities at hand—she called each guest to explain that Greg was "dealing with stuff." Everyone was supportive.

They decided to go to Costa Rica anyway

for what was supposed to be their honeymoon—depressingly, on the last day someone stole their luggage. Back home, Greg started therapy and, two months later, asked Megan to join him in seeing the therapist. "I readily agreed," she says. "I wanted to help him get better."

» the wake-up moment

After eight sessions, Megan felt "we were going in circles." At the eighth session, the therapist told them "to work on their communication skills at home." "We still hadn't done the assignments from the first session," she says. "I knew then that I had done all I could, and that Greg's moodiness was going to be his lifelong struggle. I wanted him to be happy, but I finally realized that I couldn't do that for him."

» resolution

Greg went away that weekend alone, and when he returned, Megan told him she was moving out. She waited to tell her parents until she found a place—"My mother had to reserve her applause," Megan recalls. But after the initial elation dissipated, it was tough. The loneliness was palpable. "I spent my 20s with one man, and suddenly I was alone," she says. "Regaining my self-confidence was hard."

She moved to Minnesota to do a master's in public policy, and Greg moved to the West Coast. The two are still friends. "He didn't hurt me on purpose," she says. She knows she made the right decision. "I have a therapist friend who once told me if I was meant to leave Greg, I'd know in my gut when the time came," she says. "Acting on that moment made me realize I can trust myself." ●



Megan, with her
young friend Brenna.

“He was a good man, but he was dull”

Sarah Albertson,* 51, economics professor and mother of two, Santa Barbara

SARAH WAS 27 AND LIVING IN MANHATTAN when she met Richard,* a computer systems analyst, on a double date. She didn't plan on seeing him again, despite his three subsequent calls to her, but then she got fired from her teaching job. The July 4 weekend was coming up, she says, and “I thought, *I'd better find something to do, or I'm going to be really bummed out.*” She called him back.

Richard was different from her usual self-absorbed, intellectual boyfriends. “He was kind,” she says. “And he was passive, so we never fought. My parents fought all the time when I was growing up.” Richard filled a void. “I was very lonely and insecure—and unlucky in love,” she says. “I thought he was as good as it would get for me.”

They were married the following March and moved to Santa Barbara, where she taught at a university and he worked as a computer programmer. They bought a Victorian house, had a daughter, then a son five years later, and she busied herself with work, mothering, and renovating their old house. “My life seemed full, but it wasn't. I didn't love my husband,” she says. “It wasn't that he was cruel or mean. I faulted myself for not liking him more—he was a good man, but he was dull.” He wasn't interested in politics; he didn't laugh at Sarah's jokes. He would much rather roughhouse with the kids than talk to them about how they were doing in school. “He was like another kid,” she says.

Throughout their marriage, Sarah thought about leaving, but she worried about the effect on her children. Fifteen years into her marriage, her mother died; nine months later, Sarah went to visit her father, then 70, and his new girlfriend. “I'd never seen him happy in my life,” she says. “He was ecstatic.” That impressed her. But she was waiting for a safety net: “I needed to find someone else first.” A year or so later, one of her MBA students began pursuing her. He was 42, married, and “totally inappropriate”—but his attraction to her sparked Sarah's

longing for passion, the missing ingredient in her marriage.

» the wake-up moment

Sarah had signed up for a demanding computer graphics course. She came home late one night exhausted, looking for comfort. Instead, she found her kids, then 9 and 15, sprawled out on her bed taking up all the space as her husband slept beside them. *I have to make room for myself,* she thought. Then, *Forget it, I'm not going to pretend anymore.* She put the kids in their rooms and fell into bed. “My husband initiated sex,” Sarah recalls. “And I started crying. He asked, ‘What's wrong?’ I said, ‘I don't want to do this anymore.’” He didn't fight it.

» resolution

“I had finally found the courage to leap,” she says. They told the kids two weeks later—that was difficult. But the divorce was amicable, down to shared custody, and Sarah was ready to make up for lost time. She signed up for Match.com several months after the split. “Everybody told me it was too soon to date,” Sarah recalls. “They thought I should be in shock and unhappy. And I was like, ‘I've waited my whole life for romance.’”

Through Match, Sarah met Adam*, a physicist. “He's brilliant and laughs at my jokes,” she says. “He hugs me all the time and thanks me for letting him do it.” They were married in 2000. Their relationship isn't perfect—“we have disagreements that leave me frustrated—but I feel passionate about him. That's the big difference.” Her new husband “loves music history,” she says, “so I thought we'd go to Vienna to waltz on his 60th birthday.” He was game, though he has “two left feet,” and he even agreed to dancing lessons. Now he takes the lead happily and, five years into their marriage, still sweeps Sarah off her feet.

DESPITE THEIR VARIOUS OUTCOMES, all these women share a similar sense of discovery and relief—a sense of possibilities, whether with old partners or ones yet met. Being stuck may feel safe at first but without growth, relationships become claustrophobic, stultifying. These women found ways to break loose, instigate change, which felt scary at first, but set something new in motion and brought fresh energy and freedom to their lives. ●

how I got unstuck



Anna Deavere Smith
ACTRESS, PLAYWRIGHT

I have been swimming since 1974. I've never had speed. People said it was my lackluster kick. The coach I work with told me that the problem was not my kick but my reach. For six months, I've been trying to mimic the way he reaches his arms, standing at the side of the pool, reminding me. “Reach! Reach!” I could hear him calling, in my memory, as I practiced daily on my own. Today I broke through! It wasn't with my arms but with my whole torso! My entire body unlocked. Getting unstuck is not so much about effort, I realized—it's more about moving forward with the natural flow of things. Power requires cooperation. What I needed to move through the water was full cooperation from my body. Then the water was no longer an obstacle but a vehicle.