



from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Maya Angelou

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This version of the selection alternates original text with summarized passages. Dotted lines appear next to the summarized passages.

Maya Angelou narrates this story of her life. Early in the twentieth century, Maya’s grandmother, “Momma,” had a mobile lunch counter. She sold lunches of meat pies and lemonade to working men. Her reliability made her successful. She was eventually able to build her small business into the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store or “the Store.” It was located in the heart of her Negro community in Arkansas.

Over the years it became the lay center of activities in town. On Saturdays, barbers sat their customers in the shade on the porch of the Store, and troubadours¹ on their ceaseless crawlings through the South leaned across its benches and sang their sad songs of The Brazos² while they played juice harps³ and cigar-box guitars.

Maya lived with her uncle and Momma behind the Store. Momma’s Store sold food, thread, animal feed, seeds, fuel for lamps, shoestrings, and other household goods. Momma could also order anything a customer wanted if she didn’t have it in stock. Maya felt at home in the Store and loved working there. She became an expert at measuring out scoops of flour. She was hard on herself. When she made a mistake in her work, she punished herself by not allowing herself to eat sweets. Chocolates and pineapples were her favorite treats. She had canned pineapple once a year at Christmas, when Momma baked them into upside down cake.

Until I was thirteen and left Arkansas for good, the Store was my favorite place to be. Alone and empty in the mornings, it looked like an unopened present from a stranger. Opening the front doors was pulling the ribbon off the unexpected gift. The light would come in softly (we faced north), easing itself over the shelves of mackerel, salmon, tobacco, thread.

When Maya was about 10 years old, she and her mother took a trip to St. Louis. When she returned to Arkansas, Maya was depressed. Mrs. Bertha Flowers helped Maya out of her depression. Mrs. Flowers was a well-respected black woman from the community. She always looked formal and put together. Maya admired her.

For nearly a year, I sopped around the house, the Store, the school and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible. Then I met, or rather got to know, the lady who threw me my first lifeline.

She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be. ...

NOTES

- 1. troubadours** (TROO buh dawrz) *pl. n.* traveling musicians.
- 2. The Brazos** (BRAHZ uhs) area in Central Texas near the Brazos River.
- 3. juice harps** small musical instruments held between the teeth and played by plucking a metal band.

One day, Mrs. Flowers asked for Maya to walk with her and carry groceries home from the Store. Mrs. Flowers calls Maya by her proper name, “Marguerite.” She asked Maya why she didn’t talk much in class, even though she was doing well in school.

“Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals.” That was a totally new idea to me, and I would need time to think about it.

“Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.”

I memorized the part about the human voice infusing words. It seemed so valid and poetic.

Mrs. Flowers told Maya that she was going to lend her some books and poetry to practice reading aloud. When they arrived, Maya was impressed and intimidated by Mrs. Flowers’ home. She was invited in for cookies and lemonade.

As I ate she began the first of what we later called “my lessons in living.” She said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy. That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations.

When I finished the cookies, she brushed off the table and brought a thick, small book from the bookcase. I had read *A Tale of Two Cities* and found it up to my standards as a romantic novel. She opened the first page and I heard poetry for the first time in my life.

Through her visits with Mrs. Flowers, Maya was introduced to the wonder and magic of books. Mrs. Flowers told Maya to read books aloud to hear the music in their words. She gave Maya a book of poems and asked her to memorize one and recite it to her the next time she visited. By reading classical works, Maya was transported to times and places that were very different from her own. The fact that an important and respected woman like Mrs. Flowers had taken an interest in her made Maya feel she was worthy. It changed her view of herself.

On that first day, I ran down the hill and into the road (few cars ever came along it) and had the good sense to stop running before I reached the Store.

I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson’s grandchild or Bailey’s sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson.

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