

# MAYA ANGELOU

SINGIN' AND  
SWINGIN'  
AND GETTIN'  
MERRY LIKE  
CHRISTMAS

"The buoyant, gifted Maya Angelou continues her autobiography. . . . Both her joy and her despair have twice as much impact as most people's."  
—*New York* magazine

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Singin' and  
Swingin' and  
Gettin' Merry  
Like Christmas



MAYA ANGELOU



RANDOM HOUSE TRADE PAPERBACKS

NEW YORK

for  
Martha and Lillian,  
Ned and Bey,  
for the laughter,  
the love and the music

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# CHAPTER 1

“Don't the moon look lonesome shining through the trees?

Ah, don't the moon look lonesome shining through the trees?

Don't your house look lonesome when your baby pack up to leave?”

Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the spaces between the notes and curl my back to loneliness.

In my rented room (cooking privileges down the hall), I would play a record, then put my arms around the shoulders of the song. As we danced, glued together, I would nuzzle into its neck, kissing the skin, and rubbing its cheek with my own.

The Melrose Record Shop on Fillmore was a center for music, musicians, music lovers and record collectors. Blasts from its loudspeaker poured out into the street with all the insistence of a false mourner at a graveside. Along one wall of its dark interior, stalls were arranged like open telephone booths. Customers stood playing their selections on turn tables and listening through earphones. I had two hours between jobs. Occasionally I went to the library or, if the hours coincided to a free dance class at the YWCA. But most often I directed myself to the melodious Melrose Record Store, where I could wallow, rutting in music.

Louise Cox, a short blonde who was part owner of the store, flitted between customers like a fickle butterfly in a rose garden. She was white, wore perfume and smiled openly with the Negro customers, so I knew she was sophisticated. Other people's sophistication tended to make me nervous and I stayed shy of Louise. My music tastes seesawed between the blues of John Lee Hooker and the bubbling silver sounds of Charlie Parker. For a year I had been collecting their records.

On one visit to the store, Louise came over to the booth where I was listening to a record.

“Hi, I'm Louise. What's your name?”

I thought of “Puddin' in tame. Ask me again, I'll tell you the same.” That was a cruel childhood rhyme meant to insult.

The last white woman who had asked me anything other than “May I help you?” had been my high school teacher. I looked at the little woman, at her cashmere sweater and pearls, at her slick hair and pink lips, and decided she

couldn't hurt me, so I'd give her the name I had given to all white people.

“Marguerite Annie Johnson.” I had been named for two grandmothers.

“Marguerite? That's a pretty name.”

I was surprised. She pronounced it like my grandmother. Not Margarite, but Marg-you-reet.

“A new Charlie Parker came in last week. I saved it for you.”

That showed her good business sense.

“I know you like John Lee Hooker, but I've got somebody I want you to hear.” She stopped the turntable and removed my record and put on another in its place.

“Lord I wonder, do she ever think of me,  
Lord I wonder, do she ever think of me,  
I wonder, I wonder, will my baby come back to me?”

The singer's voice groaned a longing I seemed to have known my life long. But I couldn't say that to Louise. She watched my face and I forced it still.

“Well, I ain't got no special reason here,  
No, I ain't got no special reason here,  
I'm gonna leave 'cause I don't feel welcome here.”

The music fitted me like tailor-made clothes.

She said, “That's Arthur Crudup. Isn't he great?;” excitement lighted her face.

“It's nice. Thank you for letting me hear it.”

It wasn't wise to reveal one's real feelings to strangers. And nothing on earth was stranger to me than a friendly white woman.

“Shall I wrap it for you? Along with the Bird?”

My salary from the little real estate office and the dress shop downtown barely paid rent and my son's babysitter.

“I'll pick them both up next week. Thank you for thinking of me.” Courtesy cost nothing as long as one had dignity. My grandmother, Annie Henderson, had taught me that.

She turned and walked back to the counter, taking the record with her. I counseled myself not to feel badly. I hadn't rejected an offer of friendship, I had simply fielded a commercial come-on.

I walked to the counter.

“Thank you, Louise. See you next week.” When I laid the record on the counter, she pushed a wrapped package toward me.

“Take these, Marg-you-reet. I've started an account for you.” She turned to another customer. I couldn't refuse because I didn't know how to do so gracefully.

Outside on the evening street, I examined the woman's intention. What did I have that she wanted? Why did she allow me to walk away with her property? She didn't know me. Even my name might have been constructed on the spot. She couldn't have been seeking friendship, after all she was white, and as far as I knew white women were never lonely, except in books. White men adored them, Black men desired them and Black women worked for them. There was no ready explanation for her gesture of trust.

At home I squeezed enough from the emergency money I kept in a drawer to repay her. Back at the store, she accepted the money and said, “Thanks, Marg-you-reet. But you didn't have to make a special trip. I trust you.”

“Why?” That ought to get her. “You don't know me.”

“Because I like you.”

“But you don't know me. How can you like someone you don't know?”

“Because my heart tells me and I trust my heart.”

For weeks I pondered over Louise Cox. What could I possibly have that she could possibly want? My mind, it was certain, was a well-oiled mechanism which worked swiftly and seminoiselessly I often competed with radio contestants on quiz programs and usually won hands down in my living room. Oh, my mental machine could have excited anyone. I meant anyone interested in a person who had memorized the Presidents of the United States in chronological order, the capitals of the world, the minerals of the earth and the generic names of various species. There weren't too many callers for those qualifications and I had to admit that I was greatly lacking in the popular attractions of physical beauty and womanly wiles.

All my life, my body had been in successful rebellion against my finer nature. I was too tall and raw-skinny My large extroverted teeth protruded in an excitement to be seen, and I, attempting to thwart their success, rarely smiled. Although I lathered Dixie Peach in my hair, the thick black mass crinkled and kinked and resisted the smothering pomade to burst free around my head like a cloud of angry bees. No, in support of truth, I had to admit Louise Cox was not friendly to me because of my beauty.

Maybe she offered friendship because she pitied me. The idea was a string winding at first frayed and loose, then tightening, binding into my consciousness. My spirit started at the intrusion. A white woman? Feeling sorry



for me? She wouldn't dare. I would go to the store and show her. I would roll her distasteful pity into a ball and throw it in her face. I would smash her nose deep into the unasked-for sympathy until her eyes dribbled tears and she learned that I was a queen, not to be approached by peasants like her, even on bended knees, and wailing.

Louise was bent over the counter talking to a small Black boy. She didn't interrupt her conversation to acknowledge my entrance.

“Exactly how many boxes have you folded, J.C.?” Her intonation was sober.

“Eighteen.” The boy's answer matched her seriousness. His head barely reached the counter top. She took a small box from a shelf behind her.

“Then here's eighteen cents.” She pushed the coins around counting them, then poured them into his cupped palms.

“O.K.” He turned on unsure young legs and collided with me. He mumbled “Thank you.”

Louise rounded the counter, following the little voice. She ran past me and caught the door a second after he slammed it.

“J.C.” She stood, arms akimbo on the sidewalk, and raised her voice. “J.C., I'll see you next Saturday.” She came back into the store and looked at me.

“Hi. Marg-you-reet. Boy, am I glad to see you. Excuse that scene. I had to pay off one of my workers.”

I waited for her to continue. Waited for her to tell me how precious he was and how poor and wasn't it all a shame. She went behind the counter and began slipping records into paper jackets.

“When I first opened the shop, all the neighborhood kids came in. They either demanded that I ‘gi’ them a penny”—I hated whites' imitation of the Black accent—“or play records for them. I explained that the only way I'd give them anything was if they worked for it and that I'd play records for their parents, but not for them until they were tall enough to reach the turntables.”

“So I let them fold empty record boxes for a penny apiece.” She went on, “I'm glad to see you because I want to offer you a job.”

I had done many things to make a living, but I drew the line at cleaning white folks' houses. I had tried that and lasted only one day. The waxed tables, cut flowers, closets of other people's clothes totally disoriented me. I hated the figured carpets, tiled kitchens and refrigerators filled with someone else's dinner leftovers.

“Really?” The ice in my voice turned my accent to upper-class Vivien Leigh

(before *Gone With the Wind*).

“My sister has been helping me in the shop, but she's going back to school. I thought you'd be perfect to take her place.”

My resolve began to knuckle under me like weak knees.

“I don't know if you know it, but I have a large clientele and try to keep in stock a supply, however small, of every record by Negro artists. And if I don't have something, there's a comprehensive catalog and I can order it. What do you think?”

Her face was open and her smile simple. I pried into her eyes for hidden meaning and found nothing. Even so, I had to show my own strength.

“I don't like to hear white folks imitate Negroes. Did the children really ask you to 'gi' them a penny'? Oh, come now.”

She said, “You are right—they didn't ask. They demanded that I ‘gi’ them a penny” The smile left her face. “You say it.”

“Give me a penny.” My teeth pressed my bottom lip, stressing the v.

She reached for the box and handed me a coin. “Don't forget that you've been to school and let neither of us forget that we're both grown-up. I'd be pleased if you'd take the job.” She told me the salary, the hours and what my duties would be.

“Thank you very much for the offer. I'll think about it.” I left the shop, head up, back straight. I tried to exude indifference, like octopus ink, to camouflage my excitement.

I had to talk to Ivonne Broadnax, the Realist. She was my closest friend. Ivonne had escaped the hindrance of romantic blindness, which was my lifelong affliction. She had the clear, clean eyes of a born survivor. I went to her Ellis Street house, where she, at twenty-five, was bringing up an eight-year-old daughter and a fifteen-year-old sister.

“Vonne, you know that woman that runs the record store?”

“That short white woman with the crooked smile?” Her voice was small and keen and the sound had to force itself past white, even teeth.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“She offered me a job.”

“Doing what?” I knew I could count on her cynicism.

“Salesgirl.”

I had just found a seat in the lobby when Guy walked in flanked by the policemen. He had on swim trunks and was completely covered with sand. Weak with relief, I couldn't have stood up even for a moment. He saw me and rushed away from his escorts to stand in front of me.

“Mom”—his voice was loud and concerned—“what's the matter? Are you all right?”

I said yes, I was all right, because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Whew!” He blew out his breath. “Gee, I was worried for a minute.”

I pulled enough strength from some hidden resource to stand. I thanked the officers and shook hands. They ran their hands over Guy's head, and sand fell to the carpet like brown snow. “Don't worry your mother like that again, hear?”

They left and I fell back in the chair. “Guy, where have you been?”

“Swimming, Mother.”

“Where did you get the swimsuit?”

“Grandmother gave it to me. But why were you worried?”

“You didn't have breakfast. That's why.”

“But I did.”

“The waiter said you hadn't been in this morning.”

“I didn't eat here. I ate at the Queen's Surf.”

“But you didn't have any money. Who paid?”

“No one. I signed my name.”

I was flabbergasted.

“But they didn't know you. I mean, they just accepted your signature?” That was incredible.

He looked at me as if I wasn't quite as bright as he would have liked.

“Mom, you know your name is up on that thing outside?”

I had noticed when we arrived that a large sign proclaimed MAYA ANGELOU. I said, “Yes. I saw it.”

“Well, after I finished breakfast I pointed to it and said I would like to sign the check and that Maya Angelou is a great singer and she is my mother.”

I nodded.

He was partially right. Although I was not a great singer I was his mother, and he was my wonderful, dependently independent son.



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Poet, writer, performer, teacher, and director <sup>MAYA</sup>ANGELOU was raised in Stamps, Arkansas, and then moved to San Francisco. In addition to her bestselling autobiographies, beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she has also written a cookbook, *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*, and five poetry collections, including *I Shall Not Be Moved* and *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?*

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