

# MAYA ANGELOU

## THE HEART OF A WOMAN

"Remarkable . . . a great lady moving right on  
through a great memoir." —*Kirkus Reviews*



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*Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*

The Heart  
of a  
Woman



MAYA ANGELOU



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I dedicate this book to my grandson,  
Colin Ashanti Murphy-Johnson

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WOMAN

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*“The ole ark's a-moverin', a-moverin', a-moverin', the ole ark's a-moverin' along”*

That ancient spiritual could have been the theme song of the United States in 1957. We were a-moverin' to, fro, up, down and often in concentric circles.

We created a maze of contradictions. Black and white Americans danced a fancy and often dangerous do-si-do. In our steps forward, abrupt turns, sharp spins and reverses, we became our own befuddlement. The country hailed Althea Gibson, the rangy tennis player who was the first black female to win the U.S. Women's Singles. President Dwight Eisenhower sent U.S. paratroopers to protect black school children in Little Rock, Arkansas, and South Carolina's Senator Strom Thurmond harangued for 24 hours and 18 minutes to prevent the passage in Congress of the Civil Rights Commission's Voting Rights Bill.

Sugar Ray Robinson, everybody's dandy, lost his middle weight title, won it back, then lost it again, all in a matter of months. The year's popular book was Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, and its title was an apt description of our national psyche. We were indeed traveling, but no one knew our destination nor our arrival date.

I had returned to California from a year-long European tour as premier dancer with *Porgy and Bess*. I worked months singing in West Coast and Hawaiian night clubs and saved my money. I took my young son, Guy, and joined the beatnik brigade. To my mother's dismay, and Guy's great pleasure, we moved across the Golden Gate Bridge and into a houseboat commune in Sausalito where I went barefoot, wore jeans, and both of us wore rough-dried clothes. Although I took Guy to a San Francisco barber, I allowed my own hair to grow into a wide unstraightened hedge, which made me look, at a distance, like a tall brown tree whose branches had been clipped. My commune mates, an ichthyologist, a musician, a wife, and an inventor, were white, and had they been political, (which they were not), would have occupied a place between the far left and revolution.

Strangely, the houseboat offered me respite from racial tensions, and gave my son an opportunity to be around whites who did not think of him as too exotic to need correction, nor so common as to be ignored.

During our stay in Sausalito, my mother struggled with her maternal instincts. On her monthly visits, dressed in stone marten furs, diamonds and spike heels, which constantly caught between loose floorboards, she forced smiles and held her tongue. Her eyes, however, were frightened for her baby, and her baby's baby. She left wads of money under my pillow or gave me checks as she kissed me goodbye. She could have relaxed had she remembered the Biblical assurance “Fruit does not fall far from the tree.”

In less than a year, I began to yearn for privacy, wall-to-wall carpets and manicures. Guy was becoming rambunctious and young-animal wild. He was taking fewer baths than I thought healthy, and because my friends treated him like a young adult, he was forgetting his place in the scheme of our mother-son relationship.

I had to move on. I could go back to singing and make enough money to support myself and my son.

I had to trust life, since I was young enough to believe that life loved the person who dared to live it.

I packed our bags, said goodbye and got on the road.

Laurel Canyon was the official residential area of Hollywood, just ten minutes from Schwab's drugstore and fifteen minutes from the Sunset Strip.

Its most notable feature was its sensuality. Red-roofed, Moorish-style houses nestled seductively among madrone trees. The odor of eucalyptus was layered in the moist air. Flowers bloomed in a riot of crimsons, carnelian, pinks, fuchsia and sunburst gold. Jays and whippoorwills, swallows and bluebirds, squeaked, whistled and sang on branches which faded from ominous dark green to a brackish yellow. Movie stars, movie starlets, producers and directors who lived in the neighborhood were as voluptuous as their natural and unnatural environment.

The few black people who lived in Laurel Canyon, including Billy Eckstein, Billy Daniels and Herb Jeffries, were rich, famous and light-skinned enough to pass, at least for Portuguese. I, on the other hand, was a little-known night-club singer, who was said to have more determination than talent. I wanted desperately to live in the glamorous surroundings. I accepted as fictitious the tales of amateurs being discovered at lunch counters, yet I did believe it was important to be in the right place at the right time, and no place seemed so right to me in 1958 as Laurel Canyon.

When I answered a "For Rent" ad, the landlord told me the house had been taken that very morning. I asked Atara and Joe Morheim, a sympathetic white couple, to try to rent the house for me. They succeeded in doing so.

On moving day, the Morheims, Frederick "Wilkie" Wilkerson, my friend and voice coach, Guy, and I appeared on the steps of a modest, overpriced two-bedroom bungalow.

The landlord shook hands with Joe, welcomed him, then looked over Joe's shoulder and recognized me. Shock and revulsion made him recoil. He snatched his hand away from Joe. "You bastard. I know what you're doing. I ought to sue you."

Joe, who always seemed casual to the point of being totally disinterested, surprised me with his emotional response. "You fascist, you'd better not mention suing anybody. This lady here should sue you. If she wants to, I'll testify in court for her. Now, get the hell out of the way so we can move in."

The landlord brushed past us, throwing his anger into the perfumed air. "I should have known. You dirty Jew. You bastard, you."

We laughed nervously and carried my furniture into the house.

Weeks later I had painted the small house a sparkling white, enrolled Guy into the local school, received only a few threatening telephone calls, and bought myself a handsome dated automobile. The car, a sea-green, ten-year-old Chrysler, had a parquet dashboard, and splintery wooden doors. It could not compete with the new chrome of my neighbors' Cadillacs and Buicks, but it had an elderly elegance, and driving in it with the top down, I felt more like an eccentric artist than a poor black woman who was living above her means, out of her element, and removed from her people.

One June morning, Wilkie walked into my house and asked, "Do you want to meet Billie Holiday?"

“Of course. Who wouldn't? Is she working in town?”

“No, just passing through from Honolulu. I'm going down to her hotel. I'll bring her back here if you think you can handle it.”

“What's to handle? She's a woman. I'm a woman.”

Wilkie laughed, the chuckle rolling inside his chest and out of his mouth in billows of sound. “Pooh, you're sassy. Billie may like you. In that case, it'll be all right. She might not, and then that's your ass.”

“That could work the other way around. I might not like her either.”

Wilkie laughed again. “I said you're sassy. Have you got some gin?”

There was one bottle, which had been gathering dust for months.

Wilkie stood, “Give me the keys. She'll like riding in a convertible.”

I didn't become nervous until he left. Then the reality of Lady Day coming to my house slammed into me and started my body to quaking. It was pretty well known that she used heavy drugs, and I hardly smoked grass anymore. How could I tell her she couldn't shoot up or sniff up in my house? It was also rumored that she had lesbian affairs. If she propositioned me, how could I reject her without making her think I was rejecting her? Her temper was legendary in show business, and I didn't want to arouse it. I vacuumed, emptied ashtrays and dusted, knowing that a clean house would in no way influence Billie Holiday.

I saw her through the screen door, and my nervousness turned quickly to shock. The bloated face held only a shadow of its familiar prettiness. When she walked into the house, her eyes were a flat black, and when Wilkie introduced us, her hand lay in mine like a child's rubber toy.

“How you do, Maya? You got a nice house.” She hadn't even looked around. It was the same slow, lean, whining voice which had frequently been my sole companion on lonely nights.

I brought gin and sat listening as Wilkie and Billie talked about the old days, the old friends, in Washington, D.C. The names they mentioned and the escapades over which they gloated meant nothing to me, but I was caught into the net of their conversation by the complexity of Billie's language. Experience with street people, hustlers, gamblers and petty criminals had exposed me to cursing. Years in night-club dressing rooms, in cabarets and juke joints had taught me every combination of profanity, or so I thought. Billie Holiday's language was a mixture of mockery and vulgarity that caught me without warning. Although she used the old common words, they were in new arrangements, and spoken in that casual tone which seemed to drag itself, rasping, across the ears. When she finally turned to include me in her conversation, I knew that nothing I could think of would hold her attention.

“Wilkie tells me you're a singer. You a jazz singer too? You any good?”

“No, not really. I don't have good pitch.”

“Do you want to be a great singer? You want to compete with me?”



“No. I don't want to compete with anybody. I'm an entertainer, making a living.”

“As an entertainer? You mean showing some tittie and shaking your bootie?”

“I don't have to do all that. I wouldn't do that to keep a job. No matter what.”

“You better say Joe, 'cause you sure don't know.”

Wilkie came to my defense just as I was wondering how to get the woman and her hostility out of my house.

“Billie, you ought to see her before you talk. She sings folk songs, calypso and blues. Now, you know me. If I say she's good, I mean it. She's good, and she's nice enough to invite us to lunch, so get up off her. Or you can walk your ass right down this hill. And you know I'm not playing about that shit.”

She started laughing. “Wilkie, you haven't changed a damn thing but last year's drawers. I knew you'd put my ass out on the street sooner or later.” She turned to me and gave me a fragile smile.

“What we going to eat, baby?” I hadn't thought about food, but I had a raw chicken in the refrigerator. “I'm going to fry a chicken. Fried chicken, rice and an Arkansas gravy.”

“Chicken and rice is always good. But fry that sucker. Fry him till he's ready. I can't stand no goddam rare chicken.”

“Billie, I don't claim to be a great singer, but I know how to mix groceries. I have never served raw chicken.” I had to defend myself even if it meant she was going to curse me out.

“O.K., baby. O.K. Just telling you, I can't stand to see blood on the bone of a chicken. I take your word you know what you're doing. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.”

I retreated to the kitchen. Wilkie's and Billie's laughter floated over the clangs of pots and the sputtering oil.

I couldn't imagine how the afternoon was going to end. Maybe I'd be lucky; they would drink all the gin and Wilkie would take her to a bar on Sunset.

She sat at the table, gingerly. Each move of her body seemed to be considered before she attempted execution.

“You set a pretty table and you ain't got a husband?”

I told her I lived alone with my son. She turned with the first sharp action I had seen since she came into my house. “I can't stand children. The little crumb-crushers eat you out of house and home and never say ‘Dog, kiss my foot’”

“My son is not like that. He's intelligent and polite.”

“Yeah. Well, I can't stand to be around any of the little bastards. This is good chicken.”

I looked at Wilkie, who nodded to me.

Wilkie said, "Billie, I'm going to take you to a joint on Western, where you can get anything you want."

She didn't allow the full mouth of chicken to prevent her from speaking. "Hell, nigger, if I wanted to go to a joint don't you think I could have found one without you? I know every place in every town in this country that sells anything that crosses your mind. I wanted to come to a nice lady's house. She's a good cook, too. So I'm happy as a sissy in a CCC camp. Let me have that drumstick."

While I put away the remaining chicken, she talked about Hawaii.

"People love 'the islands, the islands.' Hell, all that shit is a bunch of water and a bunch of sand. So the sun shines all the time. What the hell else is the sun supposed to do?"

"But didn't you find it beautiful? The soft air, the flowers, the palm trees and the people? The Hawaiians are so pretty."

"They just a bunch of niggers. Niggers running around with no clothes on. And that music shit they play. Uhn, uhn." She imitated the sound of a ukulele.

"Naw. I'd rather be in New York. Everybody in New York City is a son of a bitch, but at least they don't pretend they're something else."

Back in the living room, Wilkie looked at me, then at his watch. "I have a student coming in a half-hour. Come on, Billie, I'll take you back to your hotel. Thanks, Maya. We have to go."

Billie looked up from her drink and said, "Speak for yourself. All I got to do is stay black and die."

"Well, I brought you here, so I'll take you back. Anyway, Maya's probably got something to do."

They both stared at me. I thought for a moment and decided not to lie.

"No. I'm free. I'll take her back to the hotel when she wants to go."

Wilkie shook his head. "O.K., Pooh." His face was saying, "I hope you know what you're doing." Of course I didn't, but I was more curious than afraid.

Billie tossed her head. "So I'll see you when I see you, Wilkie. Hope it won't be another twenty years."

Wilkie bent and kissed her, gave me a very strange look and walked down to his car.

We spent the first few moments in silence. Billie was examining me, and I was wondering what subject I could introduce that would interest her.

Finally, she asked, "You a square, ain't you?"

I knew what she meant. "Yes."

"Then how come you invited me to your house?"

Wilkie really invited her, but I had welcomed his invitation.

“How did you do?”

“Great. I won't get the results for a couple of days. But I did great. Mom, do you know that Conor Cruise O'Brien is the same man who headed the U.N. Congo project?”

I knew.

“Well, one of my questions was ‘What role has the European in African development?’” He chuckled with pleasure. “Well, I'll tell you. I ate Dr. O'Brien up in little pieces. I read his book *To Katanga and Back* in Cairo.”

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “I'm going to meet some guys in the Junior Common Room.”

Speechless, I watched him bound away. I had tommed, mewled and begged to get him registered, and in an attempt to show how manly he was, the smartass had bungled everything. I allowed myself to relish the fury.

After an hour, when I could walk without my knees wobbling and speak without yelling, I crossed the campus and found Dr. O'Brien in the Senior Common Room. I grinned for him and was prepared to shuffle and scratch. My people had written the book on dealing with white men.

I spoke out of a mealy mouth. “Dr. O'Brien, Guy told me how he answered one of those questions. You haven't had a chance to see his exam yet ...”

“Oh, but I have, Miss Angelou. His answers are fine. His registration papers will be sent to your office. We want minds like that in the university.”

I grinned again and backed away.

Sooner or later, I was going to have to admit that I didn't understand black men or black boys and certainly not all white men.

Guy was moving into Mensa Sarba Hall. I had seen his room in the dormitory and it looked too small and too dark, but he loved it. For the first time in his life, he was going to live alone, away from my persistent commands. Responsible to himself and for himself. My reaction was in direct contrast with his excitement. I was going to be alone, also, for the first time. I was in my mother's house at his birth, and we had been together ever since. Sometimes we lived with others or they lived with us, but he had always been the powerful axle of my life.

He dragged the old trunk toward the door, but I stopped him.

“Don't lift heavy things like that. You could hurt yourself. I want you to be careful. Remember your neck.”

He put the trunk down and turned. “Mom, I know I'm your only child and you love me.” His face was quiet and his voice calm. “But there's something for you to remember. It is my neck and my life. I will live it whole or not at all.”

He pulled me to him and wrapped his arms around me. “I love you, Mom. Maybe now you'll have a chance to grow up.”

A car horn honked outside. Guy opened the door and called. “Come on in. I'm ready.” Two Ghanaian young men leaped on the porch, shouting, and blustered into the

room. When they saw me, they composed themselves.

I offered them a drink, a beer, some food. I wanted to delay the departure. All refused. They had to return the car to their uncle, and Guy had to begin his new life.

They shared Guy's possessions, trundling the boxes, grips and trunk into a new Mercedes Benz. Guy gave me one more squeeze, then they piled into the car and drove away.

I closed the door and held my breath. Waiting for the wave of emotion to surge over me, knock me down, take my breath away. Nothing happened. I didn't feel bereft or desolate. I didn't feel lonely or abandoned.

I sat down, still waiting. The first thought that came to me, perfectly formed and promising, was "At last, I'll be able to eat the whole breast of a roast chicken by myself."



Poet, writer, performer, teacher, and director MAYA 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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