

**GATHER
TOGETHER
IN MY NAME**

Maya Angelou



**RANDOM HOUSE
TRADE PAPERBACKS**

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RANDOM HOUSE
TRADE PAPERBACKS

ALSO BY MAYA ANGELOU

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Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas
The Heart of a Woman
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COOKBOOK

Hallelujah! The Welcome Table

Gather
Together
in My Name



MAYA ANGELOU



RANDOM HOUSE TRADE PAPERBACKS

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and to the other real brothers who encouraged me to be bodacious enough to invent my own life daily:

JAMES BALDWIN

KWESI BREW

DAVID DU BOIS

SAMUEL FLOYD

JOHN O. KILLENS

VAGABOND KING

LEO MAITLAND

VUSUMZI MAKE

JULIAN MAYFIELD

MAX ROACH

A special thanks to my friend

DOLLY MCPHERSON

It was a “come as you are” party and “all y'all come.” If you bring your own bottle, you'll be expected to share; if you don't it's all right, somebody will share with you. It was triumph and brotherhood. Everybody was a hero. Hadn't we all joined together to kick the hell out of *de Gruber*, and that fat Italian, and put that little rice-eating Tojo in his place?

Black men from the South who had held no tools more complicated than plows had learned to use lathes and borers and welding guns, and had brought in their quotas of war-making machines. Women who had only known maid's uniforms and mammy-made dresses donned the awkward men's pants and steel helmets, and made the ship-fitting sheds hum some buddy. Even the children had collected paper, and at the advice of elders who remembered World War I, balled the tin foil from cigarettes and chewing gum into balls as big as your head. Oh, it was a time.

Soldiers and sailors, and the few black Marines fresh from having buried death on a sandy South Pacific beach, stood around looking proud out of war-wise eyes.

Black-marketeers had sped around a million furtive corners trying to keep the community supplied with sugar, cigarettes, rationing stamps and butter. Prostitutes didn't even take the time to remove their seventy-five dollar shoes when they turned twenty-dollar tricks. Everyone was a part of the war effort.

And at last it had paid off in spades. We had won. Pimps got out of their polished cars and walked the streets of San Francisco only a little uneasy at the unusual exercise. Gamblers, ignoring their sensitive fingers, shook hands with shoeshine boys. Pulpits rang with the “I told you so” of ministers who knew that God was on the side of right and He would not see the righteous forsaken, nor their young beg bread. Beauticians spoke to the shipyard workers, who in turn spoke to the easy ladies. And everybody had soft little preparation-to-smile smiles on their faces.

I thought if war did not include killing, I'd like to see one every year. Something like a festival.

All the sacrifices had won us victory and now the good times were coming. Obviously, if we earned more than rationing would allow us to spend during wartime, things were really going to look up when restrictions were removed.

There was no need to discuss racial prejudice. Hadn't we all, black and white, just snatched the remaining Jews from the hell of concentration camps? Race prejudice was dead. A mistake made by a young country. Something to be forgiven as an unpleasant act committed by an intoxicated friend.

During the crisis, black people had often made more money in a month than they had seen in their whole lives. Black men did not leave their wives, driven away by an inability to provide for their families. They rode in public transport on a first-come/first-seated basis. And more times than not were called Mister/Missus at their jobs or by sales clerks.

Two months after V-Day war plants began to shut down, to cut back, to lay off employees. Some workers were offered tickets back to their Southern homes. Back to the mules they had left tied to the tree on ole Mistah Doo hickup farm. No good. Their expanded understanding could never again be accorded into these narrow confines. They were free or at least nearer to freedom than ever before and they would not go back.

Those military heroes of a few months earlier, who were discharged from the Army in the city which knows how, began to be seen hanging on the ghetto corners like forgotten laundry left on a backyard fence. Their once starched khaki uniforms were gradually bastardized. An ETO jacket, plus medals, minus stripes, was worn with out-of-fashion zoot pants. The trim army pants, creases trained in symmetry, were topped by loud, color-crazed Hawaiian shirts. The shoes remained. Only the shoes. The Army had made those shoes to last. And dammit, they did.

Thus we lived through a major war. The question in the ghettos was, Can we make it through a minor peace?

I was seventeen, very old, embarrassingly young, with a son of two months, and I still lived with my mother and stepfather.

They offered me a chance to leave my baby with them and return to school. I refused. First, I reasoned with the righteous seriousness of youth, I was not Daddy Clidell Jackson's blood daughter and my child was his grandchild only as long as the union between Daddy and Mother held fast, and by then I had seen many weak links in their chain of marriage. Second, I considered that although I was Mother's child, she had left me with others until I was thirteen and why should she feel more responsibility for my child than she had felt for her own. Those were the pieces that made up the skin of my refusal, but the core was more painful, more solid, truer. A textured guilt was my familiar, my bedmate to whom I had turned my back. My daily companion whose hand I would not hold. The Christian teaching dinned into my ears in the small town in Arkansas would not be quieted by the big-city noise.

My son had no father—so what did that make me? According to the Book, bastards were not to be allowed into the congregation of the righteous. There it was. I would get a job, and a room of my own, and take my beautiful son out into the world. I thought I might even move to another town and change our names.

During the months when I was tussled with my future and that of my son, the big house we lived in began to die. Suddenly jobless roomers, who lined their solemn trunks with memories before they packed in folds of disappointment, left San Francisco for Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, where “they say” jobs were begging for workers. The loud slams of the front doors were heard more seldom, and the upstairs kitchen, where the roomers exercised their cooking privileges, gave fewer and fewer of the exotic aromas which used to send me running to our kitchen for snacks.

The gamblers and prostitutes, black-marketeers and boosters, all those suckerfish who had gotten fat living on the underbelly of the war, were the last to feel the pinch. They had accumulated large masses of money, which never went into a bank, but circulated among their tribe like promiscuous women, and by the nature of their professions, they were accustomed to the infidelity of Lady Luck and the capriciousness of life. I was sorry to see the dancers go—those glamorous women, only slightly older than I, who wore pounds of Max Factor No. 31, false eyelashes and talked out of the sides of their mouths, their voices sliding around cigarettes which forever dangled from their lips. They had often practiced their routines in the downstairs kitchen. The B.S. Chorus. Time steps, slides, flashes and breaks, smoking all the time. I was fairly certain that in order to be a chorus dancer, one would have to smoke.

By no amount of agile exercising of a wishful imagination could my mother have been called lenient. Generous she was; indulgent, never. Kind, yes; permissive, never. In her world, people she accepted paddled their own canoes, pulled their own weight, put their own shoulders to their own plows and pushed like hell, and here I was in her house, refusing to go back to school. Not giving a thought to marriage (admittedly, no one asked me) and working at nothing. At no time did she advise me to seek work. At least not in words. But the strain of her nights at the pinochle table, the responsibility of the huge sums which were kept in the bedroom closet, wore on her already short temper.

In earlier, freer days I might have simply noted and recorded her grumpiness, but now my guilt, which I carried around like a raw egg, fed my paranoia, and I became sure that I was a nuisance. When my baby cried I rushed to change him, feed him, coddle him, to in fact shut him up. My youth and shuddering self-doubt made me unfair to that vital woman.

She took great joy in her beautiful grandchild, and as with most egocentric people, saw his every virtue as a mirror for her own. He had pretty hands ... “Well, look at mine.” His feet were absolutely straight with high insteps; so were hers. She was not annoyed with me; she was playing the hand life had dealt her as she had always done. And she played it masterfully.

The mixture of arrogance and insecurity is as volatile as the much-touted alcohol and gasoline. The difference is that with the former there is a long internal burning usually terminating in self-destroying implosion.

I would quit the house, take a job and show the whole world (my son's father) that I was equal to my pride and

greater than my pretensions.

I was mortified. A silly white woman who probably counted on her toes looked me in the face and said I had not passed. The examination had been constructed by morons for idiots. Of course I breezed through without thinking much about it.

REARRANGE THESE LETTERS: **ACT-ART-AST**

Okay CAT. RAT. SAT. Now what?

She stood behind her make-up and coiffed hair and manicured nails and dresser-drawers of scented angora sweaters and years of white ignorance and said that I had not passed.

“The telephone company spends thousands of dollars training operators. We simply cannot risk employing anyone who made the marks you made. I'm sorry.”

She was sorry? I was stunned. In a stupor I considered that maybe my outsized intellectual conceit had led me to take the test for granted. And maybe I deserved this highhanded witch's remarks.

“May I take it again?” That was painful to ask.

“No, I'm sorry.” If she said she was sorry one more time, I was going to take her by the sorry shoulders and shake a job out of her.

“There is an opening, though”—she might have sensed my unspoken threat—“for a bus girl in the cafeteria.”

“What does a bus girl do?” I wasn't sure I could do it.

“The boy in the kitchen will tell you.”

After I filled out forms and was found uninfected by a doctor, I reported to the cafeteria. There the boy, who was a grandfather, informed me, “Collect the dishes, wipe the tables, make sure the salt and pepper shakers are clean, and here's your uniform.”

The coarse white dress and apron had been starched with concrete and was too long. I stood at the side of the room, the dress hem scratching my calves, waiting for the tables to be clear. Many of the trainee operators had been my classmates. Now they stood over laden tables waiting for me or one of the other dumb bus girls to remove the used dishes so that they could set down their trays.

I lasted at the job a week, and so hated the salary that I spent it all the afternoon I quit.

“Can you cook Creole?”

I looked at the woman and gave her a lie as soft as melting butter. “Yes, of course. That’s all I know how to cook.”

The Creole Café had a cardboard sign in the window which bragged: COOK WANTED SEVENTY-FIVE DOLLARS A WEEK. As soon as I saw it I knew I could cook Creole, whatever that was.

Desperation to find help must have blinded the proprietress to my age or perhaps it was the fact that I was nearly six feet and had an attitude which belied my seventeen years. She didn’t question me about recipes and menus, but her long brown face did trail down with wrinkles, and doubt hung on the edges of her questions.

“Can you start on Monday?”

“I’ll be glad to.”

“You know it’s six days a week. We’re closed on Sunday.”

“That’s fine with me. I like to go to church on Sunday.”

It’s awful to think that the devil gave me that lie, but it came unexpectedly and worked like dollar bills. Suspicion and doubt raced from her face, and she smiled. Her teeth were all the same size, a small white picket fence semicircled in her mouth.

“Well, I know we’re going to get along. You a good Christian. I like that. Yes, ma’am, I sure do.”

My need for a job caught and held the denial.

“What time on Monday?” Bless the Lord!

“You get here at five.”

Five in the morning. Those mean streets before the thugs had gone to sleep, pillowing on someone else’s dreams. Before the streetcars began to rattle, their lighted insides like exclusive houses in the fog. Five!

“All right, I’ll be here at five, Monday morning.”

“You’ll cook the dinners and put them on the steam table. You don’t have to do show orders. I do that.”

Mrs. Dupree was a short plump woman of about fifty. Her hair was naturally straight and heavy. Probably Cajun Indian, African and white, and naturally, Negro.

“And what’s your name?”

“Rita.” Marguerite was too solemn, and Maya too rich-sounding. “Rita” sounded like dancing, flashing eyes, hot peppers and Creole evenings with strummed guitars. “Rita Johnson.”

“That’s a right nice name.” Then, like some people do to show their sense of familiarity, she immediately narrowed the name down. “I’ll call you Reet. Okay?”

Okay, of course. I had a job. Seventy-five dollars a week. So I was Reet. Reet, poteet and gone. All Reet. Now all I had to do was learn to cook.

I asked old Papa Ford to teach me how to cook. He had been a grown man when the twentieth century was born, and left a large family of brothers and sisters in Terre Haute, Indiana (always called the East Coast), to find what the world had in store for a “good-looking colored boy with no education in his head, but a pile of larceny in his heart.” He traveled with circuses “shoveling elephant shit.” He then shot dice in freight trains and played koch in back rooms and shanties all over the Northern states.

“I never went down to Hang'em High. Them crackers would have killed me. Pretty as was, white women was always following me. The white boys never could stand a prett nigger.”

By 1943, when I first saw him, his good looks were as delicate as an old man's memory, and disappointment rode his face bareback. His hands had gone. Those gambler's fingers had thickened during the Depression, and his only straight job, carpenting, had further toughened his “money-makers.” Mother rescued him from a job as a sweeper in a pinochle parlor and brought him home to live with us.

He sorted and counted the linen when the laundry truck picked it up and returned it, then grudgingly handed out fresh sheets to the roomers. He cooked massive and delicious dinners when Mother was busy, and he sat in the tall-ceilinged kitchen drinking coffee by the pots.

Papa Ford loved my mother (as did nearly everyone) with a childlike devotion. He went so far as to control his profanity when she was around, knowing she couldn't abide cursing unless she was the curser.

“Why the sheeit do you want to work in a goddam kitchen?”

“Papa, the job pays seventy-five dollars a week.”

“Busting some goddam suds.” Disgust wrinkled his face.

“Papa, I'll be cooking and not washing dishes.”

“Colored women been cooking so long, thought you'd be tired of it by now.”

“If you'll just tell me—”

“Got all that education. How come you don't get a goddam job where you can go to work looking like something?”

I tried another tack. “I probably couldn't learn to cook Creole food, anyway. It's too complicated.”

“Sheeit. Ain't nothing but onions, green peppers and garlic. Put that in everything and you got Creole food. You know how to cook rice, don't you?”

“Yes.” I could cook it till each grain stood separately.

“That's all, then. Them geechees can't live without swamp seed.” He cackled at his joke, then recalled a frown. “Still don't like you working as a goddam cook. Get married, then you don't have to cook for nobody but your own family. Sheeit.”

The Creole Café steamed with onion vapor, garlic mists, tomato fogs and green-pepper sprays. I cooked and sweated among the cloying odors and loved being there. Finally I had the authority I had always longed for. Mrs. Dupree chose the daily menu, and left a note on the steam table informing me of her gastronomic decisions. But, I, Rita, the chef, decided how much garlic went into the baked short rib à la Creole, how many bay leaves would flavor the steamed Shreveport tripe. For over a month I was embroiled in the mysteries of the kitchen with the expectancy of an alchemist about to discover the secret properties of gold.

A leathered old white woman, whom Mother found, took care of my baby while I worked. I had been rather reluctant to leave him in her charge, but Mother reminded me that she tended her white, black and Filipino children equally well. I reasoned that her great age had shoved her beyond the pale of any racial differences. Certainly anyone who lived that long had to spend any unused moments thinking about death and the life to come. She simply couldn't afford the precious time to think of prejudices. The greatest compensation for youthful illness is the utter ignorance of the seriousness of the affliction.

Only after the mystery was worn down to a layer of commonness did I begin to notice the customers. They consisted largely of light-skinned, slick-haired Creoles from Louisiana, who spoke a French patois only a little less complicated than the contents of my pots and equally spicy. I thought it fitting and not at all unusual that they enjoyed my cooking. I was following Papa Ford's instructions loosely and adding artistic touches of my own.

Our customers never ate, paid and left. They sat on the long backless stools and exchanged gossip or shared the patient philosophy of the black South.

“Take it easy, Greasy, you got a long way to slide.”

With the tolerance of ages they gave and accepted advice.

“Take it easy, but take it.”

One large ruddy man, whose name I never knew, allowed his elbows to support him at the twelve-stool counter, and told tales of the San Francisco waterfront: “They got wharf rats who fight a man flat-footed.”

“No?” A voice wanted to believe.

“Saw one of those suckers the other night backed a cracker up 'gainst a cargo crate. Hadn't been for me and two other guys, colored guys”—naturally—“he'd of run down his throat and walked on his liver.”

Near the steam counter, the soft sounds of black talk, the sharp reports of laughter, and the shuffling feet on tiled floors mixed themselves in odorous vapors and I was content.

I had rented a room (with cooking privileges) in a tall, imposing San Francisco Victorian and had bought my first furniture and a white chenille bedspread. God, but it looked like a field of tiny snow roses. I had a beautiful child, who laughed to see me, a job that I did well, a babysitter whom I trusted, and I was young and crazy as a road lizard. Surely this was making it.

One foggy evening on my day off, I had picked up my son and was carrying him home along the familiar streets with the casual ease of an old mother. He snoozed in the angle of my arm, and I thought of dinner, and the radio and a night of reading. Two ex-schoolmates came up the hill toward me. They were of that rare breed, black born San Franciscans. Cushioned in my maturity, didn't think to further arm myself. I had the arrowproof vest of adult confidence, so I let them approach—easy.

“Let us look at the baby ... I hear he's cute.” She was fat with small covetous eyes and was known for having a tiny but pugnacious wit. Her friend, Lily, even as a teenager, was old beyond knowing and bored beyond wisdom.

“Yes. They say you made a pretty baby.”

I lifted the flap of light blanket from my son's face and shifted myself so that they might see my glory.

“My God, you did that?” The fat one's face broke open into a wounded grin.

Her somber friend intoned, “Jesus, he looks like he's white. He could pass.” Her words floated into my air on admiration and wonder. I shivered that she could say such a terrible thing about my baby, but I had no nerve to cover my prize and walk away. I stood dumfounded, founded in dumbness.

The short one laughed a crackly laugh and pushed the point between my ribs. “He's got a little nose and thin lips.” Her surprise was maddening. “As long as you live and troubles rise, you ought to pay the man for giving you that baby, huh. A crow gives birth to a dove. The bird kingdom must be petrified.”

There's a point in fury when one becomes abject. Motionless. I froze, as Lot's wife must have done, having caught a last glimpse of concentrated evil.

“And what did you name him? ‘Thank God A-mighty?’”

I could have laid him down there, bunting and all, and left him for someone who had more grace, more style and beauty. My own pride of control would not allow me to show the girls what I was feeling, so I covered my baby and headed home. No good-byes—I left them as if they were planning to walk off the edge of the world. In my room I lay my five months of belongingness on the chenilled bed and sat beside him to look over his perfection. His little head was exactly round and the soft hair curled up in black ripples. His arms and legs were plump marvels, and his torso as straight as a look between lovers. But it was his face with which I had to do.

Admittedly, the lips were thin and traced themselves sparely under a small nose. But he was a baby, and as he grew, these abnormalities would flesh out, become real, imitate the

regularity of my features. His eyes, even closed, slanted up toward his throbbing temples. He looked like a baby Buddha. And then I examined his hairline. It followed mine in every detail. And that would not grow away or change, and it proved that he was undeniably mine.

Butter-colored, honey-brown, lemon- and olive-skinned. Chocolate and plum-blue, peaches and cream. Cream. Nutmeg. Cinnamon. I wondered why my people described our colors in terms of something good to eat. Then God's prettiest man became a customer at my restaurant.

He sat beside the light-skinned Creoles, and they thinned and paled and disappeared. His dark-brown skin glistened, and the reflected light made it hard to look into my mysterious eyes. His voice to the waitress was a thumb poking in my armpits. I hated his being there because his presence made me jittery, but I loathed his leaving and could hardly bear waiting for him to return.

The waitress and Mrs. Dupree called him "Curly," but I thought whoever named him little used their imagination. When he opened the steamy door to the restaurant, surely it was the second coming of Christ.

His table manners pleased me. He ate daintily and slowly as if he cared what he put in his mouth. He smiled at me, but the nervous grimaces I gave him in return couldn't even loosely be called smiles. He was friendly with the customers, the waitress and me, since he always came alone. I wondered why he didn't have girl friends. Any woman would give a pretty girl to go out with him or rush to sit and talk to him. I never thought he would find me interesting and if he did, it would be just to tease me.

"Reet." There it was. I acted as if I hadn't heard him.

"Reet. You hear me. Come here."

I have seen bitch dogs in heat sidle sinuously along the ground, tempting, luring. I would like to be able to say I went to him so naturally. Unfortunately not. I draped myself in studied indifference and inched out my voice in disdainful measures.

"Were you speaking to me?"

"Come here, I won't bite." Looking down upon his request, I conceded. If he was beautiful from a distance, up close he was perfection. His eyes were deep-black and slow-lidded. His upper lip arched and fell over white teeth held together in the middle by the merest hint of yellow gold.

"How long you been knowing to cook like that?"

"All my life." I could hardly make the lie leave my tongue.

"You married?"

"No."

"You be careful, somebody's gonna come here and kidnap you."

"Thank you." Why didn't he? Of course he would have had to knock me down, bind and gag me, but I would have liked nothing better.

"You want a soda?"

"No thanks." I turned and went back to the steam table, sweat nibbling above my top lip and under my arms. I wished him away but could feel his gaze on my back. I had spent s

many years being people other than myself that I continued to stir and mix, raise and lower burners as if every nerve in my body were not attached to the third stool of the lunch counter.

The door opened and closed and I turned to watch his retreating back, only to find that another customer had left. Automatically I looked for him and met his eyes, solemn on me, burned at giving myself away.

He nodded me over.

“What time you get off?”

“One o'clock.”

“Want me to take you home?”

“I usually go out to see my baby.”

“You've got a baby? Somebody must of give it to you for Christmas. A doll baby. How old are you?”

“Nineteen.” Sometimes I was twenty or eighteen. It depended on my mood.

“Nineteen going on seventeen.” His smile held no ridicule. Just a smidgen of indulgence.

“Okay. I'll take you to see your baby.”

He drove his 1941 Pontiac without seeming to think about it. I sat in the corner pushed against the door trying desperately not to watch him.

“Where's the baby's daddy?”

“I don't know.”

“He wouldn't marry you, huh?” His voice hardened in the question.

“I didn't want to marry him.” Partly true.

“Well, he's a low-down bastard in my book and needs his ass kicked.” I began to love him at that moment.

I shifted to look at him. My avenging angel. Mother and my brother had been so busy being positive and supportive, neither had given any thought to the possibility that I might want revenge. I don't think I had even thought about it before. Now anger was an injection that flooded my body, making me warm and excited.

That's true, he was a low-life bastard. He should have given me a chance to refuse his proposal. Out of my head and into forgetfulness went the memory that I had wilfully initiated my one sexual tryst. My personal reasons and aggressive tactics were conveniently obliterated. Self-pity in its early stage is as snug as a feather mattress. Only when it hardens does it become uncomfortable.

Curly stood in the center of the baby-sitter's living room and said all the mother-liking things: “Sure is a fine baby ... Looks just like you ... He's gonna be a big one ... Check those feet.”

Back in the car it never occurred to me to put up resistance when he said we were going to his hotel. I wanted to do what he wanted, so I sat quiet.

As we passed through the hotel lobby I felt the first stirring of reluctance. Now, wait a minute. What was I doing here? What did he think I was? He hadn't even said he loved me. Where was the soft music that should be playing as he kissed my earlobe?

He sensed the hesitation and took my hand to guide me down the carpeted hallway. His touch and confidence rushed my doubts. Obviously I couldn't stop now.

“Make yourself comfortable.”

He removed his coat and I sat quickly in the one large chair. On the dresser, amid candles and toiletries, stood a bottle of whiskey.

“May I have a drink?” I had never drunk anything stronger than Dubonnet.

“No. I don't think so. But I'll have one.” He poured the liquor into a glass he took down from above the face bowl. Water sloshed around and he gulped it down. Then in a moment he stood over me. I wanted to look up at him but my head refused.

“Come here, Reet. Get up.” I wanted to, but my muscles had atrophied. I didn't want him to think of me as a dick teaser. A cheat. But my body wouldn't obey.

He bent and took both hands and pulled me upright. He enclosed me in his arms.

“You nearly 'bout as tall as me. I like tall girls.” Then he kissed me, softly. And slowly. When he stopped, my body had gone its own way. My heart raced and my knees were locked. I was embarrassed at my trembling.

“Come over to the bed.” He patiently pulled me away from the chair.

We both sat on the bed and I could hardly see him, although he was a breath away. He held my face in his large dark hands.

“I know you're scared. That's natural. You're young. But we're going to have a party. Just think of it like that. We're having a love party.”

My previous brushes with sex had been just that. Brushes. One violent. The other indifferent, and now I found myself in the hands and arms of a tender man.

He stroked and talked. He kissed me until my ears rang, and he made me laugh. He interrupted his passion to make some small joke, and the second I responded he resumed lovemaking.

I lay crying in his arms, after.

“You happy?” The gold in his mouth glinted like a little star.

I was so happy that the next day I went to a jeweler and bought him an onyx ring with a diamond chip. I charged it to my stepfather's account.

Love was what I had been waiting for. I had done grownup things out of childish ignorance and juvenile bravado, but now I began to mature. I became pleased with my body because it gave me such pleasure. I shopped for myself carefully for the first time. Searching painstakingly for just the right clothes instead of buying the first thing off the rack. Unfortunately my taste was as new as my interest. Once when Curly was to take me out to dinner, I bought a small yellow crepe dress with black roses, black baby-doll shoes, whose straps sank a full inch into my ankles, and an unflattering wide coolie hat with veil. I pinned a small cluster of yellow rose buds on my bosom and was ready for the fray.

He only asked me to remove the corsage.

Curly had said at the beginning of our affair that he had a girl who worked in a San Diego shipyard and her job would be up soon. Then they'd go back to New Orleans and get married. I hastily stored the information in that inaccessible region of the mind where one puts the memory of pain and other unpleasanties. For the while it needn't bother me, and it didn't.

He was getting out of the Navy and only had a couple of months before all his papers would be cleared. Southern upbringing and the terror of war made him seem much older than his thirty-one years.

We took my son for long walks through parks; when people complimented us on our child, he played the proud papa and accepted. At playland on the beach we rode the Ferris wheel and loop-the-loop and goosed ourselves with salt-water taffy. Late afternoons we took the baby back to the sitter and then went to his hotel and one more, or two more, or three more love parties. I never wanted it to end. I bought things for him. A watch (he already had one), a sports coat (too small), another ring, and paid for them myself. I couldn't hear his protestations. I wasn't buying things. I was buying time.

One day after work he took me to the sitter's. He sat and held the baby. His silence should have told me something. Maybe it did, but again I didn't want to know. We left in a quiet mood. He only said, "I want me a boy like that. Just like that."

Since we weren't heading for the hotel, I asked where we were going.

"I'm taking you to your house."

"Why?"

No answer.

He found a parking space a half-block away. The streetlights were just coming on and a soft fog dimmed the world. He reached in the back seat and took out two large boxes. He handed them to me and said, "Give me a kiss."

I tried to laugh, to pretend that the kiss was payment for the gifts, but the laugh lied. He kissed me lightly and looked at me long.

"Reet. My girlfriend is here and I'll be checking out of the hotel tonight."

I didn't cry because I couldn't think.

"You're going to make some man a wonderful wife. I mean it. These things are for you and

the baby. I hate to say good-bye, but I gotta.”

He probably said more, but all I remember is walking from the car to my front door. Trying for my life's sake to control the angry lurchings of my stomach. Trying to walk upright carrying the awkward boxes. I had to set down the boxes to find the door key, and had to fiddle with it to get it fitted into the lock. I entered the hall without hearing him start the car.

Because he had not lied, I was forbidden anger. Because he had patiently and tenderly taught me love, I could not use hate to ease the pain. I had to bear it.

I am certain, with the passage of time, that he loved me. Maybe for the loveless waif I was. Maybe he felt pity for the young mother and fatherless child, and so decided to give us what we both needed for two months. I don't know. I'm only certain that for some reason he loved me and that he was a good man.

The loss of young first love is so painful that it borders on the ludicrous.

I even embarrassed myself. Weeks after Charles left, I stumbled around San Francisco operating in the familiar. The lovely city disappeared in my fog. Nothing I did to food made it interesting to me. Music became a particular aggravation, for every emotional lyric had obviously been written for me alone.

Gonna take a sentimental journey

gonna set my heart at ease ...

Charles had taken that journey and left me all alone. I was one emotional runny sore. To be buffeted about emotionally was not new, only the intensity and reason were. The new pain and discomfort was physical. My body had been awakened and fed, and suddenly discovered I had a ravenous appetite. My natural reticence and habit of restraint prevented me from seeking other satisfaction even if it could be found.

I began to lose weight, which, with my height and thinness, I could ill afford to do. The burst of energy which had propelled me into beauty salons and dress shops was now absent as my gone lover. I longed and pined, sighed and yearned, cried and generally slouched around feeling dismal and bereaved. By eighteen I managed to look run down if not actually run over.

My brother Bailey again was my savior, a role he fulfilled most of my early years.

He returned to the city after some months on an ammunition ship, and came to the restaurant to see me.

“My. What the hell's happened to you?” The way I looked seemed to anger rather than worry him. I introduced him to my employer. She said, “Your brother. He awful little, ain't he? I mean, to be your brother?”

Bailey thanked her smoothly, allowing just the tail of his sarcasm to flick in her face. She never noticed.

“I said, what's the matter with you? Have you been sick?” I held in the tears that wanted to pour into my brother's hands.

“No. I'm okay.”

I thought at the time that it was noble to bear the ills one had silently. But not so silent

that others didn't know one was bearing them.

“What time do you get off?”

“One o'clock. I'm off tomorrow, so I'm going out to get the baby.”

“I'll be back and take you. Then we can talk.”

He turned to Mrs. Dupree. “And a good day to you, too, madam.” Bailey did little things with such a flourish. He might have been the Count of Monte Cristo, or Cyrano saying farewell to fair Roxanne.

After he had gone, Mrs. Dupree grinned her lips into a pucker. “He's as cute as a little bug.”

I busied myself amid the pots. If she thought likening my big brother to an insect would please me, she had another think coming.

The baby crawled around the floor of my room as I told Bailey of my great love affair. Of the pain of discovery of pain. He nodded understanding and said nothing.

I thought that while I had his attention I might as well throw in my other sadness. I told him that because my old schoolmates laughed at me, I felt more isolated than I had in Stamps, Arkansas.

He said, “He sounds like a nice guy” and “I think it's time for you to leave San Francisco. You could try Los Angeles or San Diego.”

“But I don't know where I'd live. Or get a job.” Although I was miserable in San Francisco, the idea of any other place frightened me. I thought of Los Angeles and it was a gray vast sea without ship or lighthouse.

“I can't just tear Guy away. He's used to the woman who looks after him.”

“But she's not his mother.”

“I've got a good job here.”

“But surely you don't mean to make cooking Creole food your life's work.”

I hadn't thought about it. “I have a nice room here. Don't you think it's nice?”

He looked at me squarely forcing me to face my fears. “Now, My if you're happy being miserable, enjoy it, but don't ask me to feel sorry for you. Just get all down in it and wallow around. Take your time to savor all its subtleties, but don't come to me expecting sympathy.”

He knew me too well. It was true. I was loving the role of jilted lover. Deserted, yet carrying on. I saw myself as the heroine, solitary, standing under a streetlight's soft yellow glow. Waiting. Waiting. As the fog comes in, a gentle rain falls but doesn't drench her. It's just enough to make her shiver in her white raincoat (collar turned up). Oh, he knew me too well.

“If you want to stay around here looking like death eating a soda cracker, that's your business. There are some rights no one has the right to take from you. That's one. Now, what do you want to do?”

That evening I decided to go to Los Angeles. At first I thought I'd work another month saving every possible penny. But Bailey said, “When you make up your mind to make

change you have to follow through on the wave of decision.” He promised me two hundred dollars when his ship paid off and suggested that I tell my boss that I’d be leaving in a week.

I had never had two hundred dollars of my own. It sounded like enough to live on for a year.

The prospect of a trip to Los Angeles returned my youth to me.

My mother heard my plans without surprise. “You’re a woman. You can make up your own mind.” She hadn’t the slightest idea that not only was I not a woman, but what passed for my mind was animal instinct. Like a tree or a river, I merely responded to the winds and the tides.

She might have seen that, but her own mind was misted with the knowledge of a failing marriage, and the slipping away of the huge sums of money which she had enjoyed and thought her due. Her fingers still glittered with diamonds and she was a weekly customer at the most expensive shoe store in town, but her pretty face had lost its carefree adornment and her smile no longer made me think of day breaking.

“Be the best of anything you get into. If you want to be a whore, it’s your life. Be a damn good one. Don’t chippy at anything. Anything worth having is worth working for.”

It was her version of Polonius’ speech to Laertes. With that wisdom in my pouch, I was to go out and buy my future.

The Los Angeles Union Railway Terminal was a marvel of Moorish, Spanish glamour. The main waiting room was vast and the ceiling domed its way up to the clouds. Long curved benches sat in dark wooden splendor, and outside its arched doors, palm trees waved in lovely walks. Inlaid blue and yellow tiles were to be found on every wall, arranged in geometric and exotic design.

It was easy to distinguish San Franciscans detrainning amid the crowd. San Franciscan women always, but always, wore gloves. Short white snappy ones in the day, and long black or white kid leather ones at night. The Southern Californians and other tourists were much more casual. Men sported flowered shirts, and women ambled around or lounged on the imposing seats in cotton dresses which could have passed for brunch coats in San Francisco.

Being from The City, I had dressed for the trip. A black crepe number which pulled and pleated, tucked and shirred, in a wrap all its own. It was expensive by my standards and dressy enough for a wedding reception. My short white gloves had lost their early-morning crispness during the ten-hour coach trip, and Guy, whose immensity matched his energy, had mashed and creased and bungled the dress into a very new symmetry. Less than a year old, he had opinions. He definitely wanted to get down and go to that smiling stranger across the aisle, and immediately wanted to be in my lap pulling on the rhinestone brooch which captured and brought light to the collar of my dress.

In spite of the wrinkled dress and in spite of the cosmetic case full to reeking with dirty diapers, I left the train with my son a picture of controlled dignity. I had over two hundred dollars rolled in scratchy ten-dollar bills in my brassiere, another seventy in my purse, and two bags of seriously selected clothes. Los Angeles was going to know I was there.

My aunt answered my telephone call.

“Ritie, where are you?”

“We’re at the station.”

“What we?”

Like all the family she had heard about my pregnancy, but she hadn’t seen the result.

“My son and I.”

A tiny hesitation, then: “Get a taxi and come out here. I’ll pay the cab fare.” Her voice didn’t ooze happiness at hearing from me, but then, the Baxters were not known to show any emotions. Except violent ones.

Wilshire Boulevard was wide and glossy. Large buildings sat back on tiny little lawns in privacy that projected money and quiet voices and white folks.

The house on Federal Avenue had a no-nonsense air about it. It was a model of middle-class decorum. A single-story solidly made building with three bedrooms, good meant-to-last furniture, and samplers on the wall which exhorted someone to “Bless This Home” and warned that “Pride Goeth Before a Fall.”

The clan had met, obviously called by my aunt, to check out my new addition to the family and give me the benefit of their conglomerate wisdom. My Uncle Tommy sat, wide-spraddled as usual, and grumbled. "Hey, Ritie. Got a baby, I see."

Guy was in my arms and talking, pointing, laughing, so the meaning in his statement was not in the words. He was simply greeting me and saying that although I had a child without the benefit of marriage, he for one was not going to ignore either me or the baby.

My family spoke its own mysterious language. The wives and husbands of my blood relatives handed my son around as if they were thinking of adding him to their collection. They removed his booties and pulled his toes.

"Got good feet."

"Uh huh. High arches."

One aunt ran her hand around his head and was satisfied. "His head is round."

"Got a round head, huh?"

"Sure does."

"That's good."

"Uh huh."

This feature was more than a symbol of beauty. It was an indication of the strength of the bloodline. Every Baxter had a round head.

"Look a lot like Bibbi, doesn't he?" "Bibbi" was the family name for my mother. Guy was handed around the circle again.

"Sure does."

"Yes. I see Bibbi right here."

"Well ... but he's mighty fair, isn't he?"

"Sure is."

They all spoke without emotion, except for my Aunt Leah. Her baby voice rose and fell like music played on a slender reed.

"Reetie, you're a woman now. A mother and all that. You'll have two to think of from now on. You'll have to get a job—"

"I've been working as a cook." She shouldn't think I had come to be taken care of.

"—and learn to save your money."

Tommy's wife, Sarah, wrapped my son carefully in his blanket and handed him to me. Aunt Leah stood, a signal that the inspection was over. "What time is your train? Charlie can drive you to the station."

My brain reeled. Had I given the impression that I was going on? Did they say something I missed? "In a few hours. I should be getting back."

We were all shaking hands. Their relief was palpable. I was, after all, a Baxter and playing the game. Being independent. Expecting nothing and if asked, not giving a cripple crab crutch.

Tom asked, "Need some money, Reet?"

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