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Gather Together In My Name

26066-9 ★ IN U.S. $5.50 (IN CANADA $6.99) ★ A BANTAM BOOK

GATHER TOGETHER IN MY NAME

Maya Angelou

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A Bantam Book / published by arrangement with Random House, Inc.

PUBLISHING HISTORY

Random House edition published April 1974
Bantam edition / May 1975
Bantam reissue November 1993

ISBN 0-553-26066-9

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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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 accordioned 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.

1

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 think much about it.

REARRANGE THESE LETTERS: A C T - A R T - A S T

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 let me to take the test for granted. And maybe I deserved this high-handed 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 her 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 room, the dress hem scratching my calves, waiting for the tables to 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.

2

"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 in 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 means 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 short 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 dark 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.

3

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 I was, white women was always following me. The white boys never could stand a pretty 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."

4

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 youth's 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.

5

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 baby-sitter 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. I, 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 teen-ager, 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 word floated into my air on admiration and wonder. I shriveled 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 Amighty'?"

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 I 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.

6

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 pots. 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 to go out with him or rush to sit and talk to him. I never