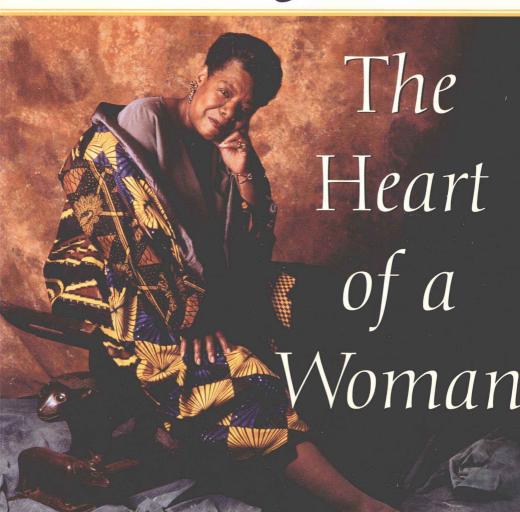
Maya Club Angelou



A flowering, a growing son—a powerful personal narrative

THE HEART OF A WOMAN

Maya Angelou



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BANTAM BOOKS BY MAYA ANGELOU ASK YOUR BOOKSELLER FOR THOSE THAT YOU HAVE MISSED

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
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Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas
The Heart of a Woman
Maya Angelou: Poems
Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now
I Shall Not Be Moved

THE HEART OF A WOMAN

Special thanks to a few of the many sister/friends whose love encourages me to spell my name:

WOMAN

Doris Bullard
Rosa Guy
M. J. Hewitt
Ruth Love
Paule Marshall
Louise Merriwether
Dolly McPherson
Emalyn Rogers
Efuah Sutherland
Decca Treuhaft
Frances Williams
A. B. Williamson

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

THE HEART OF A WOMAN

"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 house-boat 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 icthyologist, 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-towall 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. hurt my feelings. You see me now, though, you ain't seeing nothing. I used to be a bitch on wheels. Lots of folks thought I was pretty. Anyway, that's what they said. 'Course, you know how folks talk. They'll tell you anything to get what they want. 'Course, there are them that'll just strong-arm you and take it. I know a lot of them, too." Suddenly she withdrew into her thoughts and I sat quiet, not wanting to break into her reverie.

She raised her head and turned half away from me, toward the window. When she spoke it was in a conspiratorial whisper. "Men. Men can really do it to you. Women would too, if they had the nerve. They are just as greedy; they're just scared to let on."

I had heard stories of Billie being beaten by men, cheated by drug pushers and hounded by narcotics agents, still I thought she was the most paranoid person I had ever met.

"Don't you have any friends? People you can trust?"

She jerked her body toward me. "Of course I have friends. Good friends. A person who don't have friends might as well be dead." She had relaxed, but my question put her abruptly on the defense again. I was wondering how to put her at ease. I heard Guy's footsteps on the stairs.

"My son is coming home."

"Oh. Shit. How old you say he is?"

"He's twelve and a very nice person."

Guy bounded into the room, radiating energy.

"Hey, Momhowareya? Whatwereyoudoing? What'sfordinner? CanIgoovertoTony's? CanIgoovertoTony'saftermy-homework?"

"Guy, I have a guest. This is Miss Billie Holiday." He turned and saw Billie, but was accelerating too fast to read the distaste on her face.

"Billie Holiday? Oh. Yes. I know about you. Good after-

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.

"Because you are a great artist and I respect you."

"Bullshit. You just wanted to see what I looked like, up close." She interrupted my denial. "That's all right. That don't