

## “Finishing School”

BY MAYA ANGELOU

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### *About the Author*



*Maya Angelou (1928–2014) was an American poet, memoirist, and civil rights activist whose writing explores identity, resilience, justice, and the power of voice. Born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, Angelou spent much of her childhood in Arkansas, where experiences of racism, trauma, and silence later shaped the themes of her work. She became one of the most influential literary figures of the twentieth century, known for writing that blends personal narrative with broader reflections on history, culture, and human dignity. Angelou first gained international recognition with her 1969 memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which recounts her childhood and her journey toward reclaiming language after a period of self-imposed silence. The book helped redefine the modern memoir and remains widely taught for its exploration of race, gender, and personal agency. She went on to write several additional autobiographies, poetry collections, essays, and plays. Throughout her career, Angelou was deeply involved in the civil rights movement and worked with leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Her writing often reflects the moral urgency of that historical moment while emphasizing empathy, courage, and the transformative potential of language. Angelou’s poetry reached a broad audience in 1993 when she recited “On the Pulse of Morning” at the inauguration of Bill Clinton, becoming the first poet to deliver an inaugural poem at a U.S. presidential inauguration since 1961. Her work has received numerous honors, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Today, Maya Angelou’s writing remains widely read for its clarity, emotional honesty, and belief that words can confront injustice, affirm human worth, and inspire social change.*

Recently a white woman from Texas, who would quickly describe herself as a liberal, asked me about my hometown. When I told her that in Stamps my grandmother had owned the only Negro general merchandise store since the turn of the century, she exclaimed, “Why you were a debutante.” Ridiculous and even ludicrous. But Negro girls in small Southern towns, whether poverty-stricken or just munching along on a few of life’s necessities, were given as extensive and irrelevant preparations for adulthood as rich white girls shown in magazines. Admittedly, the training was not the same. While white girls learned to waltz and sit gracefully with a tea cup balanced on their knees, we were lagging behind, learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge them....

10 We were required to embroider and I had trunkfuls of colorful dishtowels, pillowcases, runner, and handkerchiefs to my credit. I mastered the art of crocheting and tatting, and there was a lifetime’s supply of dainty doilies that would never be used in sacheted dresser drawers. It went without saying that all girls could iron and wash, but the finer touches around the home, like

setting a table with real silver, baking roasts and cooking vegetables without meat, had to be learned elsewhere. Usually at the source of those habits. During my tenth year, a white woman's kitchen became my finishing school.

20 Mrs. Viola Cullinan was a plump woman who lived in a three-bedroom house somewhere behind the post office. She was singularly unattractive until she smiled, and then the lines around her eyes and mouth which made her look perpetually dirty disappeared, and her face looked like the mask of an impish elf. She usually rested her smile until late afternoon when her woman friends dropped in and Miss Glory, the cook, served then cold drinks on the closed-in porch.

The exactness of her house was inhuman. This glass went here and only here. That cup had its place and it was an act impudent rebellion to place it anywhere else. At twelve o'clock the table was set. At 12:15 Mrs. Cullinan sat down to dinner (whether her husband had arrived or not). At 12:16 Miss Glory brought out the food.

It took me a week to learn the difference between a salad plate, a bread plate, and a dessert plate.

30 Mrs. Cullinan kept up the tradition of her wealthy parents. She was from Virginia. Miss glory, who was a descendant of slaves who had worked for the Cullinans, told me her history. She had married beneath her (according to Miss Glory). Her husband's family hadn't had their money very long and what they had "didn't 'mount to much."

As ugly as she was, I thought privately, she was lucky to get a husband above or beneath her station. But Miss Glory wouldn't let me say a thing against her mistress. She was very patient with me, however, over the housework. She explained the dishware, silverware and servants' bells. The large round bowl in which soup was served wasn't called a soup bowl, it was called a tureen. There were goblets, sherbet glasses, ice cream glasses, wine glasses, green glass coffee cups with matching saucers, and water glasses. I had a glass to drink from, and it sat with Miss Glory's on a separate shelf from the others. Soup spoons, gravy boats, butter knives, salad forks  
40 and carving platter were additions to my vocabulary and in fact almost represented a new language. I was fascinated with the novelty, with the fluttering Mrs. Cullinan and her Alice-in-Wonderland house.

Her husband remains, in my memory, undefined. I lumped him with tall the other white men that I had ever seen and tried not to see.

On our way home one evening, Miss Glory told me that Mrs. Cullinan couldn't have children. She said that she was too delicate-boned. It was hard to imagine bones at all under those layers of fat. Miss Glory went on to say that the doctor had taken out all her lady organs. I reasoned that a pig's organs included the lungs, heart and liver, so if Mrs. Cullinan was walking around without those essentials, it explained why she drank alcohol out of unmarked bottles. She was  
50 keeping herself embalmed.

When I spoke to Bailey\* about it, he agreed that I was right, but he also informed me that Mr. Cullinan had two daughters by a colored lady and that I knew them very well. He added that they girls were the spitting image of their father. I was unable to remember what he looked like, although I had just left him a few hours before, but I thought of the Coleman girls. They were very light-skinned and certainly didn't look very much like their mother (no one ever mentioned Mr. Coleman).

60 My pity for Mrs. Cullinan preceded me the next morning like the Cheshire cat's smile. Those girls, who could have been her daughters, were beautiful. They didn't have to straighten their hair. Even when they were caught in the rain, their braids still hung down straight like tamed snakes. Their mouths were pouty little cupid's bows. Mrs. Cullinan didn't know what she missed. Or maybe she did. Poor Mrs. Cullinan.

For weeks after, I arrived early, left late and tried very hard to make up for her barrenness. If she had her own children, she wouldn't have had to ask me to run a thousand errands from her back door to the back doors of her friends. Poor old Mrs. Cullinan.

Then one evening Miss Glory told me to serve the ladies on the porch. After I set the tray down and turned toward the kitchen, one of the women asked, "What's your name, girl?" It was the specked-faced one. Mrs. Cullinan said, "She doesn't talk much. Her name's Margaret."

"Is she dumb?"

70 "No. As I understand it, she can talk when she wants to but she's usually quiet as a little mouse. Aren't you, Margaret?"

I smile at her. Poor thing. No organs and couldn't even pronounce my name correctly.

"She's a sweet little thing, though."

"Well, that may be. But the name's too long. I'd never bother myself with it. I'd call her Mary if I was you."

I fumed into the kitchen. That horrible woman would never have the chance to call me Mary because if I were starving I'd never work for her...

That evening I decided to write a poem on being white, fat, old, and without children. It was going to be a tragic ballad. I would have to watch her carefully to capture the essence of her loneliness and pain.

80 The very next day, she called me by the wrong name. Miss Glory and I were washing up the lunch dishes when Mrs. Cullinan came to the doorway. "Mary?"

Miss Glory asked, "Who?"

Mrs. Cullinan, sagging a little, knew, and I knew. "I want Mary to go down to Mrs. Randall's house and take her some soup. She's not been feeling well for a few days."

Miss Glory's face was a wonder to see. "You mean Margaret, ma'am. Her name's Margaret."

"That's too long. She's Mary from now on. Heat that soup from last night and put it in the china tureen and, Mary, I want you to carry it carefully."

90 Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being "called out of his name." It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots, and spooks.

Miss Glory had a fleeting instance of being sorry for me. Then as she handed me the hot tureen she said, "Don't mind, don't pay no mind. Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words... You know, I been working for her fore twenty years."

She held the back door open for me. "Twenty years. I wasn't much older that you. My name used to be Hallelujah. That's what Ma named me, but my mistress gave me 'Glory' and it stuck. I likes it better too."

I was in the little path that ran between the houses when Miss Glory called out, "It's shorter too."

100 For a few seconds it was toss-up over whether I would laugh (imagine being named Hallelujah) or cry (imagine letting some white woman rename you for her convenience). My anger saved me from either outburst. I had to quit the job, but the problem was going to be how to do it. Momma wouldn't allow me to quit for jut any reason.

"She's a peach. That woman is a real peach." Mrs. Randall's maid was taking as she took the soup from me, and I wondered what her name used to be and what she answered to now.

For a week I looked into Mrs. Cullinan's face as she called me Mary. She ignored my coming late and leaving early. Miss Glory was a little annoyed because I had begun to leave egg yolk on the dishes and wasn't putting much heart into polishing the silver. I hoped that she would complain to our boss, but she didn't.

110 Then Bailey solved my dilemma. He had me describe the contents of the cupboard and the particular plates she like best. Her favorite piece was a casserole shaped like a fish and the green glass coffee cups. I kept his instructions in mind, so on the next day when Miss Glory was hanging out clothes and I had again been told to serve the old biddies on the porch, I dropped the empty serving tray. When I heard Mrs. Cullinan scream "Mary!" I picked up the casserole and two of the green glass cups in readiness. As she rounded the kitchen door I let them fall on the tiled floor.

I could never absolutely describe to Bailey what happened next, because each time I got to the part where she fell on the floor and screwed up her ugly face to cry, we burst out laughing. She

actually wobbled around on the floor and picked up shards of the cups and cried, “Oh, Momma. Oh, dear Gawd. It’s Momma’s fine china from Virginia. Oh Momma, I’m sorry.”

120 Miss Glory came running in from the yard and the women from the porch crowded around. Miss Glory was almost as broken up as her mistress. “You mean to say she broke our Virginia dishes? What we gone do?”

Mrs. Cullinan cried louder. “That clumsy nigger. Clumsy little black nigger.”

Old speckled-face leaned down and asked, “Who did it, Viola? Was it Mary? Who did it?”

Everything happened so fast I don’t remember whether her action preceded her words, but I know that Mrs. Cullinan said, “Her name’s Margaret, goddamn it, her name’s Margaret.” And she threw a wedge of broken plate at me. It could have been the hysteria which put her aim off, but the flying crockery caught Miss Glory right over her ear and she started screaming.

I left the front door wide open so all the neighbors could hear.

130 Mrs. Cullinan was right about one thing. My name wasn’t Mary.