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MOMMA, THE DENTIST, AND ME

Maya Angelou

Born Marguerite Johnson in St. Louis in 1928, Maya Angelou was raised with her brother, Bailey, in Stamps, Arkansas, by her grandmother, who, with Uncle Willie, operated a country store. After leaving Stamps, she lived in Los Angeles, where she had a dancing career, and in New York, where she became an active worker in the civil rights movement. She has produced a series on Africa for PBS-TV and written three books of poetry as well as four volumes of her autobiography. This selection is from the first of those autobiographical volumes, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969).

The angel of the candy counter had found me out at last, and was exacting 1
excruciating penance for all the stolen Milky Ways, Mounds, Mr. Goodbars
and Hersheys with Almonds. I had two cavities that were rotten to the gums.
The pain was beyond the bailiwick of crushed aspirins or oil of cloves. Only
one thing could help me, so I prayed earnestly that I'd be allowed to sit under
the house and have the building collapse on my left jaw. Since there was no
Negro dentist in Stamps, nor doctor either, for that matter, Momma had dealt
with previous toothaches by pulling them out (a string tied to the tooth with
the other end looped over her fist), pain killers and prayer. In this particular
instance the medicine had proved ineffective; there wasn't enough enamel
left to hook a string on, and the prayers were being ignored because the Bal-
ancing Angel was blocking their passage.

I lived a few days and nights in blinding pain, not so much toying with 2
as seriously considering the idea of jumping in the well, and Momma de-
cided I had to be taken to a dentist. The nearest Negro dentist was in
Texarkana, twenty-five miles away, and I was certain that I'd be dead long
before we reached half the distance. Momma said we'd go to Dr. Lincoln,
right in Stamps, and he'd take care of me. She said he owed her a favor.

I knew there were a number of whitefolks in town that owed her favors. 3
Bailey and I had seen the books which showed how she had lent money to
Blacks and whites alike during the Depression, and most still owed her. But
I couldn't aptly remember seeing Dr. Lincoln's name, nor had I ever heard
of a Negro's going to him as a patient. However, Momma said we were going,
and put water on the stove for our baths. I had never been to a doctor, so
she told me that after the bath (which would make my mouth feel better) I
had to put on freshly starched and ironed underclothes from inside out. The
ache failed to respond to the bath, and I knew then that the pain was more
serious than that which anyone had ever suffered.

4 Before we left the Store, she ordered me to brush my teeth and then wash my mouth with Listerine. The idea of even opening my clamped jaws increased the pain, but upon her explanation that when you go to a doctor you have to clean yourself all over, but most especially the part that's to be examined, I screwed up my courage and unlocked my teeth. The cool air in my mouth and the jarring of my molars dislodged what little remained of my reason. I had frozen to the pain, my family nearly had to tie me down to take the toothbrush away. It was no small effort to get me started on the road to the dentist. Momma spoke to all the passers-by, but didn't stop to chat. She explained over her shoulder that we were going to the doctor and she'd "pass the time of day" on our way home.

5 Until we reached the pond the pain was my world, an aura that haloed me for the three feet around. Crossing the bridge into whitefolks' country, pieces of sanity pushed themselves forward. I had to stop moaning and start walking straight. The white towel, which was drawn under my chin and tied over my head, had to be arranged. If one was dying, it had to be done in style if the dying took place in whitefolks' part of town.

6 On the other side of the bridge the ache seemed to lessen as if a white-breeze blew off the whitefolks and cushioned everything in their neighborhood—including my jaw. The gravel road was smoother, the stones smaller and the tree branches hung down around the path and nearly covered us. If the pain didn't diminish then, the familiar yet strange sights hypnotized me into believing that it had.

7 But my head continued to throb with the measured insistence of a bass-drum, and how could a toothache pass the calaboose, hear the songs of the prisoners, their blues and laughter, and not be changed? How could one or two or even a mouthful of angry tooth roots meet a wagonload of powwhite-trash children, endure their idiotic snobbery and not feel less important?

8 Behind the building which housed the dentist's office ran a small path used by servants and those tradespeople who catered to the butcher and Stamps' one restaurant. Momma and I followed that lane to the backstairs of Dentist Lincoln's office. The sun was bright and gave the day a hard reality as we climbed up the steps to the second floor.

9 Momma knocked on the back door and a young white girl opened it to show surprise at seeing us there. Momma said she wanted to see Dentist Lincoln and to tell him Annie was there. The girl closed the door firmly. Now the humiliation of hearing Momma describe herself as if she had no last name to the young white girl was equal to the physical pain. It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness.

10 It was always possible that the teeth would quiet down and maybe drop out of their own accord. Momma said we would wait. We leaned in the harsh sunlight on the shaky railings of the dentist's back porch for over an hour.

11 He opened the door and looked at Momma. "Well, Annie, what can I do for you?"

He didn't see the towel around my jaw or notice my swollen face. 12
 Momma said, "Dentist Lincoln. It's my grandbaby here. She got two rot- 13
 ten teeth that's giving her a fit."

She waited for him to acknowledge the truth of her statement. He made 14
 no comment, orally or facially.

"She had this toothache purt' near four days now, and today I said, 15
 'Young lady, you going to the Dentist.'"

"Annie?" 16

"Yes, sir, Dentist Lincoln." 17

He was choosing words the way people hunt for shells. "Annie, you 18
 know I don't treat nigra, colored people."

"I know, Dentist Lincoln. But this here is just my little grandbaby, and 19
 she ain't gone be no trouble to you. . . ."

"Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. 20
 Now, my policy is I don't treat colored people."

The sun had baked the oil out of Mamma's skin and melted the Vaseline 21
 in her hair. She shone greasily as she leaned out of the dentist's shadow.

"Seem like to me, Dentist Lincoln, you might look after her, she ain't 22
 nothing but a little mite. And seems like maybe you owe me a favor or two."

He reddened slightly. "Favor or no favor. The money has all been repaid to 23
 you and that's the end of it. Sorry, Annie." He had his hand on the doorknob.
 "Sorry." His voice was a bit kinder on the second "Sorry," as if he really was.

Momma said, "I wouldn't press on you like this for myself but I can't take 24
 No. Not for my grandbaby. When you come to borrow my money you didn't
 have to beg. You asked me, and I lent it. Now, it wasn't my policy. I ain't no
 moneylender, but you stood to lose this building and I tried to help you out."

It's been paid, and raising your voice won't make me change my mind. 25
 My policy . . ." He let go of the door and stepped nearer Momma. The three
 of us were crowded on the small landing. "Annie, my policy is I'd rather
 stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's."

He had never once looked at me. He turned his back and went through 26
 the door into the cool beyond. Momma backed up inside herself for a few
 minutes. I forgot everything except her face which was almost a new one to
 me. She leaned over and took the doorknob, and in her everyday soft voice
 she said, "Sister, go on downstairs. Wait for me. I'll be there directly."

Under the most common of circumstances I knew it did no good to 27
 argue with Momma. So I walked down the steep stairs, afraid to look back
 and afraid not to do so. I turned as the door slammed, and she was gone.

*Momma walked in that room as if she owned it. She shoved that silly nurse 28
 aside with one hand and strode into the dentist's office. He was sitting in his chair,
 sharpening his mean instruments and putting extra sting into his medicines. Her
 eyes were blazing like live coals and her arms had doubled themselves in length.
 He looked up at her just before she caught him by the collar of his white jacket.*

"Stand up when you see a lady, you contemptuous scoundrel." Her tongue had 29
 thinned and the words rolled off well enunciated. Enunciated and sharp like little
 claps of thunder.

30 *The dentist had no choice but to stand at R.O.T.C. attention. His head dropped after a minute and his voice was humble. "Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Henderson."*

31 *"You knave, do you think you acted like a gentleman, speaking to me like that in front of my granddaughter?" She didn't shake him, although she had the power. She simply held him upright.*

32 *"No, ma'am, Mrs. Henderson."*

33 *"No ma'am, Mrs. Henderson, what?" Then she did give him the tiniest of shakes, but because of her strength the action set his head and arms to shaking loose on the ends of his body. He stuttered much worse than Uncle Willie. "No, ma'am, Mrs. Henderson, I'm sorry."*

34 *With just an edge of her disgust showing, Momma slung him back in his dentist's chair. "Sorry is as sorry does, and you're about the sorriest dentist I ever laid my eyes on." (She could afford to slip into the vernacular because she had such eloquent command of English.)*

35 *"I didn't ask you to apologize in front of Marguerite, because I don't want her to know my power, but I order you, now and herewith. Leave Stamps by sundown."*

36 *"Mrs. Henderson, I can't get my equipment . . ." He was shaking terribly now.*

37 *"Now, that brings me to my second order. You will never again practice dentistry. Never! When you get settled in your next place, you will be a vegetarian caring for dogs with the mange, cats with the cholera and cows with the epizootic. Is that clear?"*

38 *The saliva ran down his chin and his eyes filled with tears. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you for not killing me. Thank you, Mrs. Henderson."*

39 *Momma pulled herself back from being ten feet tall with eight-foot arms and said, "You're welcome for nothing, you varlet, I wouldn't waste a killing on the likes of you."*

40 *On her way out she waved her handkerchief at the nurse and turned her into a crocus sack of chicken feed.*

41 *Momma looked tired when she came down the stairs, but who wouldn't be tired if they had gone through what she had. She came close to me and adjusted the towel under my jaw (I had forgotten the toothache; I only knew that she made her hands gentle in order not to awaken the pain). She took my hand. Her voice never changed. "Come on, Sister."*

42 *I reckoned we were going home where she would concoct a brew to eliminate the pain and maybe give me new teeth too. New teeth that would grow overnight out of my gums. She led me toward the drugstore, which was in the opposite direction from the Store. "I'm taking you to Dentist Baker in Texarkana."*

43 *I was glad after all that I had bathed and put on Mum and Cashmere Bouquet talcum powder. It was a wonderful surprise. My toothache had quieted to solemn pain, Momma had obliterated the evil white man, and we were going on a trip to Texarkana, just the two of us.*

44 *On the Greyhound she took an inside seat in the back, and I sat beside her. I was so proud of being her granddaughter and sure that some of her magic must have come down to me. She asked if I was scared. I only shook my head and leaned over on her cool brown upper arm. There was no chance that a dentist, especially a Negro dentist, would dare hurt me then.*

Not with Momma there. The trip was uneventful, except that she put her arm around me, which was very unusual for Momma to do.

The dentist showed me the medicine and the needle before he dead-⁴⁵ ened my gums, but if he hadn't I wouldn't have worried. Momma stood right behind him. Her arms were folded and she checked on everything he did. The teeth were extracted and she bought me an ice cream cone from the side window of a drug counter. The trip back to Stamps was quiet, except that I had to spit into a very small empty snuff can which she had gotten for me and it was difficult with the bus humping and jerking on our country roads.

At home, I was given a warm salt solution, and when I washed out my⁴⁶ mouth I showed Bailey the empty holes, where the clotted blood sat like filling in a pie crust. He said I was quite brave, and that was my cue to reveal our confrontation with the peckerwood dentist and Momma's incredible powers.

I had to admit that I didn't hear the conversation, but what else could⁴⁷ she have said than what I said she said? What else done? He agreed with my analysis in a lukewarm way, and I happily (after all, I'd been sick) flounced into the Store. Momma was preparing our evening meal and Uncle Willie leaned on the door sill. She gave her version.

"Dentist Lincoln got right uppity. Said he'd rather put his hand in a dog's⁴⁸ mouth. And when I reminded him of the favor, he brushed it off like a piece of lint. Well, I sent Sister downstairs and went inside. I hadn't never been in his office before, but I found the door to where he takes out teeth, and him and the nurse was in there thick as thieves. I just stood there till he caught sight of me." Crash bang the pots on the stove. "He jumped just like he was sitting on a pin. He said, 'Annie, I done tole you, I ain't gonna mess around in no niggah's mouth.' I said, 'Somebody's got to do it then,' and he said, 'Take her to Texarkana to the colored dentist' and then's when I said, 'If you paid me my money I could afford to take her.' He said, 'It's all been paid.' I tole him everything but the interest been paid. He said 'Twasn't no interest.' I said, 'Tis now, I'll take ten dollars as payment in full.' You know, Willie, it wasn't no right thing to do, 'cause I lent that money without thinking about it.

"He tole that little snippity nurse of his'n to give me ten dollars and⁴⁹ make me sign a 'paid in full' receipt. She gave it to me and I signed the papers. Even though by rights he was paid up before, I figger, he gonna be that kind of nasty, he gonna have to pay for it."

Momma and her son laughed and laughed over the white man's evil-⁵⁰ ness and her retributive sin.

I preferred, much preferred, my version.⁵¹

Rhetorical Considerations

1. How would you describe Angelou's purpose in "Momma, the Dentist, and Me"? Is it mainly to share an experience, to move her reader to indignation, or both? Point to evidence in the essay. (*Hodges' 32a/Writer's 1b and 1e*)

2. Comment on the difference in tone between the account of Momma's confrontation with the dentist given in italics and that given at the end of the essay. (*Hodges' 32a/Writer's 1e*)
3. Although Angelou narrates the events involved in a trip to two dentists, the account deals with more than just the pain of a toothache. Explain. (*Hodges' 32c/Writer's 2b*)
4. What is Angelou's main point? How do you know? (*Hodges' 32c/Writer's 2b*)
5. In what kind of order does Angelou relate the event? Why is this organization appropriate? (*Hodges' 32d/Writer's 2c*)
6. Identify and account for any changes in the point of view Angelou uses in this essay. (*Hodges' 32a/Writer's 1e*)

Language and Style

1. Angelou uses two kinds of vocabulary in this essay. Dictionaries attach labels to words that are not in Edited American English. Use your dictionary to check for labels on the following words: *bailiwick* (paragraph 1); *calaboose* and *powhitetrash* (paragraph 7); *nigger* (paragraph 25); *epizootic* (paragraph 37); *varlet* (paragraph 39); *crocus* (paragraph 40); *peckerwood* (paragraph 46); *snippety* (paragraph 49); *retributive* (paragraph 50). If one of these words is not listed in your dictionary, what do you think that indicates? (*Hodges' 19e/Writer's 28e*)
2. Paragraphs 13 through 24 contain a number of expressions that would be grammatically incorrect in most written English. Why are they acceptable here? Are there any other instances in which these expressions might be acceptable in writing? Explain. (*Hodges' 19c/Writer's 28c*)
3. This essay contains several similes. Find three and explain why each is appropriate. (*Hodges' 20b/Writer's 29b*)
4. The last sentence of paragraph 29 is elliptical; that is, important grammatical elements are implied rather than stated. Supply the omitted parts and comment on the difference in effect. (*Hodges' 1e/Writer's 16d*)
5. The first sentence of this essay contains the verb *had found*, the fifth sentence contains the verb *had dealt*, and the first sentence of paragraph 3 contains the verb *had lent*. To what time sequence do these verbs refer? What would be the effect of rewriting each sentence, instead using *found*, *dealt*, and *lent* respectively? (*Hodges' 7b/Writer's 22b*)

Writing Suggestions

1. Write an essay about an event where someone was unthinkingly and unnecessarily cruel.
2. Write an essay in which you give two versions of a single event, each from a different point of view. You might do as Angelou did and write about the event as you wanted it to be and also as it actually was, or you might write about how you could look at a single event in two different ways depending upon external influences.