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"There is Always an Engine, Maya"

1.1 The Birth of Marguerite Annie Johnson

Any person's birthday is an inviolable part of that person. On April 4, 1928, when Vivian Baxter Johnson gave birth to her second child and first daughter, she was still a happy woman. Married to her charismatic husband Bailey Johnson, an ex-Navy sweet talker, a man proud of having escaped the humbling poverty of his Arkansas childhood, Vivian had tried to accept the roles of wife and mother. After their first baby, Bailey, Junior, had been born in the winter of 1926, she was discovering that playing such roles was harder than she had imagined – she was tired, cranky, deprived of the fun she had envisioned after marriage. She had traded being Vivian *Baxter*, older daughter of the imposing woman who ran her family and her St. Louis neighborhood filled with numbers runners and whiskey sellers – as its precinct captain – and the older sister to four younger brothers and a sister, to become Vivian *Johnson*, a woman who needed household help and baby care. The independent existence she had known as Vivian Baxter was fading fast.

It looked to their friends, however, as if Vivian and Bailey had the world in their grasp. A cook and self-styled dietician in the Navy, Bailey had learned a number of skills that made him employable. Vivian herself had trained for pediatric nursing though she had soon discovered that becoming a dealer ("cutting poker games") in her neighborhood's gambling world was more exciting. Both of them were outgoing people; both of them were socially adept. If the postwar world was not their oyster, it at least seemed to welcome their ambition and their energy. The relatively prosperous world of the late 1920s, however, was gradually changing.

During the troubled early 1930s, work for any African American was growing scarce. As Vivian and Bailey moved further and further away from their families and friends – finally ending in Long Beach, California – they experienced the loneliness of what decades later would be called the "nuclear family." Alone

Maya Angelou, *A Life*, First Edition. Linda Wagner-Martin.

in their small family unit, they needed the protective relatives that were hundreds of miles away, and their marriage suffered. They had lived in many places within the South, always closer to the Baxters in St. Louis than to the Henderson/Johnsons of Arkansas. By the time they had reached California in search of better work, however, their marriage was worn threadbare. Sometime in 1931, heading for divorce, Bailey realized that his children were being damaged by their parents' continuous fighting, and he made arrangements for Bailey, Jr. and his little sister, Marguerite, to travel by train to live with his mother, Annie Henderson, the store owner and pillar of the African American church in Stamps, Arkansas. As the crow flew, the distance was 1,600 miles; going by train would take several days and nights. It was becoming all too common: removed from disintegrating households, children were being put on trains to reach more stable family situations.

1.2 The Train to Arkansas

They looked to be twins. The little brown-skinned girl was exactly as tall as her brother, and yet he was clearly in charge. On both their jackets were pinned the signs, "To Whom It May Concern," with Annie Henderson's name and address. The porter had been tipped to watch out for them as they traveled from California to near the tiny Arkansas town. (Texarkana was the closest "city.") The porter left the train in Arizona, however, helping Bailey put the train tickets into his inner pocket before he left the car. Even though there were kindly other passengers, some offering food, the Johnson children knew they were now alone. The constant motion, especially during the dark hours, made Marguerite feel sicker and sicker.

There was little comforting her. She had early on understood that she was too black, too tall, too gap-toothed to ever be a "pretty" girl. When she had watched her father walk away from the car in which they rode – she could see him from the dirty window and she could tell from the set of his shoulders that he would not give in: they were going away. She did not care where, or why, or who would be taking care of them – all she knew was that they were no longer going to live with their mother and their father. For Bailey, nearly two years older, the pain was worse. He was five; he knew that once a person set foot on a train, there was no walking back to the starting point. He had been to the railroad yard often; some of his dad's friends worked there. He understood steam engines and the way the trains worked. He knew how the coal dust dirtied the air, but it was the sheer power of the fuel propelling the train that most excited him. He had also gone to pick up the Baxter relatives when they came for visits: everybody who could afford a ticket traveled by train. Railroads were like the military, they created choices for families who didn't have the money to buy

cars, or to think about getting more schooling. American culture, especially among the lower and middle classes, ran on trains and military service.

What saved Bailey from the tears that swamped his little sister was the order his military father had given him: *You are in charge of your sister. Take care of her. Pay attention. Do not eat all your lunch at once.* There were more orders coming from the sometimes stern lips of the man who often frightened them, but Bailey had long ago gotten the idea: men were to be in charge. They took care of girls, just as his father sometimes took care of his mother. Gender behavior during the 1920s was divided in two parts: men did this, women did that. Men went to train stations; they rode buses; they talked about what cars they would buy. Such behavior aligned men with technology, with the amazing force of physical power, physical action, visible bravery. Women, in another sphere of behavior, were clean. They took care of their clothes and their hair ornaments; they savored their personal beauty. Just as so many African American men joined the military – partly for the pay and the education such service provided but mostly for the macho appearance the tailored dress uniforms created, so men's behavior tended to be judged from the outside. Yet even as Bailey could assume the charge of taking care of his little sister, Marguerite herself could not stay tidy, much less clean, on that long train trip. The pink edge on her new anklets was already smudged with coal dirt. She continued crying.

Especially after the porter left them, her sobs grew louder. It was as if she were trying to drown out the muffled clacking sounds that rose through the tawdry covering under their feet. Bailey handed her a sandwich and she chewed into the bread. Dry as the food was, she knew that when nightfall came again, she and Bailey would be alone, and she could not stop the rising fear. She belatedly asked her brother, "Who is moving it, Bailey?" He knew these kinds of answers; that was what five-year-olds were capable of understanding. "There is always an engine, Ritzi," came the answer. "I met one of the engineers who drive it."

Chewing solemnly, Marguerite began to calm down, even as the car darkened. Bailey's knowledge impressed her. She had relied on him for all the care her parents sometimes forgot to give their children. As she scrutinized her "To Whom It May Concern" tag, still chewing, she knew that they would reach their destination the next morning, and that she was – until then – in her brother's care. She was ready to sleep.

Sending their children back to Bailey's mother and brother – Annie Henderson and Willie Johnson – was a last resort for Vivian and Bailey, Sr. Annie owned a store, after all, so she would be able to at least feed Ritzi and Bailey, Jr. She would also be able to keep track of them, out there in the country of modestly cared for houses, sheds, and farms. The black side of Stamps hardly ever saw strangers: blacks lived with blacks, and there were no predatory passers-through

as there were in St. Louis or Long Beach. The enclave in which Bailey, Sr. had grown up, there in the corner of Lafayette County, the place he had been so eager to leave that he had joined the Navy as soon as he could, was a relatively safe space. In the community of cotton-pickers, handymen, housemaids, farmers, and the unemployed, people depended on each other. Everybody had to get along.

Bailey also knew that Willie, his handicapped younger brother, would watch out for the small ones. Willie could barely walk on his own, even with his cane, nor could he drive. His pious demeanor set Bailey's teeth on edge. Willie was always going to church, praising the God who had crippled him in childhood, singing those hymns joyously. Willie was the source of their belief that Marguerite and Bailey would be *safe* in Arkansas, away from any city temptations, or perhaps more likely from city people always on the lookout for money. Even the KKK knew that the African American side of Stamps was supposed to be a safe place for blacks.

Of course, Annie herself was the kindly benefactor who kept half the town from trouble: standing over six feet tall, earning the trust of the African American townspeople through both her prominence in the AME church and her even more visible prominence as the only storekeeper for the black neighborhood. First married to a man of God, Annie gave birth to her two sons and cared for them in the one-room house – even taking on the difficult care of the crippled Willie after the accident that paralyzed him. But when William Johnson, her husband, left her and his boys to earn his preaching status in Enid, Oklahoma, she decided to find her own way of supporting her family. Secretly, doing most of the work at night, Annie Johnson made meat pies that she fried and sold the next day at noon. Carrying her coals, the food, and a bucket, she trekked the three miles to the cotton gin where working men would think her hot lunch and cool lemonade worth the nickel she charged. Walking the two miles back to the sawmill, selling the pies for three cents there rather than five, she continued her earnings for the day. Her walk back home was five miles. The next day she reversed the order, selling the sawmill pies for a nickel and taking the left-overs to the cotton gin, selling those pies for three cents. After months of this work, she put together a rough shacklike place, positioned between the two sites, and many of her buyers walked at noon to buy her good sensible food. It was from that site – and her savings of $1000 – that she later could buy the "store" which then became Annie's livelihood for the coming decades.

The whole sales scheme was a gamble. It was nothing a black woman should have taken on. Annie Johnson, by rights, should have gone humbly into the white part of Stamps and asked, again humbly, for cleaning jobs. Tall and strong as she was, cleaning work would have been easy to get.

For Annie, however, the usual route that women followed offered no challenges. In fact, she found such a direction less than interesting. In contrast, her

scheme of earning money that she would *not* quickly have to spend whetted her appetite. In her mind, earning money erased her subservience. As she later said, "I looked up the road I was going and back the way I come, and since I wasn't satisfied, I decided to step off the road and cut myself a new path."[1]

The nighttime hours when her daily work began quickly came to be her comfort. When Johnson had gone to Oklahoma, he left her the one-room house. For his journey, he took every bit of cash and property that existed. Annie had then promised herself she would never again be penniless. Accordingly, her cache of nickels and pennies grew slowly, but the accumulation satisfied her. She had worked out arrangements to trade her labor for the flour, lard, sugar, chickens, beef, and lemons – she did not often have to spend money to buy ingredients. Friends traded her their vegetables for the cold meat pies; others babysat her boys. Months passed. Annie's cash money gave her the right to buy lumber, nails, and fittings from the white businesses in Stamps; she paid the full price, she did not ask for favors. She came to be respected as the hard-working businesswoman she was. She built the shed for the noon lunch buyers to visit and the hungry men – at least many of them – made their way to her.

Everything about Annie Johnson was practical. Unlike some of her African American friends, known throughout the area for their delicious cooking, Annie was as practical a cook as she was a builder. By her own admission, she knew that she could "mix groceries well enough to scare hungry away and from starving a man."[2]

In a later marriage, she became Annie Henderson; she left that marriage and later found a third partner. But to the African American population of Stamps, Annie Henderson was the rock-solid storekeeper, the devout participant in the black church, the mother of the disabled Willie, and the person who could help anyone she thought a good friend. That identity sufficed for her, even without Bailey, her older son. But by the time of the arrival of her only grandchildren, Bailey, Jr. and Marguerite Annie Johnson, she was willing to open her small living quarters behind the newly-built store, and make her daily life a testimony of God's care for their young and eager eyes. Annie Henderson, with Willie Johnson at her side, would become mother and father to the little ones they had unexpectedly inherited.

Bailey, Sr., was comforted by the fact that his mother would take on rearing his children. But those children had no idea where they were, or why they were leaving their parents. Glib as Bailey appeared to be – his articulate speaking was one of the reasons he had succeeded in the military – he was never given to explaining anything for the minds of youngsters. Had he described Annie Henderson to Bailey, Jr. and Marguerite, they might have been more comfortable

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1 Quoted in Maya Angelou, "New Directions," *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, 1997, pp. 22–25.
2 Quoted by Angelou, "New Directions," *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, p. 22.

meeting her, and traveling from the train station by cart, and finally by their sturdy legs, until they reached the store, with its living spaces at the rear. But there was no verbal description. It was as if Bailey, Sr., thought it would not matter to "just children." Going to live with a community paragon, a woman considered important to her entire community, was less than reassuring to children, especially to children who had never met, or even seen, this grandmother. Annie Henderson was often accompanied by her older son, the sometimes helpless Uncle Willie. (These children had early learned to give Grandmother Baxter a wide berth – her officious, curt behavior never endeared her to either Bailey, Jr. or to Marguerite.)

In Marguerite's own words, Annie Johnson Henderson was "the big-hearted woman who was taller and bigger than most men yet who spoke with a voice a little above a whisper. Her hands were so large one would span my entire head but they were so gentle that when she rubbed my legs and arms and face with blue-seal Vaseline every morning, I felt as if an angel had just approved of me."[3] Never demonstrative, Annie – Momma to the children – led Bailey and Marguerite through the *oughts* and *shoulds* of her modest Christian life with a steadying hand, never an abusive one. They received very few hugs but as Angelou remembered, Annie's touch was always gently helpful. It was Marguerite who became Annie's shadow, following her everywhere possible. And the neighbors in the black part of Stamps called her "Annie's shadow."

The changes of circumstances were immense. In St. Louis, whether in the Baxter household or in Vivian's, neither Bailey nor Marguerite ever felt at home. Not that they knew what was missing but they did know that a tone of impatience surrounded them. What they did was not quite on target – they cried from bewilderment as much as from fear. In contrast with Grandmother Baxter, Annie Henderson was sometimes short but she never showed the impatience that could have resulted from caring for two small children: when she asked them to help in the store, it was to locate them within the place where both Uncle Willie and she herself needed to be. They knew they could play with the children passing by, and hover around the pickle barrel. They knew that what they did to "help" was seldom a real chore. But they also knew that the store was their home, as it was Annie's and Willie's, and so they enjoyed being there, hearing the customers order, listening to the grown-up talk – even if they pretended not to be doing so.

In Annie Henderson's world, everything had its place. In the outside world of the paths and the chinaberry tree and the cleanly swept front lawn as well as in the inside world of the bedrooms, the kitchen and the outbuildings like the chicken coop and the pig sty. Order was key. The first week after the long train trip, Annie made sure that the grandchildren understood the procedures.

3 Angelou's description, *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*, p. 14.

Marguerite had cried because she could not find any sidewalks. There were only the edges of the dirt road and the sometimes straw-covered paths. Nothing in Arkansas seemed familiar. But what quickly became familiar was the way to Annie's bedroom, to the right out the first back door in the store. Annie shared her bedroom with Marguerite. Uncle Willie, whose bedroom was across the path, shared his room with Bailey. Back of those rooms was, to one side, the chicken coop and to the other, the pig sty. Between those two locations was the outhouse, complete with a door that closed and a box filled with not only Sears Roebuck catalogues but also such magazines as *Ladies' Home Companion, Liberty*, and some Christian magazines. The children already knew that this was the toilet paper to be used.

When darkness fell over the yard, the animals quieted and people prepared for going to bed. Washing at the pump was a nightly ritual; saying prayers was a similar ritual. Sometimes Uncle Willie would read Scripture from the Bible. Occasionally Annie would allow the radio to be played. But the quiet of the farming community pervaded everyone's thinking. The store closed around suppertime so it too was dark and still. Suppertime, held in the kitchen that shielded Willie's bedroom from passers-by, was the crowning daytime event: no family in Stamps had better meals than Annie Henderson's. There were not many different foods in any one meal, but the cooking was good. And for dessert, there was the whole province of the store.

After Marguerite and Bailey had lived in Stamps for several weeks, they began to see how central Momma's store was to the community. Not only did people shop for cheese, lunchmeats, sausage, sardines, oil, syrup, greens, crackers, eggs, potatoes, onions, and leather soles for worn-out shoes, they also came by on Saturdays to see what was happening around the chinaberry tree in the back yard. Annie had early on built a table around the base of the tree, providing shade in summer and protection from rains and the occasional snow. Around the tree barbers set up their equipment of a Saturday, as did women hairdressers. Visiting as well as commerce brought people together. Men played juice-harps and cigar-box guitars. Everybody sang. And when the people of black Stamps saw both Bailey, Jr. and Marguerite, they began to bring along outgrown clothing from their own households. It had been thirty years since Annie had had to outfit children.

Off to the side of the chicken coop Annie and Willie grew their large garden – flowers as well as vegetables, rows and rows of different kinds of greens and radishes, potatoes, corn, and cabbages. And across the yard, near the well, stood the deep washing pots (one for soaking and boiling, one for rinsing), with a long clothesline connecting the two larger trees on the plot. It didn't take Bailey, Jr. or Marguerite long to understand how Momma's household worked. What was more important was that they understood that there was a place for them in every activity.

They also quickly learned that Annie never bought anything that she could make for herself. She carpentered. She planted. She harvested. She canned. She butchered and preserved. She bartered with neighbors. Famous for her caramel cake, Annie also made the brown sugar for that delicacy – baking that cake and icing it took nearly a whole day. She had always quilted but now that her grandchildren had come to live, she sewed clothes for them, buying whole bolts of fabric so that Bailey's shirts and Marguerite's dresses and blouses were from the same fabric (and sometimes Uncle Willie's work shirts and Annie's dresses as well). Except for a few fancy buttons on Marguerite's good dresses, every one of Annie's results were buttoned with plain white shirt buttons.

One of Momma's prize possessions was the Singer Sewing Machine. Another was the quilting frame that she housed in her bedroom. When half a dozen neighbors came for a quilting bee, they rolled out the quilt and attached it to the frame. Then each woman began her neatest, tiniest stitches. Marguerite hid behind whatever door seemed nearest and listened to the women's stories – about black men who had been lynched, or black men who had run away, or white men who had tried to molest black women – their white wives pretending not to notice their efforts, and instead only showing anger at the black women who were being hunted. Black women who, somehow, without agency, were the sexual rivals for those married to the white men in pursuit.[4]

Even pre-school African American children knew where the loaded shotguns were kept, though they also knew not to tell anyone about the weapons. Set against the omnipresence of the Colored Methodist Episcopalian church, the threat of harming or killing was an obvious sin, but the knowledge that the family had this power – righteous or not – was comforting. And it wasn't just the African American knowledge that pervaded in the Stamps, Arkansas, culture: the young white girls who came into the store, thinking that if Uncle Willie waited on them they could pull the sexual threat of claiming that he had touched them – and thereby get their candy for free – also knew how racial power worked. Black men who were unfortunately confronted by white girls or women had no power at all.

The comfort of the church was not only based on its spirituality. It also stemmed from its segregated character. African American ministers traveled from rural church to rural church; if there was no minister, Uncle Willie, as Superintendent of the Sunday School, might read some Scripture. In any case, the rituals were known; the families sat where they usually did; the hymns were chosen in advance, and were often led by Sister Henderson – with or without the piano. An oasis in the midst of what might have been a stormy week, the

4 As Maya Angelou would write decades later, "You couldn't be black in the South past five years of age and not know the threats implied and overt." (Interview, *Casebook, I Know Why*, 1999), p. 11.

Sunday services took up not only the morning hours but also the early afternoons. Sunday breakfasts were big so that people were held over till the main Sunday meal, the mid-afternoon dinner, usually built around roasted chicken, complete with peas and greens, and inch-high buttermilk biscuits. Served with apple butter in the autumn, the biscuits were memorable with sweet butter no matter the time of year. Metaphoric in several ways, the church service and its accompanying meals were the heart of the serenity that Annie Henderson, Uncle Willie Johnson, and now Bailey, Jr. and Marguerite experienced. The other six days of the week blurred into sameness. But Sunday was "another world," a place of "hilarity, ecstasy, despair, poignancy, sadness, and human warmth. We go to church not for duty's sake, but for the joy of it, the music, the excitement."[5]

In the silent world of Sister Henderson's store and household, Ritzie and Bailey were faced with an almost voiceless culture. For that reason alone, being an accepted part of the Colored Methodist Episcopalian congregation was exciting. They loved the hymns, and not only because Momma often led them. "Amazing Grace," "Abide with Me," "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," "Lead, Kindly Light," "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past," and a bevy of holiday anthems were the music the children could sing by rote. The tattered hymnals had only a few of these. Most parishioners knew the separate verses well, and if they didn't, they hummed joyfully. No one cared how close the language was to what was written; nobody cared if an interval was a bit off. The spirit of Sunday bound all sounds into one glorious echo. Church became a magical place, suffused with harmony.

Like the path across the road from the store, which led to the African American school, the way to the church was often visible – especially when the children were eager for Sunday to come. Church was the only break in the dailiness that was life in Stamps: Bailey would begin school the following year but Ritzie had several years to be Annie's helper in the store. She was a *learner* now. She was not yet a reader (because that was what she would learn at school) though she had found she could read some of the words on boxes and packages in the store. She could not make out what the *King James Bible* said, though she loved to listen to Uncle Willie reading from it. She was a good learner: she learned how to wash windows with vinegar water, and occasionally scrub dirty patches on the washboard. She learned how to hand the wrung-out clothes to Momma as she filled the wavering clothesline with the weekly wash. She was a hearty eater – always – though never quite so hearty as Bailey, Jr. She could scrape dishes into the slop bucket and some nights she could feed the pigs, but only if someone went with her. And she could regularly feed the chickens

5 Angelou remembering how church services in Stamps affected her. (*Conversations* 202–203.)

though their scurrying flapping was not her favorite part of the back yard. And she was a very good girl when she washed, remembering Annie's joke that "first you wash as far as possible and then you wash possible."

Obedience was nothing to challenge. She loved to do whatever "work" was assigned to her – by either Momma or Uncle Willie. She behaved like Momma, too, in a decorous, stately way – bordering on the solemn. Her slim, tall body swayed like Momma's did when she sang the hymns joyfully: she displayed her grandmother's joyous state of both singing and listening to the Word of God. Even when her feet could barely reach the church floor, she sat upright and paid attention to whatever words were being spoken. (She frowned at babies who cried, at younger children who fidgeted.) Marguerite delighted in being Annie's shadow in every possible way.

Watching Bailey cross the road to the pathway to school, watching him climb the slight elevation, was one of Ritzie's moments of pride mingled with sorrow. She wanted to go where Bailey went: she did not believe that her comforting brother was any smarter than she was, or any better at following directions. And she missed him to an almost intolerable degree until he returned home again. From the front door of the store, she could watch for him at the close of school. Watching for Bailey became one of those daily rituals that Ritzie liked to create for herself.

Although it didn't happen every day, Annie tried to find some time during the school day to make Ritzie feel special. The most common ploy was to help her young granddaughter make something for supper, all by herself. It might be washing off some good fresh fruit and fixing a sugar sauce to dip it in; it might be washing greens and showing her how to boil the vinegar water in the skillet. It might be a much more elaborate time, of creating the black strap sauce that would dress up the date cake Annie had already made. Marguerite learned that she was also able to learn new things. She did not miss playing with little girls her own age when she had the comfort of being Annie's chosen helper.

Centrally located as Annie Henderson's store was, with the dirt road to one side leading to "the town," which identified white Stamps, and on the other side, leading to the best of the African American houses, there was little need to ever leave the store's front yard. As Marguerite grew taller, she became the person who swept that yard, carefully making the scrolls in the dirt to pretty it up. The Johnson-Henderson lives were led in the back yard, but the public face of the expanded family became the front yard. Somewhere in the distance, people explained that she could hear the Red River, but Ritzie had not yet seen that important-sounding place. (Was it really *red*, she sometimes wondered.) She heard grown-ups talk about the river, the mountains (and in her mind, Bailey walked up the mountain to get to school, though the incline was very slight in fact). She had never paid attention to the land in St. Louis or in Long Beach, not in the way Momma paid attention to it. Don't pour that grease into the grass,

Ritzie. Pick those leaves carefully. (Don't just pull up the potatoes.) Momma was a kind of natural force in herself, and she respected the nature that surrounded her and her family.

She talked often about planting more grass seed in the back, so as to protect the yard and also to make that area more pleasant for the Saturday gatherings. She thought about what she might trade the seed store for the grass seed. Annie did not move as swiftly as some people thought she should but she planned much about her life – what she could plan. The rest she accepted.

She also was a saver. Even as she always made sure that Bailey and Marguerite had pennies and nickels for the church offering, she kept a penny jar inside the kitchen cupboard for the unexpected. Sometimes Bailey reminded her late that he needed a dime for this or that at school. Then Annie would go to the jar. Her natural tendency was to barter but she would never embarrass her grandchildren – never. Occasionally she put a folding bill into the church offering plate, but not every week. Sensitive to the way the plants in their garden are growing, pausing to enjoy the bright blue skies of the Arkansas world, Annie is also the epitome of what nature itself demands: she has never questioned that she must care for Uncle Willie. She has never considered placing him in a care facility. Even in the years when it seemed as if he might never learn to read, she knew that her own calm acceptance of whatever injuries God had allowed him to experience would provide a buffer for him and his life.

Similarly, she did not expect her handsome and talented second son, Bailey, to stay in Stamps. When he insisted he wanted to join the Navy, she outfitted him as best she could and sent him off. When he brought Vivian home, carrying Bailey, Jr., she smiled as graciously as she could though she could see that nothing in Stamps would be suitable for her new daughter-in-law, citified and educated as she was. Similarly, when she got Bailey's letter telling her – not asking her – that he would be sending his two children back to her by train, she did not mention any expenses, any concerns about the toddlers' wellbeing. She never suggested that he keep them in his own household. Annie Henderson did not see the expansion of her family from two to four as anything but a useful gift – from her son? From her God? – and she behaved accordingly. She did not grumble her way into the position of grandmother. She did not grumble at all.

Throughout her mature life, Annie Henderson had provided. She knew that Willie would need care throughout his life. She had set up friendships with Stamps officials – particularly with the various sheriffs who might keep watch over KKK activities. She was known not only in the religious community but also in the circles of education and medicine. She was a fair trade person long before the term existed: she dealt carefully and humanely with her neighbors. She had even created a kind of road to the store, a strip of semi-paving that cars and wagons could traverse – to deliver supplies, to pick up Willie for trips to town, to make the physical connections more agreeable for her and her family.

It crossed the back yard at an angle, but Annie kept it clear. Hers was a practical functionality: whatever, whenever, God sent to her, she was going to be ready.

After Marguerite could go to school, so that both the grandchildren were gone during the weekdays, Annie and Uncle Willie realized how much time they had invested in the youngsters. But that investment was never grudging; in fact, nobody ever mentioned it to either the community of Stamps or to Bailey, Jr., or to Ritzie. Strangely, being sent 1,600 miles away from their parents had left little trace on either of the children – perhaps more on Bailey, Jr., who missed Vivian with a passion that did not disappear, ever. But the security of life in Stamps with Momma and Uncle Willie was a wide-reaching plateau of comfort. When Marguerite went to sleep at night, she dreamed occasionally of one of three possibilities:

(1) Ritzie as a beautiful little girl, dressed in taffeta, her hair smooth and glossy, reciting either a poem or a Bible verse in front of the church congregation;
(2) Ritzie being allowed to eat as much as she wanted from a pile of candy, most of it made by the Spangler Company – chocolate-covered cherries, Bit-o-Honey, Circus Peanuts, Good & Plenties, Necco wafers, Hershey's kisses, Milky Ways; or
(3) Momma in a cloud-filled place, about to meet her God. Angelou describes that scene decades later: "One of my earliest memories of Momma, of my grandmother, is a glimpse of a tall cinnamon-colored woman with a deep, soft voice, standing thousands of feet up in the air on nothing visible. That incredible vision was a result of what my imagination would do each time Momma drew herself up to her full six feet, clasped her hands behind her back, looked up into a distant sky, and said 'I will step out on the word of God.' Immediately I could see her flung into space, moon at her feet and stars at her head, comets swirling around her. Naturally, since Momma stood out on the word of God, and since Momma was over six feet tall, it wasn't difficult for me to have faith. I grew up knowing that the word of God had power."[6]

6 Angelou's explanation in "Power of the Word," *Even the Stars*, 73–74.