# **Liked for myself – by Maya Angelou**

# **For nearly a year, I sopped around the house, the Store, the school and the 1**

# **church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible. Then I met, or rather got to**

# **know, the lady who threw me my first life line.**

# **Mrs. Bertha Flowers was the aristocrat of Black Stamps. She had the grace of 2**

# **control to appear warm in the coldest weather, and on the Arkansas summer**

# **days it seemed she had a private breeze which swirled around, cooling her. She**

# **was thin without the taut look of wiry people, and her printed voile dresses**

# **and flowered hats were as right for her as denim overalls for a farmer. She was**

# **our side’s answer to the richest white woman in town.**

# **Her skin was a rich black that would have peeled like a plum if snagged, but 3**

# **then no one would have thought of getting close enough to Mrs. Flowers to**

# **ruffle her dress, let alone snag her skin. She didn’t encourage familiarity. She**

# **wore gloves too.**

# **I don’t think I ever saw Mrs. Flowers laugh, but she smiled often. A slow 4**

# **widening of her thin black lips to show even, small white teeth, then the slow**

# **effortless closing. When she chose to smile on me, I always wanted to thank**

# **her. The action was so graceful and inclusively benign.**

# **She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained 5**

# **throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be. . . .**

# **One summer afternoon, sweet-milk fresh in my memory, she stopped at the 6**

# **Store to buy provisions. Another Negro woman of her health and age would**

# **have been expected to carry the paper sacks home in one hand, but Momma**

# **said, “Sister Flowers, I’ll send Bailey up to your house with these things.”**

# **She smiled that slow dragging smile, “Thank you, Mrs. Henderson. I’d prefer 7**

# **Marguerite, though.” My name was beautiful when she said it. “I’ve been meaning**

# **to talk to her, anyway.” They gave each other age-group looks. . . .**

# **There was a little path beside the rocky road, and Mrs. Flowers walked in 8**

# **front swinging her arms and picking her way over the stones.**

# **148 \_ Self with Friends**

# **She said, without turning her head, to me, “I hear you’re doing very good 9**

# **school work, Marguerite, but that it’s all written. The teachers report that they**

# **have trouble getting you to talk in class.” We passed the triangular farm on our**

# **left and the path widened to allow us to walk together. I hung back in the separate**

# **unasked and unanswerable questions.**

# **“Come and walk along with me, Marguerite.” I couldn’t have refused even if 10**

# **I wanted to. She pronounced my name so nicely. Or more correctly, she spoke**

# **each word with such clarity that I was certain a foreigner who didn’t understand**

# **English could have understood her.**

# **“Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in 11**

# **mind, language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow man and it is**

# **language alone which separates him from the lower animals.” That was a totally**

# **new idea to me, and I would need time to think about it.**

# **“Your grandmother says you read a lot. Every chance you get. That’s good, 12**

# **but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It**

# **takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.”**

# **I memorized the part about the human voice infusing words. It seemed so 13**

# **valid and poetic.**

# **She said she was going to give me some books and that I not only must read 14**

# **them, I must read them aloud. She suggested that I try to make a sentence**

# **sound in as many different ways as possible.**

# **“I’ll accept no excuse if you return a book to me that has been badly han- 15**

# **dled.” My imagination boggled at the punishment I would deserve if in fact I**

# **did abuse a book of Mrs. Flowers’. Death would be too kind and brief.**

# **The odors in the house surprised me. Somehow I had never connected Mrs. 16**

# **Flowers with food or eating or any other common experience of common people.**

# **There must have been an outhouse, too, but my mind never recorded it.**

# **The sweet scent of vanilla had met us as she opened the door. 17**

# **“I made tea cookies this morning. You see, I had planned to invite you for 18**

# **cookies and lemonade so we could have this little chat. The lemonade is in the**

# **icebox.”**

# **It followed that Mrs. Flowers would have ice on an ordinary day, when most 19**

# **families in our town bought ice late on Saturdays only a few times during the**

# **summer to be used in the wooden ice-cream freezers.**

# **She took the bags from me and disappeared through the kitchen door. I 20**

# **looked around the room that I had never in my wildest fantasies imagined I**

# **would see. Browned photographs leered or threatened from the walls and the**

# **white, freshly done curtains pushed against themselves and against the wind. I**

# **wanted to gobble up the room entire and take it to Bailey, who would help me**

# **analyze and enjoy it.**

# **“Have a seat, Marguerite. Over there by the table.” She carried a platter cov- 21**

# **ered with a tea towel. Although she warned that she hadn’t tried her hand at**

# **baking sweets for some time, I was certain that like everything else about her**

# **the cookies would be perfect.**

# **They were flat round wafers, slightly browned on the edges and butter- 22**

# **yellow in the center. With the cold lemonade they were sufficient for childhood’s**

# **lifelong diet. Remembering my manners, I took nice little lady-like bites**

# **off the edges. She said she had made them expressly for me and that she had a**

# **few in the kitchen that I could take home to my brother. So I jammed one**

# **whole cake in my mouth and the rough crumbs scratched the insides of my**

# **jaws, and if I hadn’t had to swallow, it would have been a dream come true.**

# **As I ate she began the first of what we later called “my lessons in living.” She 23**

# **said that I must always be intolerant of ignorance but understanding of illiteracy.**

# **That some people, unable to go to school, were more educated and even**

# **more intelligent than college professors. She encouraged me to listen carefully**

# **to what country people called mother wit. That in those homely sayings was**

# **couched the collective wisdom of generations.**

# **When I finished the cookies she brushed off the table and brought a thick, 24**

# **small book from the bookcase. I had read *A Tale of Two Cities* and found it up**

# **to my standards as a romantic novel. She opened the first page and I heard poetry**

# **for the first time in my life.**

# **“It was the best of times and the worst of times . . .” Her voice slid in and 25**

# **curved down through and over the words. She was nearly singing. I wanted to**

# **look at the pages. Were they the same that I had read? Or were there notes,**

# **music, lined on the pages, as in a hymn book? Her sounds began cascading**

# **gently. I knew from listening to a thousand preachers that she was nearing the**

# **end of her reading, and I hadn’t really heard, heard to understand, a single**

# **word.**

# **“How do you like that?” 26**

# **It occurred to me that she expected a response. The sweet vanilla flavor was 27**

# **still on my tongue and her reading was a wonder in my ears. I had to speak.**

# **I said, “Yes,ma’am.” It was the least I could do, but it was the most also. 28**

# **“There’s one more thing. Take this book of poems and memorize one for 29**

# **me. Next time you pay me a visit, I want you to recite.”**

# **I have tried often to search behind the sophistication of years for the en- 30**

# **chantment I so easily found in those gifts. The essence escapes but its aura remains.**

# **To be allowed, no, invited, into the private lives of strangers, and to**

# **share their joys and fears, was a chance to exchange the Southern bitter wormwood**

# **for a cup of mead with Beowulf or a hot cup of tea and milk with Oliver**

# **Twist. When I said aloud, “It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever**

# **done . . .” tears of love filled my eyes at my selfishness.**

# **On that first day, I ran down the hill and into the road (few cars ever came 31**

# **along it) and had the good sense to stop running before I reached the Store.**

# **I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Hen- 32**

# **derson’s grandchild or Bailey’s sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson.**

# **Childhood’s logic never asks to be proved (all conclusions are absolute). I 33**

# **didn’t question why Mrs. Flowers had singled me out for attention, nor did it**

# **occur to me that Momma might have asked her to give me a little talking to. All**

# **150 \_ Self with Friends**

# **I cared about was that she had made tea cookies for *me* and read to *me* from**

# **her favorite book. It was enough to prove that she liked me.**