

## Unit 4

# Mrs Flowers

*Think about the people in your life who mean the most to you. Has any one of these people influenced you in any significant way? Have you changed in your manner of thinking or behaviour because of your interaction with this person?*

*Share your experience with your class.*

For nearly a year, I sopped around<sup>1</sup> the house, the Store, the school and the church, like an old biscuit, dirty and inedible. Then I met, or rather got to know, the lady who threw me my first lifeline.

Mrs Bertha Flowers was the aristocrat<sup>2</sup> of Black Stamps<sup>3</sup>. She had the grace of 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<sup>4</sup> look of wiry people, and her printed voile<sup>5</sup> dresses and flowered hats were as right for her as denim overalls<sup>6</sup> 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<sup>7</sup>, but then no one would have thought of getting close enough to Mrs Flowers to ruffle<sup>8</sup> 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 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<sup>9</sup>.

She was one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be.

<sup>1</sup>sopped around did things without purpose <sup>2</sup>aristocrat a person of status and dignity

<sup>3</sup>Black Stamps the part of Stamps (a town in Arkansas, USA) inhabited by the black citizens <sup>4</sup>taut stretched or tight <sup>5</sup>voile a thin, semi-transparent fabric of cotton, wool or silk <sup>6</sup>overalls one-piece garment worn over ordinary clothes for doing dirty work

<sup>7</sup>snagged caught and torn <sup>8</sup>ruffle disorder or disarrange <sup>9</sup>benign gentle and kind



One summer afternoon, sweet-milk fresh in my memory, she stopped at the 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 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<sup>10</sup>.

There was a little path beside the rocky road, and Mrs Flowers walked in front swinging her arms and picking her way over the stones.

She said, without turning her head, to me, ‘I hear you’re doing very good schoolwork, 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 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 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, but not good enough. Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse<sup>11</sup> them with the shades of deeper meaning.’



<sup>10</sup>gave each other age-group looks exchanged adult expressions that conveyed a message understood by them alone and not by the child <sup>11</sup>infuse fill



I memorized the part about the human voice infusing words. It seemed so valid and poetic.

She said she was going to give me some books and that I not only must read 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 handled.' My imagination boggled<sup>12</sup> at the punishment I would deserve if in fact I did abuse a book of Mrs Flowers's. Death would be too kind and brief.

The odors in the house surprised me. Somehow I had never connected Mrs Flowers with food or eating or any other common experience of common people. There must have been an outhouse<sup>13</sup>, too, but my mind never recorded it.

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

'I made tea cookies this morning. You see, I had planned to invite you for 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 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 looked around the room that I had never in my wildest fantasies imagined I would see. Brownd photographs leered<sup>14</sup> or threatened from the walls and the white, freshly done curtains pushed against themselves and against the wind. I wanted to gobble<sup>15</sup> 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<sup>16</sup> covered 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-yellow in the center. With the cold lemonade they were sufficient for childhood's lifelong diet.

<sup>12</sup> **imagination boggled** found it difficult to imagine <sup>13</sup> **outhouse** a shed or a barn built on the grounds of a house <sup>14</sup> **leered** looked at in an unpleasant way <sup>15</sup> **gobble** take in hurriedly <sup>16</sup> **platter** a large flat dish or plate for serving food



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 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<sup>17</sup> the collective wisdom of generations.

When I finished the cookies she brushed off the table and brought a thick, 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, it was the worst of times ....' Her voice slid in and 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<sup>18</sup> 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?'

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

'There's one more thing. Take this book of poems and memorize one for me. Next time you pay me a visit, I want you to recite.'

I have tried often to search behind the sophistication of years<sup>19</sup> for the enchantment

<sup>17</sup>couched expressed <sup>18</sup>cascading falling sequentially <sup>19</sup>sophistication of years the maturity of adulthood



I so easily found in those gifts. The essence escapes but its aura<sup>20</sup> 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<sup>21</sup> for a cup of mead<sup>22</sup> with Beowulf or a hot cup of tea and milk with Oliver Twist. When I said aloud, 'It is a far, far better thing than I do, than I have ever done ...' tears of love filled my eyes at my selflessness. On that first day, I ran down the hill and into the road (few cars ever came along it) and had the good sense to stop running before I reached the store.

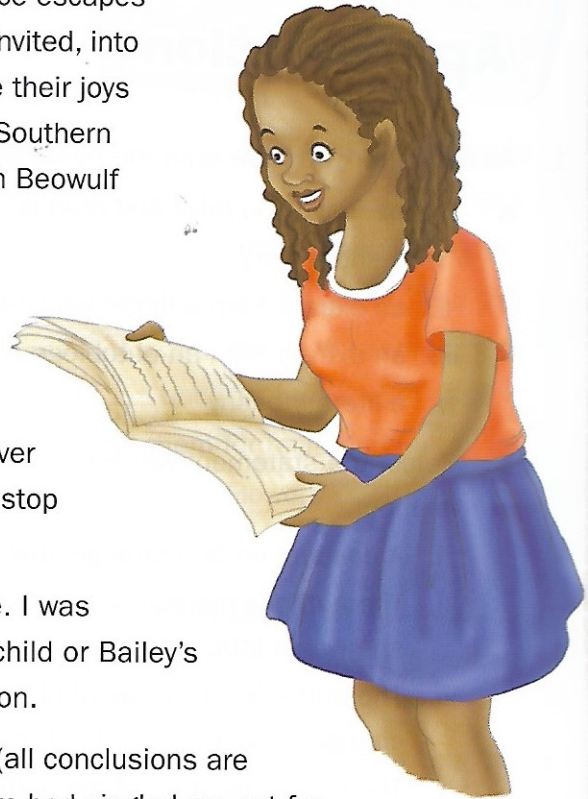
I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson.

Childhood's logic never asks to be proved (all conclusions are absolute). I 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<sup>23</sup>.

All 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.

From *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

MAYA ANGELOU



<sup>20</sup>**aura** a quality that seems to surround something <sup>21</sup>**wormwood** a woody shrub with an aromatic taste <sup>22</sup>**mead** an alcoholic drink made of fermented honey and water <sup>23</sup>**talking-to** a sharp reprimand for having done something wrong