

Stealing Angel



Terry Wolverton

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by

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To TLC, who showed me the Baja

Chapter 1

Perhaps the stupidest part of all the stupid things I am doing this afternoon is taking Angel to Mexico. Crossing international borders automatically adds years to one's sentence, doesn't it?

Spirit, show me the right thing to do. Show me the path you intend and give me the courage to walk it.

I could still turn back. What I've done is problematic and might get me into trouble, but it's not irredeemable yet. I could make some excuse, talk my way out of it. There's still time.

I'm sweating as my silver Accord idles in a long line of cars waiting to cross the border. The late April afternoon sun is warm but not enough to create the sheets of perspiration sliding down my rib cage, pooling under my too-big boobs, soaking the cropped hair at the nape of my neck.

In my wilder youth, I crossed this border half a dozen times

with a lid of pot rolled in paper towel stuffed into my underwear like a menstrual pad and never worried about getting stopped. But it was the seventies then, and we didn't expect to find terrorists around every corner. Since 9/11, the border is tougher. And of course, my contraband today is much more precious.

"Why are we stopped?" Angel complains from the passenger seat beside me. It's an almost-eight-year-old's impatience, restless with the confinement of the car, the long (to her) drive from L.A. to San Ysidro, the stasis of waiting. It's not that she's anxious to arrive; she has no idea of our destination and the truth is, I scarcely do myself. Or rather, I do know where we're headed, in some blind, instinctive way, but I haven't yet allowed myself to formulate a vision of it, a concrete plan. Nor have I worked out what we'll do once we've arrived. Yoli always hated my impulsiveness, my tendency to leap before I looked. This would certainly qualify as one of those times.

"Sometimes the police need to look inside a car," I tell her, "just to make sure everybody is safe." I try to locate a reassuring register for my voice. I don't tell her how fervently I hope that our car will not be one of the ones pulled over to be checked. *Spirit, if I'm meant to do this, please just let us get a green light.*

I try to imagine the perspective of the border guard: My ten-year-old but still well kept Accord will project an image of middle-class respectability. He'll peruse me, a too-large woman in T-shirt and jeans with short-cropped graying blond hair and Ray-Bans covering my eyes. Due to my age—forty-five this year—it's just possible he'll see "soccer mom" and not "dyke." As if to underscore this impression, I pull my lip balm from my jeans pocket and swipe it across my lips, bringing the slight sting of menthol to the tip of my tongue.

But then that border guard will look at Angel—Angela Davis Washington, according to her birth certificate—her caramel skin, her kinky, slightly reddish curls, and what will he see? Will his vision allow him to see her as mine?

The name in the blank after "Mother" on Angel's birth certificate will not match the one on my passport. *I'm taking her to her mother, down in Los Cabos*, I could tell him. It would be the first time Angel has ever seen me lie. *Only the truth can create*

right reality, Guru Tam says. And would the guard believe my fabrication? Will he even speak English? And if he notices the bruises on her, what will he see then? Will he make a phone call and find out Angel's missing and pull a gun on me?

No, it's too soon, isn't it? Only a couple of hours since someone would have come for her at school. Even if somebody called an Amber Alert, the cops don't work that fast, do they?

I wonder if Yoli will call the cops on me. There was a time when I wouldn't have worried about this. However much she might have disagreed with me about my life choices, she knew I was on her side. She knew I was on Angel's side—our daughter. It was a bond we continued to hold in common, even after Yoli decided that being a lesbian was no longer her “scene.”

“I'm sorry, baby, we've had some good times.” This was how Yoli referred to the seven years we'd spent together, three prior to Angel's birth and four subsequently. “But this alternative lifestyle thing just isn't my scene. You always knew that, Maggie.”

I knew it and I didn't. I knew Yolanda Marion Washington wanted to be a singer more than she wanted anything else in the world. I knew when I showed up at her club dates, she always introduced me as her “friend Maggie,” and never brought me with her to industry parties; she feared being labeled a lesbian would ruin her chances for stardom. I knew that Yoli got pregnant by a concert promoter during our third year together.

It isn't every lesbian who would be so understanding if her girlfriend came home with the news she was pregnant. Not by a turkey baster, not by *in vitro* fertilization, but by a man in snakeskin boots and a gold belt buckle the size of my hand.

I can still remember that afternoon, eight years ago, Yoli coming home too early. I was working on a client, an actress whose name you would know; her idea of a beauty regimen was to rely on daily saunas and a weekly lymphatic drainage massage to undo the ravages of her coke habit. She always chattered all the way through the massage, too, and I used to wonder whether she got any benefit from it at all. But every time she'd roll up from the table with a wide-eyed, “That was *fantastic!*” (Perhaps the very same line she'd give the ever-changing sex partners

that were always rumored in the pages of the *People* magazines Yoli kept in the bathroom and read religiously.)

After the actress had dressed and let herself out the patio door, I was changing the sheets on the massage table when Yoli waved at me from the garden. I let her in to the converted garage that housed my massage business.

Yoli was temping in offices in those days, to keep her schedule open for auditions and the session work that came her way sporadically. But on this afternoon she wasn't dressed for work; she wore loose Capri-length red cotton pants and a gold T-shirt that burnished her cocoa skin. Her straightened hair was unstyled, the ends hanging stiff as if carved. As many times as I'd asked her not to, she plopped herself onto my massage table.

"I just changed those sheets," I complained mildly.

She ignored this, gazing at me intently, her eyes both fearful and resolute. "Maggie, I got some news, and I don't know how else to tell you 'cept straight out."

One of the things I liked about Yoli was her blunt style. She never made you guess about what was going on with her. "Okay," I said.

"I went to the doctor today, and," she paused to draw in her breath, "I'm pregnant." Her eyes narrowed. "I ain't havin' no abortion, so don't go there."

As if I would; she must be confusing me with someone else. But I was a few steps behind her. "Pregnant? How?"

"The *usual* way." She looked at me like I was a bigger fool than she'd even imagined.

I was already practicing with the Light Beings in those days, so rather than react to the avalanche taking place inside my chest, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *Spirit, give me the strength to handle this. Give me the courage to respond to this with love.* "I guess I mean, with whom?" I worked to keep my voice neutral.

She'd gotten together with this concert promoter, a white dude, a coupla' months ago, it was a one-time thing, it was a mistake, she was sorry, but she'd understand if I wanted to throw her out. No, she didn't want to tell him, was I crazy? And she was definitely keeping the baby.

Of course I wouldn't throw her out. When I look back on it now it seems our relationship was all about my promising Yoli unconditional love and Yoli's continually testing that promise. *Will you still love me now? How about now?* I knew she'd occasionally slept with men during the time we'd been together, but mostly she'd made at least minimal effort not to throw it in my face. This was different. There was no denying where this baby had come from.

I was stunned and hurt, but I kept praying and meditating, and I told myself that what she'd done had nothing to do with us. After all, I loved her.

So, yes, I knew my girlfriend was still attracted to men; I knew she believed too that they could further her musical ambitions. But I also knew the way she opened herself to me at night with the full moon spilling onto our mattress. I knew the sound of her singing in the shower, not the pumped up stage voice with the phenomenal range everyone got so excited about, but sweet and sleepy and slightly off-key. I knew the street she grew up on in Detroit, and the name of her best friend in the third grade, and that she would run away and hide behind the library when her mom invited strange men over to the house. I knew that potato chips are her favorite food in the whole world. I was sure none of the men she was with were familiar with her in these ways.

So I'd realized it was a tenuous balance, but I hadn't known just which way the scales would tilt for her, until I was left weightless.

By that time, though, I had Angel. I was there in the delivery room when our daughter was born. Through a friend of mine in the massage community, we found a doctor who would deliver our baby in water, a lukewarm tub calming to both mother and child, under low lights instead of hospital-bright fluorescents. Meditation music played on the boom box we'd been allowed to bring in, and for once, Yoli didn't complain about the sound of "New Age crap." Angel's first utterance was not a scream of terror, but a warm gurgle of contentment. I was the first one to hold her.

She already had some reddish fuzz on top her head, and

as I held her against my heart, a recognition shot through me like the proverbial bolt from the heavens. Guru Tam talks about those moments when the universe speaks directly to you, gives you the blessing of knowing your true purpose. As I held this newborn in my arms, I felt surrounded by a warm kind of golden light. I understood then that she was the reason I'd been put on earth, to shepherd and guard and nurture this being. My difficult relationship with Yoli, even the hurt of this and all her other betrayals, had yielded this remarkable gift—what I had been born to do—and I was grateful.

From that time on she was mine. Not that Yoli didn't love her daughter; she did. But she was never the one to get up in the middle of the night for a bad dream, or spend the time to cut the crusts off grilled cheese sandwiches, Angel's favorite. She couldn't miss a concert just because Angel had a fever. Yoli's tie is biological, and I never question that, but Yoli has another mission, another destiny to fulfill, her music. I have only Angel.

So even when, four years later, Yoli went off with Tyrone, her manager, having decided that being my lover was no longer "her scene," she didn't try to disrupt my bond with Angel. She knew it was to her advantage to share custody; auditions, club dates and recording sessions are hard things to pull off with a child in tow. Men tend to not want to watch you change diapers, especially the kind of men who might be in a position to offer one a record deal.

My friend Charlie warned me at the time. "Get it on paper, girlfriend. You need to adopt that child, make it legal." He's been a gay rights activist since he came out at the age of twelve, right after the Stonewall Riots in New York City. And I knew I should listen to him. But I hate paperwork, and the legal system, and its assumption that everyone is a potential adversary. I want to live in a world where people trust one another, and keep their word.

I say that, but look at what I'm doing. Breaking my word, breaking the law. Committing what some might see as a heinous crime. I think about the Buddhist concept of Right Action. Can what I am doing in any way be seen as right action?

Behind me, a horn bleats. I nudge the Accord forward another two inches.

And how can one maintain that principle when the actions of others are so wrong? I would never have imagined the day a few weeks ago when Yoli came to retrieve Angel from my house. I always picked up Angel after school; there was a note in her file that they could release her to Yoli or me. Her teachers were always introduced to both of us, and either of our signatures might go on report cards, permission forms, or excuses for absence. Yoli left it to me to explain that we were former partners who, though separated, were still co-parenting. Luckily, Angel's school had a lot of parents in the arts, the entertainment industry. They were accustomed to all manner of blended families, gay and straight, even one father who'd become a woman.

Half the time Yoli came to get her from me before Angel's bedtime, and half the time Angel spent the night; that was our arrangement. The particulars of this schedule varied depending on Yoli's gigs. I was willing to be flexible. I don't have another girlfriend, I can schedule my massage clients at my convenience, and I was always more than happy to keep Angel whenever possible.

But on that afternoon three weeks ago, Yoli didn't hug me at the door like she usually does. In fact, she wouldn't look me in the eye as she sat down stiffly in one of the rattan chairs in my living room.

"Where's Angel?" she wanted to know.

"She's over next door with Khandi and the new puppies." Since that litter was born it was all I could do to get Angel home for dinner in the evenings.

"We have to talk," she announced, her acrylic nails lightly fiddling with one long beaded earring.

I noticed she looked tired; there was the slightly ashy cast to her complexion that she gets when she's been partying too much. She'd bleached blond highlights into her dark hair, which today was swept up into a French twist that was starting to come undone. Her eye shadow was sea green, a beautiful contrast to her brown skin, but smudging into the lid's crease. Her copper lipstick needed freshening.

“Listen, I got into the touring company for *Aida*. I’m understudy to the lead.” She should have been on the ceiling with glee; I couldn’t understand the wariness in her voice.

“Yoli, that’s incredible!” I jumped up to hug her, but she waved me back.

“Chicago,” she added. “The contract is for four months, but maybe they’ll extend it.”

“Don’t worry,” I reassured her. “Angel can stay with me until school’s out, and then maybe we can fly up to visit you if you’ve got a day off.”

She shot me a harsh look. “Look, Maggie, usually, I would ask you to do that, and you’ve been really great about helping me out with her...”

I interrupted. “It’s not helping out, I mean, she’s my girl, too...”

“No,” she stopped me. “She’s not. She’s *my* girl, and I need to be making the decisions about how she’s raised...”

“Meaning what?” My fingers had gone stone cold, and I was surprised at the knife in my voice.

“Meaning, Daman thinks...” Perhaps she saw my grimace at the mention of her new boyfriend, perhaps not. At any rate, she stopped to correct herself.

“Daman and I think, now that we’re together, we need to build Angela’s sense of family around this relationship. You and I have been over for a long time, yet Angela still asks me when you and I are going to live together again. It’s too confusing for her.”

Family. The implications of her words eddied around me, threatened to suck me under. I tried to stay focused on the immediate issue. “So what are you proposing to do while you’re in Chicago?”

“Daman’s sister has offered to keep her. Lurlene lives in Tujung, and she’s got three other kids, one just about Angela’s age; it’ll be good for her to be around other kids. She’s too spoiled as an only child.”

“That’s crazy! What about her school?” *Breathe*, I told myself, *stay calm and find your compassion.*

Yoli sighed, smoothing back the stray strands of her hairdo. “We’ll keep her in her school till the end of the semester. It’s

just another six weeks or so. Lurlene has agreed to drive down every day to take her.”

She was speaking as if this were just a matter of logistics to be solved. She was talking about taking away my right to be with my little girl, yet she acted as if this was something that could be reasoned.

“What about her sense of stability? You’re going to go away and leave her with *strangers* just because your boyfriend is threatened by me?”

Yoli wouldn’t dignify this last remark. “Kids are resilient. She’ll adjust.”

Here then was the difference in our parenting styles. I tried to create a climate in which our daughter could grow and thrive; Yoli felt Angel should adjust to whatever new turn her mother’s life was taking.

I tried another tack. “I know Daman put you up to this. What, does he think Angel shouldn’t be raised by *a lesbian*?”

At least she had the grace to blush. Still, she remained unmoved. “It’s all arranged,” she insisted.

But beyond appealing to her sense of fairness, which had apparently deserted her, what recourse did I have? My friend Charlie had been right; I had no legal entitlement to my own daughter. Some part of me tried hard to cling to calm beneath my growing panic; I knew I needed to not antagonize Yoli.

Spirit, help me, I implored. I closed my eyes, concentrating at the third eye point. I felt a tingling there, as I forced my breath to deepen. I could hear the words of my teacher, Guru Tam: *It is in situations of extreme conflict or stress that we need most to call on the Divine for guidance. Unfortunately, these are also the times when we are most likely to forget that we are not alone, that we are always guided by Spirit. When we forget, we are spun into chaos.*

For Angel’s sake, I chose to surrender. No sense dragging a child through a battle, pulling and tugging at her loyalties. It was going to be hard enough for her to adjust to this change. And given Yoli’s track record with men—Daman was her sixth boyfriend since she’d ended our relationship, and the white producer for some rap labels—I was pretty sure that it wouldn’t be long before Angel was back with me.

“Make sure,” I told her, and my voice sounded like all the breath had been squeezed out of me. “Make sure those people are going to treat her well. I’m going to hold you personally responsible.”

“What, you think I don’t look out for my own daughter?” Yoli was belligerent.

I could have summoned a dozen examples of occasions where Angel didn’t get picked up from her play date because the session ran long, or Angel didn’t get dinner because Yoli was stuck in rehearsal. But once I started down that road, I wasn’t sure I could stop. Instead, I called Angel from next door and after she’d hugged Yoli hello, I told her, “Be sure to take DogBear with you tonight when you go.” This stuffed toy of indeterminate species was the one she could not sleep without.

“That’s right, sweetheart.” Yoli knelt beside her. She put on the fake voice she uses with Angel when she’s trying to get her to do something she doesn’t want to do. Yoli doesn’t even know that Angel is already wise to this tactic. “Bring alotta your stuff. You’re gonna go stay with Lurlene and her kids for a little while, won’t that be nice?”

“I don’t want to,” Angel said immediately.

“Of course you do, honey. You’ll have Kimmerlee and Justin and Baby T to play with.”

“I don’t want to! I want to come back tomorrow and see the puppies!” Her voice escalated a register. Kids have a sixth sense for when their worlds are about to change. Tears were starting to well up in her eyes.

Yoli glared at me as if this were somehow my fault.

I knelt down beside my girl, kissed the tears from each of her cheeks. “Listen,” I murmured, wrapping my arms around her. “Sometimes we have to do things we don’t want to do, and sometimes they turn out better than we thought.” I have always been scrupulous about not lying to Angel, and I weighed each word carefully before letting it slip from my lips. “Just go and visit Lurlene and the kids. You might like it.”

Her small arms enfolded me and she sobbed into my shirt. “I wanna stay with you!”

Yoli tried to pull her away, but that only made Angel scream

and cling to me harder. Yoli hates it when Angel has a fit. She retreated to the other side of the foyer, sulking. “This is exactly what I’m talking about, Maggie.” She glanced at the watch on her slender arm.

I held onto Angel as she cried out all her feelings. I wanted to join her in one long howl that would drive Yoli out of the house, off to wherever it was she had to be next, but I continued to let each breath fill me with the light of the Infinite, visualized it entering the crown of my head, spilling down my arms, into my heart, soothing myself, willing that energy to surround my girl and soothe her too.

When Angel was at last more composed, I took her gently by the shoulders and faced her. Looking deep into her hazel eyes, I said, “Mrs. Havisham?” It was my pet name for her and even now it made her giggle.

“Mrs. Havisham, I love you more than ice cream. I love you more than sunny days...”

This was one of our routines, and Angel broke in, “I love you more than macaroni and cheese!”

“So whether we are together or not, there is always that love between us, like an invisible thread that binds us, right?”

She nodded.

“Just look at any flower, and I’ll be there. Okay?”

She nodded again. I picked her up and handed her to Yoli. “And here’s someone else who loves you more than she loves the stars in the sky! Mrs. Havisham, I hope to see you soon.”

To Yoli I asked, “Do you need me to pick her up from school?”

As if each word were a sliver of glass against her tongue, she said, “It’s probably better if you don’t for a while.” She wouldn’t look at me anymore.

And then she left, her high heels tapping down the walk, my girl in her arms.

It took every ounce of my discipline, every fiber of neutral mind I could muster to let them go. After that I pictured myself as an empty vessel for breath, flowing in and flowing out. If I could just keep breathing, I would not implode. Breath now became my purpose, minute by minute, as the days passed.

I kept appointments with my clients, pressed my hands into their muscles and sinew as if I might find answers there. It became part of my daily practice to keep from driving by Angel's school, to keep from calling or driving by Lurlene's house. Of course I had made the calls to find out where she lived—Lurlene Fraiser, Silverton Avenue, Tujunga—but I kept myself from physically going there.

I meditated until my third eye swirled in my forehead like a pinwheel. *Spirit, what is the meaning of this test you have given me? What am I supposed to learn? How am I to endure it? Spirit, please keep her safe.* The chants of the Light Beings were the only sounds that could drown out the mantra of curses against Yoli and Daman that were a steady stream in my thoughts.

I found myself sleeping with Mickey, the stuffed Disney mouse Angel had loved until she was five and a half, until one day she abruptly and completely lost interest. In my dreams, she was lost in the supermarket, on a busy street corner; I called for her in ragged screams and woke, sweating with fever. In nearly eight years I had never been separated from Angel for more than a couple of nights.

Then this morning, I got a call from Sumiko, Angel's second-grade teacher. This was the kind of school where kids called teachers by their first names. "Maggie," I heard Sumiko's voice, breathless, "I wonder if you would be free to come in and talk to me today, perhaps on my lunch break?"

I was there at 11:30, pacing the corridor, sneaking little glimpses through the door of the classroom, looking for Angel. When the bell rang and the kids poured out of the room, I hid in the stairwell, so she would not see me. Only when the halls had cleared again did I enter Room 114.

Sumiko was a young teacher, just a few years out of school, with a bright open smile. Slender and delicate. I was always aware of my own ungainly height and girth around her. Today she wore her sleek black hair in two red barrettes, but her expression was somber, nervous.

"Sit down," she said, and gestured toward one of the children's desks. I did my best to fold my long limbs into its small contours. "I don't know if I should have called you or

not. I understand Yoli is on tour.” She paused as though waiting for me to make a comment, but I had nothing to say yet. She continued, “I didn’t know what to do. Angela says the bruises are from falling down...”

“Bruises?” I was on my feet.

“Yes, they are on the backs of her thighs, her buttocks. I saw them when she changed her clothes for gym class. I don’t think she could get them from falling down. They seem...very bad.”

I felt myself spiraling, but I drew in my breath until the world uprighted itself.

Sumiko looked concerned. “I hope it isn’t bad for me to call you. I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t want to call Mrs. Fraiser. Maybe that’s wrong.

“We’re supposed to report these things,” she continued, “but then Children’s Services gets involved and...” She looked down at her desk, apologetically, “I wouldn’t like to see Angel get caught up in that system.”

My heart was nearly cracking open with gratitude for this young teacher who was putting her career on the line for my girl. I knew she might lose her job.

She said again, “I hope it wasn’t bad for me to call...”

“No, it’s not bad. It was the right thing. But you might still get in trouble for it, Sumiko.” I smiled ruefully. I wished I could reassure her further.

“I’m not worried about my trouble. Only that of my students.”

Bless her, Spirit.

“Sumiko,” I asked, “am I still on record for being able to sign permission slips for Angel?”

“Yes. To my knowledge, nothing has been changed in the records. Except that Mrs. Fraiser can pick her up from school.” She was clearly embarrassed to talk about these delicate issues.

“I need to take Angel to the doctor, to make sure she’s okay. Is it possible for her to be excused about a half hour before school gets out? About two thirty?” I wanted to get there before Lurlene arrived to pick her up.

“I just need a note from you.”

I borrowed a sheet of notebook paper, lines widely spaced to

accommodate a child's printing, and in my own awkward scrawl wrote the excuse. I didn't yet know what I was going to do, or perhaps I would not have left such an obvious paper trail. On the other hand, I'm not a criminal. It's not as if I would try to deny what I was doing.

"I'll be back for her in a couple of hours," I promised.

Walking the hall to the exit, I retrieved the gold pocket watch from my jeans. Its case elaborately carved, it belonged to my great-grandfather. I've promised it to Angel when she turns thirteen, which was enough to motivate her to learn to tell time. Its fragile hands told me I had little more than two hours. With no plan formulated in my conscious mind, I began to enact steps as if I had drilled them my entire life, the way we used to practice for fire when I was a kid, or the way Angel and I have trained ourselves in what to do in an earthquake. Perhaps I had been rehearsing these steps in my unconscious ever since the night Yoli carried Angel from my living room.

While driving to the bank I used my cell phone to call my clients and cancel their sessions for the rest of the week. In many cases it was their personal assistants I was calling. When I became a bodyworker I never imagined I'd end up with a Hollywood clientele. It's something I've been complaining about lately, but today I'm grateful because I had no qualms whatsoever about canceling. In a stroke of luck, I reached answering machines for all of them, so I didn't even have to come up with an excuse for not rescheduling.

At the bank I withdrew the money from my savings; bodywork is a cash business, by and large, so I didn't have that much in my checking account. I had more at home, stuffed into a sock in my sock drawer, and as I drove away from the bank, I was trying to calculate in my head just how much that sock might hold.

I stopped home next, phoning my neighbor Khandi to tell her I'd been called away unexpectedly, would she keep an eye on the house? I knew she would; we did this kind of thing for each other. Although I suppose it won't be anytime at all before the house is crawling with police trying to find some evidence of what I've done and where I've gone. They won't find much. I've

never been one for paperwork, and I keep most phone numbers and addresses in my head.

Then it was time to pack. Angel didn't have many clothes at my house now; Yoli had come to pack them up before she left town. I brought only a few things of my own, too. I didn't want to have much more than Angel did; I wanted to be able to travel light. Then I made sure to find my copy of Angel's birth certificate and my own passport. I hoped a birth certificate would be enough to get her across the border.

I knew right away that we would head for Mexico. Baja California Sur. I spent a lot of time there in my twenties; my girlfriend at the time was a surfer. There were little towns all up and down the peninsula with enough gringos where Angel and I wouldn't be too conspicuous. It would be harder to find us, maybe harder to bring us back. And almost all the gringos there have left something behind; there wouldn't be a lot of questions.

But was I crazy to think my daughter and I could simply plunge ourselves into a fugitive life? Especially in a foreign country, and without friends there. It was then I remembered that Guru Tam now lives in the southern Baja; a whole community of Light Beings established themselves there about five years ago. I would go there, I decided, and ask for an audience with the Teacher. Guru Tam would be able to tell me how best to deal with this set of circumstances.

Los Angeles is a city with no shortage of opportunities to explore one's spiritual life, some more credible than others. I'd been introduced to the Light Beings by a client, a producer who swore their practice of meditation had cured his alcoholism; he'd practically dragged me to one of their Sunday night gatherings, now almost ten years ago. Up until that point, I hadn't had much of what you would call a spiritual bent, but I found myself calmer after participating in their sessions, and I liked how it gave me a different perspective on things, less bitter, more kind. Over time, I found myself growing more intuitive in my work with clients. But I've never been a joiner or a devotee, so this quest to see the Guru came somewhat out of the blue.

My daughter was happy to see me when I returned to her

school. This time I walked into Room 114 while class was still in session, and Angel's downcast mouth stretched into a big grin. She was wearing her favorite red shirt, and a pair of corduroy pants, too warm for the season, but long enough that no one could see the backs of her thighs. I could imagine Lurlene getting her dressed this morning, insisting that she wear long pants. She was thinner, and no one had bothered to comb her hair today. It stuck out from her head in random patches. Sumiko called her up to the front and in a quiet voice told her to pack her books; she was getting out early today. Angel eagerly turned to go back to her desk to gather her things.

Help me, Spirit, help me to be calm. Don't let me scare her, or make this any worse than it is.

I walked Angel to the car. Usually she was full of chatter about her day, what new thing she had learned, what she did at recess. Sometimes she asked me to tell her stories about the actresses I'd worked on that day. Today she was silent, gripping my hand as tight as she could.

Once we got in the car, she looked at me accusingly. "Where have you been? Why did you leave me?" Even this, though, was spoken in a tone of plaintive defeat, not the fiery confrontation of which my girl is capable.

"I'm sorry, honey. I couldn't help it." I wondered to myself if that was true. Should I have fought Yoli's decision harder? Had I given in too easily? "I'm here now, baby, I promise."

Angel lapsed once more into silence as I drove away from the school. She didn't ask where we were going or why she was leaving school before the rest of her class. She didn't twist in her seat to look out the window as the school receded from view.

While it seemed important to get on the road as quickly as we could, I knew I needed to talk to her first. I couldn't just change her life utterly without giving her the chance to object. From the cooler in the back, I pulled a Rice Dream bar that I'd stopped at the health food store to get; it was just beginning to melt.

Biting into the chocolate coating to the cold sweetness inside, Angel said, "Mmmm," with just a speck of enthusiasm

as I navigated into Griffith Park. I drove up past the merry-go-round and found a place to park under a tree. She rolled down the windows, settling into the relative peace of the place, though the white noise of the freeway was ever-present.

“Honey,” I began, “I need to ask you something.”

She looked afraid. “Am I in trouble?” she wanted to know.

“You are absolutely not in trouble, Mrs. Havisham. But I need to know, how did you get the bruises on your legs? Sumiko told me about them.”

The crease of fear returned to her forehead. I have always taught her not to lie, assured her that she could always tell me the truth about anything at all. She hesitated, trying to figure out a way to respond.

“Miz Fraiser told me to say I got hurt when I fell playing,” she ventured, barely loud enough to hear. It was a truthful enough statement.

“Is that what really happened?”

There was another long pause, as Angel studied the carpet under her feet. The rice milk dripped down the popsicle stick onto her fingers, then onto the car seat.

At last she raised a pair of agonized eyes to meet mine. “Miz Fraiser said I’d get in really bad trouble if I told. She said Mommy would get in really bad trouble too.” The fingers holding the popsicle stick had started to tremble; she was terrified.

If it had been Yoli sitting there instead of me, she would have barked, “Angela Davis Washington, you tell me right now what happened!” And maybe Angel would have. But I don’t believe in making a child do something she doesn’t want to do, a quality that has often infuriated Yoli.

I reached both my arms around my daughter. There was a slightly acrid scent on her skin, fear mixed with perspiration. “Okay, sweetheart, I don’t want to get you or Mommy in trouble. But let me ask you this: do you want me to take you home to Mrs. Fraiser’s house now?”

In a voice tiny as an angel’s whisper, my daughter said, “Please, no.” She looked as if she expected to be struck for even revealing this much.