I returned from lunch. In the outer office Millie Jordan was working over a table of papers. Hazel was busy on the telephone. I walked into my office and a man sitting at my desk, with his back turned, spun around, stood up and smiled. Martin Luther King said, “Good afternoon, Miss Angelou. You are right on time.”

The surprise was so total that it took me a moment to react to his outstretched hand.

I had worked two months for the SCLC, sent out tens of thousands of letters and invitations signed by Rev. King, made hundreds of statements in his name, but I had never seen him up close. He was shorter than I expected and so young. He had an easy friendliness, which was unsettling. Looking at him in my office, alone, was like seeing a lion sitting down at my dining-room table eating a plate of mustard greens.

“We're so grateful for the job you all are doing up here. It's a confirmation for us down on the firing line.”

1. a confirmation . . . line: proof to us in the middle of the struggle that we are doing the right thing.
I was finally able to say how glad I was to meet him.
“Come on, take your seat back and tell me about yourself.”
I settled gratefully into the chair and he sat on the arm of the old sofa across the room.

“Stanley says you’re a Southern girl. Where are you from?” His voice had lost the church way of talking and he had become just a young man asking a question of a young woman. I looked at him and thought about the good-looking . . . school athlete, who was invariably the boyfriend of the . . . cheerleader.

I said, “Stamps, Arkansas. Twenty-five miles from Texarkana.”
He knew Texarkana and Pine Bluff, and, of course, Little Rock. He asked me the size and population of Stamps and if my people were farmers. I said no and started to explain about Mamma and my crippled uncle who raised me. As I talked he nodded as if he knew them personally. When I described the dirt roads and shanties and the little schoolhouse on top of the hill, he smiled in recognition. When I mentioned my brother Bailey, he asked what he was doing now.

The question stopped me. He was friendly and understanding, but if I told him my brother was in prison, I couldn’t be sure how long his

CHARACTERIZATION
Reread lines 20–24. What change does the author notice in King’s speech pattern? What does this suggest about King?

shanty (shăn’tē) n. a rundown house; a shack
understanding would last. I could lose my job. Even more important, I might lose his respect. Birds of a feather and all that, but I took a chance and told him Bailey was in Sing Sing.²

He dropped his head and looked at his hands.

“It wasn’t a crime against a human being.” I had to explain. I loved my brother and although he was in jail, I wanted Martin Luther King to think he was an uncommon criminal. “He was a fence. Selling stolen goods. That’s all.”

He looked up. “How old is he?”

“Thirty-three and very bright. Bailey is not a bad person. Really.”

“I understand. Disappointment drives our young men to some desperate lengths.” Sympathy and sadness kept his voice low. “That’s why we must fight and win. We must save the Baileys of the world. And Maya, never stop loving him. Never give up on him. Never deny him. And remember, he is freer than those who hold him behind bars.”

Redemptive³ suffering had always been the part of Martin’s argument which I found difficult to accept. I had seen distress fester souls and bend

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2. Sing Sing: a prison in New York State.
3. redemptive: earning freedom or salvation.
peoples’ bodies out of shape, but I had yet to see anyone redeemed from pain, by pain.

There was a knock at the door and Stanley Levison entered.

“Good afternoon, Maya. Hello, Martin. We’re about ready.”

Martin stood and the personal tenderness disappeared. He became the fighting preacher, armed and ready for the public fray.

He came over to my desk. “Please accept my thanks. And remember, we are not alone. There are a lot of good people in this nation. White people who love right and are willing to stand up and be counted.”

His voice had changed back to the mellifluous Baptist cadence raised for the common good.

We shook hands and I wondered if his statement on the existence of good whites had been made for Stanley’s benefit.

At the door, he turned. “But we cannot relax, because for every fair-minded white American, there is a Bull Connor waiting with his shotgun and attack dogs.”

I was sitting, mulling over the experience, when Hazel and Millie walked in smiling.

“Caught you that time, didn’t we?”

I asked her if she had set up the surprise. She had not. She said when Martin came in he asked to meet me. He was told that I was due back from lunch and that I was fanatically punctual. He offered to play a joke by waiting alone in my office.

Millie chuckled. “He’s got a sense of humor. You never hear about that, do you?”

Hazel said, “It makes him more human somehow. I like a serious man to be able to laugh. Rounds out the personality.”

Martin King had been a hero and a leader to me since the time when Godfrey and I heard him speak and had been carried to glory on his wings of hope. However, the personal sadness he showed when I spoke of my brother put my heart in his keeping forever, and made me thrust away the small constant worry which my mother had given me as a part of an early parting gift: Black folks can’t change because white folks won’t change.

redeem (rĕ-dĕm’) v. to set free

fray (frā) n. a fight; a heated dispute

punctual (pŏŋk’chŏ-əl) adj. on time; prompt

CHARACTERIZATION
Reread lines 56–62. Describe the shift in King’s attitude. What can you infer about why he is different in private than he is in public?

CHARACTERIZATION
What do you learn about King through Millie’s and Hazel’s words?

CONNECT
Think about how Angelou feels toward King. Who has touched your heart or mind in a similar way?

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4. mellifluous (mĕl-ĭflō’-əs) Baptist cadence (kăd’ns); the smooth rhythms of speech characteristic of Baptist preachers.