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SHORT STORIES

Walter Dean Myers



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OPM

*To Beryl Banfield, for her contributions to  
multicultural literature*

Outside, the rain picked up and now beat hard against the window. From down the street a tinny-sounding radio oozed out a slow blues. Johnnie Mae was crying, but she didn't say anything. Billy took the money out of his pocket and threw it on the table. Johnnie Mae picked it up and threw it on the floor. Then, realizing that she had hurt him, picked it up and put it carefully back onto the dresser.

Johnnie Mae wiped the traces of alum from his face with a wet, cool cloth. It should have been left on, but he let her do it anyway.

"I love you, baby," she said. "I love you so much."

Later Billy, lying in the darkness, listened to the even sounds of his wife's breathing. He wondered if somewhere in the city Vegas was lying in bed dreaming about fighting, about their fight. Billy checked the time; it was a little after two. He found Johnnie Mae's hand and held it. Even in her sleep she took his hand and squeezed it gently. He needed that squeeze, that gentleness, the knowing that the gentleness would always be there, that through all the nights of pain to come, she would be there for him. He closed his eyes and hoped he wouldn't dream.

## Angela's Eyes

The wind, whistling across the vacant lots and through the redbrick and fire escape canyons of the neighborhood, had taken another summer. Old men brought out their faded suit jackets and moved their domino games inside. Theresa, the mother of Angela Luz Colón, finally emerged from her grief and called the factory where she had worked before her husband, Fernando, had been killed. They told her she could come back to work, and she did.

That is not to say that she had stopped crying against the wall at night or stopped reaching out her hand in the darkness to where he had lain by her side for so many years. It was just that she had also begun to rise, once she had watched the gray mist of twilight give way to early sun, and leave for work.

"You should go out more, too," she told her daugh-

ter. "Remember what the priest said about putting aside sorrow."

She left out the part about rejoicing that another soul had found peace in the Lord.

Angela did go out more. She went to her seventh-grade classes, to the store, sometimes for walks alone in the park. These things she did when it was time for them to be done. She still spent a lot of time thinking of her father. The thoughts often came to her as she sat alone in the kitchen waiting for her mother to come home in the evenings. She would think of his laugh, the way his brown face would wrinkle around the eyes and the wide smile would fill their small kitchen. On weekends he would rise early, shower, and prepare breakfast for Angela and her mother. The comforting sounds of ham frying would announce that he was ready for them to come to the table even before he knocked on her door.

Then the dreams began.

It was Poli, the old man that worked in Mr. Rodriguez's bodega, that Angela first dreamt about. She dreamt that she was at school when suddenly her father walked into her classroom. Then it was not her father who stood before the class, but Poli, stoop-shouldered beneath his white hair. His sad, dark eyes seeming to look into her very soul. Angela felt the same sadness for him that she had felt for her father. Later, when she went into the bodega to buy olive oil, she saw Poli sorting tomatoes in the window. She stood, not thinking, looking at him until her eyes misted with tears.

"Hey, Angela, what's wrong?" Mr. Rodriguez came over to her. "How can such a pretty girl be sad?"

"It's nothing," Angela said.

"It's got to be something," Mr. Rodriguez said.

Angela told him of her dream. Poli and another woman came over and listened, both nodding their heads as Angela spoke. The woman said that the dream was sad, but Mr. Rodriguez and Poli looked up the dream in the Black Cat dream book to see which number to play. Dreaming about a school was 3-5-6, which was also Poli's house number. Then they came up with 2-3-7, which was Angela's house number, and since her father had recently died, they played 0-6-5, for death.

Poli played the numbers the next day and then forgot them. Mr. Rodriguez played them all that week. None of them came out, but Poli died.

"He called and said that he didn't feel well," Poli's grandson said. "He had a pain in his shoulder. The hospital said he had a heart attack."

The Sunday after Poli's funeral the domino players drank rum and talked about him, about how good he was and about the old days in Mayagüez when Poli had raised pigs until his first wife left him and he had come to the United States. They talked about Angela, too. About how her dream had predicted his death. Mr. Rodriguez said that sometimes children see things. Jorge Cruz, who was older than Mr. Rodriguez and whose face was lined with his years, said that when a man dies violently he leaves his eyes to his child, and that it was her father, looking from the other side of darkness, that had

seen Poli's dying. Not much was said after that but it had been enough to dampen the thin sound of the portable radio they had been playing.

What Jorge Cruz had said spread quickly around the neighborhood and soon everyone was saying that Angela had her father's eyes. When it came to Angela she went quickly home and looked in the bathroom mirror. She pushed her hair away from her face and looked into her own eyes. Some boys said that her eyes were pretty. To Angela they were too dark, like deep, bottomless pools.

When Mrs. Flores came into Mr. Rodriguez's bodega she said that it was strange that Angela had predicted Poli's death. This she said more to Maria Pincay and Titi Sanchez, who had come to buy plantains, than to Mr. Rodriguez, who she knew liked Angela very much and who looked with soft eyes on the girl's mother as well.

"Poli was an old man," Mr. Rodriguez said. "His time had come, that's all. Besides, when is death a stranger in this neighborhood? You can't pick up *El Diario* without reading that someone has died."

"Yes, that is right," Mrs. Flores said, crossing herself, "but how many times do you pick up a paper and see that some healthy person is going to die, eh? Tell me that."

"I tell you that you talk foolishly, woman," Mr. Rodriguez said. "The girl knew Poli, maybe she saw that he didn't look so good."

This was true, Angela had known Poli for many years. Mr. Rodriguez was pleased with the logic of his remark and noted that, although Maria Pincay did say

that Angela had always been a little strange, it was a weakly offered statement.

But Angela had not known Eddie Robinson. He was the man who worked in the West Indian restaurant on 147th Street. He seemed a distant man, often lost in his own thoughts as he stood behind the counter stacking porgies in the basket for deep-frying. A dark, stocky man with sloping shoulders and large hands, he would scoop up a large portion of the breading mixture in one hand and, taking the fish in the other, would slap it from hand to hand until it was perfectly breaded on both sides. Then he would sprinkle the breaded fish with basil and stack it with the others. Angela had seen him do this but had not spoken to him about it or anything else. In truth, if it had not been for Mrs. Flores no one might even have known that Angela had ever seen Eddie Robinson.

"How are you doing?" Mrs. Flores asked when they met in the bodega. "I haven't seen you at Mass for a while."

"I go to early Mass with my mother now," Angela said.

"I saw your mother the other day and she looks good." Mrs. Flores had selected two cans of kidney beans and put them on the counter. "You must be taking good care of her."

"I try," Angela said, pleased with the comment.

"Have you had any more of your dreams?" Mrs. Flores asked.

Mr. Rodriguez looked up from where he was sitting with Jorge Cruz, a dark scowl crossing his face.

"Sometimes I dream," Angela said.

There were images in her mind. An image of Poli sitting in the park watching the children play basketball. An image of the funeral cars pulling away from the church, gliding away into the gently falling snowflakes.

"Who do you dream about?" Mrs. Flores asked, pretending to examine the label on a can of soup as the dark looks of Mr. Rodriguez burned into her back.

"My father, mostly," Angela replied.

"Angela came for eggs, not to talk about her dreams." Mr. Rodriguez got up from the card table and put his arm around the slim girl.

"Did you dream about me?" Mrs. Flores stepped to one side so that she could see Angela's face.

"No," Angela said, "I dreamt about the black man who works in the restaurant near the post office. Him and my father."

It stopped them. Mrs. Flores, Mr. Rodriguez, and Jorge Cruz. Even the moment stopped for the space of a heartbeat.

"She dreams about a place to eat," Mr. Rodriguez said finally, and twisted his face into a silly grin. "That's a good sign for a young girl, isn't it?"

Angela took the eggs and a package of sausages and paid for them. Jorge Cruz played idly with the cards as Mr. Rodriguez bagged Angela's purchases. When Angela had left, Mr. Rodriguez slapped the flat of his hand hard against the countertop.

"Why do you have to do this?" Mr. Rodriguez lifted his voice, a thing that was rare with him. "Why can't you leave the girl alone? We have bad girls in this neighbor-

hood and you don't say a thing about them. This is a good girl, so why don't you leave her alone?"

"Lips speak lies, but the face speaks the heart," Mrs. Flores said, shaking a finger toward Mr. Rodriguez. "Jorge, did you see Mr. Rodriguez's face when the girl said that she dreamt of Eddie?"

"Who is this Eddie?" Mr. Rodriguez asked.

"You know, the black man who works in the little diner that the Greek used to have," Jorge Cruz asked.

"Yeah, I see him at the market."

"You won't be seeing him at the market much longer," Mrs. Flores said.

"I don't believe a word of it," Mr. Rodriguez said. "You're making something of nothing."

"What do you think, Jorge?" Mrs. Flores asked. "She has her father's eyes, no?"

"I don't know," Jorge Cruz said. "Maybe she has a special vision."

"What vision?" Mr. Rodriguez threw his hands up. "This Eddie is still alive, isn't he? If he dies it's you who puts the mouth on him, not her."

Eddie Robinson was born in Athens, Georgia, on the same day that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was first inaugurated. Eddie's father would have named him Franklin if he hadn't promised his cousin when the boy's mother was first pregnant that he would name the child after him.

So it was Eddie, and not Franklin, Robinson who was hit by a truck on Thanksgiving morning. Someone who saw it said that he had pulled up his coat collar and was leaning into the bitterly cold wind and never saw the

truck coming. Others said that it didn't matter, that all that mattered was that Angela had dreamt of him, and that he was dead.

Surprisingly, it was Titi Sanchez and not Mrs. Flores who started the most trouble for Angela. This despite the fact that it was Mrs. Flores who spread it around the neighborhood that Angela had dreamt of Eddie Robinson. When Eddie died it was the same Mrs. Flores who went on with her did-you-hear's and her I-told-you-so's.

But when Mr. Rodriguez gave a party for his friends and best customers on the Wednesday before Christmas, which he had been doing for the ten years he had been in business, it was Titi Sanchez who piled the biggest burden onto Angela.

Perhaps it was the wine, or the heat from the kerosene burner used to supplement the cranky radiator, or perhaps an unlucky combination of the two. Titi was standing against the wall, beneath the plastic Malta Fresca sign, when she found herself looking into someone's eyes. The someone, sitting at her mother's side at the round table, was Angela Luz Colón.

"Don't look at me!" Titi screamed at her.

Angela looked quickly away, shocked by Titi's sudden outburst. Then, compelled to see what kind of creature would scream at her so, she looked again, searching in her eyes for reasons for this violation of her sensibilities.

"Don't look at me!" Titi screamed again and buried her head in her hands.

All eyes turned away from Titi toward Angela, but as the girl looked back the heads turned away quickly.

"What is wrong? What is wrong?" Angela's mother's

voice was like the screeching of a gull. Her eyes darted first to her daughter, then to those around her. "What is wrong?"

"Titi has had too much celebration." Mr. Rodriguez separated himself from two old friends. "Here, open another bottle of wine and let's relax and enjoy ourselves."

The party went on, but the musical lilt of voices, the cymbal lightness of laughter, did not. Angela's name pulsed beneath the hushed conversations like a muted drum.

When Titi was finally calmed by Sadie Jones and her cousin she apologized to Mr. Rodriguez through her tears.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just don't want to die."

Mr. Rodriguez didn't answer her, just patted her lightly on the shoulder and told her, "It's okay, Mami."

When Titi left the others began to leave, too. Soon it was just Mr. Rodriguez, Jorge Cruz, Angela, and her mother who remained behind in the gaily decorated bodega.

"I hear what they say." Angela's mother had her arm around her daughter. "It's a terrible thing to say. This is America, not some jungle. Why do they say things like that?"

"Today they talk about Angela and tomorrow they'll be talking about me," Mr. Rodriguez said. "Half the people in this neighborhood don't have jobs, all they have for entertainment is what they can make up."

But they did not stop talking about Angela. When Titi went around saying that she did not want Angela looking at her because then she might dream of her it

brought a nodded agreement, if not an "amen" and a hastily made sign of the cross.

There were images in Angela's mind. When her father died she had lived with the terror of knowing that he had been killed in his taxi, and that they had found him slumped over the wheel, just as she had feared for so many nights, ever since he had started driving. When it had come she was asleep. Her mother woke her to give her the news and then left to go to the hospital. She had lain in the darkness of her room, her mind blank, her body numb. Had she fallen asleep? She must have. When she was sure of her surroundings she recalled an image of her father. Had it been real? Or was it, perhaps, only the echo of a thousand headlines that had already screamed their violence into the deepest corners of her soul? Later, as she leaned against the cracked porcelain sink, the tea already cold in her thin hands, her mother and aunt returned from the hospital, their tear-streaked faces bringing her the news that the images had indeed been real.

That people began to shun her was the worse part. The eyes turning away were like a knife to the heart. She began to stay away from school, from the park, even from the bodega, wrapping the images that came to her around her waking moments as one wraps a cape around the shoulders on a cold day.

There was the image of her father sitting at the table across from her, his body framed by the high kitchen window, his cap on the back of the chair near his shoulder.

"Dying is not the bad part," he had said. "The bad

part is when the death grows in us. When we know it's coming. Then you mourn for yourself even before you go. It's the knowing that is terrible. When I die I want to die by getting hit by a comet at Yankee Stadium during the World Series."

"Why Yankee Stadium?" her mother had asked.

"I don't want to die alone, either," he had said, buttering his toast.

Perhaps it would have ended with Angela and her mother pressing themselves like two funeral lilacs between the yellowed walls of their apartment, had not Mrs. Morales also told Consuela Ortiz that Angela had the power to see death coming. Consuela Ortiz was a woman of forty-seven who lived in the projects. She was older than her years and much given to ruminating about her health. Further, she had had a strange feeling in her right side ever since a man had pushed her into a railing as they scrambled for seats on the IRT line. The more she thought of it the more she thought that it might, after all, be a cancer. And so she asked Mrs. Morales if she would arrange a meeting between herself and the girl, Angela.

Mr. Rodriguez wanted nothing to do with it when Mrs. Morales approached him, but Jorge Cruz said that it would be a good idea.

"If she can't do this thing," Jorge Cruz said, gently tapping his curved and yellowed nails on the card table in Mr. Rodriguez's bodega, "then we will know that the deaths just happened and everybody will feel better for it. If she can, then we will know that it is a miracle of God."



Mrs. Morales was not sure if the miracle would be of God or Satan, but she held her tongue while Mr. Rodriguez thought about it.

"I'll see what I can do about it," Mr. Rodriguez said.

The idea didn't sit well with him, but neither did the notion that the girl was so sad now. So he spoke first to the mother, telling her just how he felt, and then, with her permission, he spoke to them both and convinced them of Jorge Cruz's logic. Still, when they all found themselves in his bodega the following Saturday evening, they were not easy.

Jamie Farrell, who sometimes delivered packages for Mr. Rodriguez, was there, as were Maria Pincay, Mrs. Morales, and a few of her choice friends to whom she owed favors.

"My name is Consuela Ortiz." The woman's hands were shaking as she spoke. "I have a pain here."

She touched her side, somewhat embarrassed to be revealing herself before so many people. Then she paused, not knowing what to say next, or how to frame the question that she wanted answered.

"I don't know what to say to you," Angela said. "I don't know about your pain."

There were tears in Angela's eyes and her mother took her hand.

"Do you have dreams?" Mrs. Morales asked.

"Dreams?" Angela looked up at Mrs. Morales.

"I don't mean about me," Mrs. Morales said quickly, "I mean about her!"

There were images in Angela's mind. Images of a

city, of people walking, working, some sitting in the sun on benches. Were they eating lunch?

"I dreamt there was a noise, an explosion. It was on a nice day. . . ."

There were images in her mind. A cloud that shaped itself into a funnel and a funnel that shaped itself into a tornado, and then a giant mushroom, and then a cloud that covered half the earth.

". . . Many people were hurt," Angela said, trying to shut away what she had seen in her dreams.

"Did you see me?" Consuela Ortiz took her other hand.

Angela looked into the woman's eyes and shook her head. No, she had not seen her.

As Consuela Ortiz looked around the room many things happened. First there were the tears of relief that came to her eyes. Then the loud cry that crouched in Mrs. Morales throat, ready to spring when she heard the expected news, died where it lay. Then there were smiles on other faces and, lastly, Jorge Cruz brought his years and wisdom to the event.

"Sometimes a child sees things," he said, "which are large things to a child. But when the child gets older it sees more important things. Angela is dreaming about a war. That's why so many people were killed."

"I bet my last dollar," Mr. Rodriguez said, "that there will be another war. Probably something in the Middle East."

"By the time you get to your last dollar we'll all be too old to think about war," Maria Pincay said.

Even though the bodega had not done well that month Mr. Rodriguez broke out the wine. It was not a time for celebration, but neither was it a time for despair.

Angela started coming back to the bodega again after that and Maria Pincay got Titi Sanchez to apologize to her for what had happened at the party.

When a proper amount of time had passed Mr. Rodriguez began speaking with Mrs. Colón. He spoke of loneliness, and how the sun, even in the barrio, seemed warmer when shared. The consequences of their conversations seemed scant but they both seemed pleased with the possibilities, which, in turn, pleased Angela.

But Angela's dreams did not leave her. Or, rather, the dream did not, for they were all the same now. There would be a city, people walking, working, sitting in the sun on benches. Were they eating lunch? And there was a terrible noise and a flame that turned itself into a funnel, and a funnel that turned itself into a tornado, and then a mushroom, and then a great cloud that covered nearly half the earth.

She would be in the dream, sometimes with her father, sometimes not, running from house to house, unable to find an unshattered mirror to hold the fragments of her terror.

But she did not speak of her dreams again and, after a while, neither did anyone else. It was a silent pact that she had made with the world: She would not speak of the dreams that caused such trembling in her bosom, and the world would not turn away from her. It was hard

for her at first, but soon she learned to cry only in her bed and to muffle the sound with her pillow.

"Sometimes," Mr. Rodriguez said, cutting up chickens for his meat case, "things happen that hurt us deeply, and even though it's something we think we should hold on to it's usually better to let it go."

"You mean my dreams?" Angela asked.

Mr. Rodriguez, having meant her grief over her father's death, nodded all the same.