

## The Girl from the River

By Elizabeth Cain

### *Catherine*

With my heart in my throat, I walked across the campus after an 18<sup>th</sup> century Lit class toward the bench where Will and I had sat so silently that first day. He was there, and he had placed his jacket beside him, motioning that I should sit on it. I wondered if I were in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

“Maybe you aren’t real,” I observed.

“The bench was cold. I wasn’t sure what you’d be wearing,” he said.

“No work clothes today. I *can* look like a normal person,” I said.

“You look fine to me,” he said and handed me an avocado sandwich.

I took a bite and told him it was one of my favorites. There were other students on the lawn, some eating, some throwing footballs and laughing in the California sun. All sounds faded away as I sat there with Will Halliday. I imagined us strolling through a street market in Arusha or sitting on the sea wall at Dar es Salaam. Perhaps startling in awe as a cheetah jumps up on our safari vehicle—something that had happened at least once to my folks while on safari.

Just then, he leaned over, and I saw a tiny gold crucifix gleaming against his black skin. That was something I hadn’t counted on, being in a relationship with an extremely devout person. Would I say the wrong thing? Would he try to change me?

He brought me back with his own question. “You are a dreamer, aren’t you?”

“Mostly. I like that music is not about words.”

“Tell me when you first played the flute.”

“I was ten. I had just heard *The Moldau* in my dad’s office at home. Of course, there were many instruments in that recording, but the sound that stood out, the sound I was looking for at that time in my life, was the flute.”

“And why was that?”

Oh my gosh, I couldn’t tell him about Angela! About thinking I could bring her to life with flute music!

“There was someone I wanted to...please,” I said.

“A parent?”

“No.”

“A sibling?”

“No.” I swallowed hard. “An imaginary friend.”

I couldn’t go on deflecting the truth forever.

“What a terrific idea!” he said. “Did it work?”

“It took several years, but yes, it did.”

He nodded as if this were a perfectly acceptable answer and gave me a huge chocolate chip cookie from the bottom of the box.

Then he said, “How wonderful! And who has had the privilege of teaching you to make a sound with that kind of power?”

At first, I thought he was teasing me, maybe laughing at me, but his face remained serious.

“Olivia Zellner,” I said.

“*The* Olivia Zellner, who has a professorship here?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my,” he said.

The clock tower rang one time. We had classes and other places to be, but he reached into a back pocket and brought out what looked like two theater tickets. He held the blank sides toward me and said, “I would like very much for you to accompany me to the Los Angeles Symphony’s spring concert next week.”

“Absolutely! I would love it! But is the featured work a surprise?”

“You could say that.”

He smiled and turned the tickets over, and I saw the words *Presenting Smetana’s The Moldau*.

“Will!”

“Of course, I had no way of knowing what a surprise this would be. Shall we talk later?”

“Oh, yes! But I’m going out to my folk’s ranch this weekend. I have a riding date with my father,” I explained.

“You ride horses too?”

“And I can write a mean short story,” I added.

I gave him my landscaping card which had my cell number on it. He kept his fingers on my hand longer than anyone ever had before releasing me back into the real world.

The afternoon dragged on. I could not concentrate in my poetry class while still wrapped in the poetry of William Halliday. Why was it so easy? Why was it so necessary? I thought of Angela, so starved for the touch of *her* William that she stayed around for over a hundred years. Well, in my mother’s fiction, of course. When I was not with Angela, I began to think of her as only a character in my mother’s novella. I knew this was not fair to her, but until I discovered the quantum *reason* for her to be in my life, that’s what I had to do.

Later that day, I drove to my apartment and packed a duffel for the weekend— riding clothes, a few textbooks, and flute music. I hoped my dad would feel up to trotting the horses briskly along the canyon bridle path and maybe around one mountain loop that would be beginning to show paintbrush and daisies and wild iris. I always got ideas for the campus, noticing the array of colors and the way they complemented each other in a certain light.

The freeway was jammed. I put a new CD in the player. It was a popular group, not classical music, but their instrumentation was unusual. I wasn’t listening to the words until I thought I heard a great line, something about holding someone close before he disappeared, then searching for him for a thousand years. Angela would have to hear that song. As for me, I hadn’t held anyone close. I had no idea what it would feel like or if I could long for someone for a thousand years. It made me sad.

My mom was fixing dinner when I got home. I gave her a kiss on the cheek, but she seemed distracted, so I went to my old room and changed my clothes. I’d help my dad with the evening chores and tell him about going to the symphony to hear *The Moldau*. He’d like the coincidence of that invitation before Dr. Halliday knew anything about me.

The horses were running in from the pasture, and my father was sweeping the aisleway. He’d already put the hay flakes in the feeders. I cleaned out the waterers and grabbed a brush to groom the geldings while they were eating their grain. It was a balmy night, my favorite kind of air, healing and sweet, like a certain African I knew.

My mom called from the front terrace, and my dad and I went up to the house arm in arm as we had done dozens of times. It was strange how safe I could feel in the place where the nightmare had ravaged my childhood sleep and set me at an odd distance from my parents. Now, who should bring us back together but that very Angela with whom I was cast over the bridge. Sooner or later, that girl was going to be in the same place as the three of us.

After dinner, during which my mother said hardly a word, I went to my room and began to unpack the things I had brought. Just as I started polishing my riding boots, my cell phone rang. It was Will.

"Hello, Catherine. I hope this is a convenient time," he said.

"Yes. We've finished dinner, and I'm unpacking. Actually, I'm cleaning my boots—my English riding boots."

"Hmm. I learn something new every time we talk," he said. "Do you like speaking on the phone?"

"Yes."

"Some people don't. It seems that some people are waiting for a way to get off the phone."

"I like it, but I've not had lots of practice."

Then, I seemed at a loss for words. What could I say to this educated and worldly man? What experiences of mine could match his in a conversation? But he recovered adroitly from the silence.

"I noticed the name William Langley on the faculty register."

"He's my father," I said.

"Oh, good. I bought one of his books of poetry today, but I haven't read anything yet. What do you like?" he asked.

"Is the one called 'Webs' in your volume?"

He didn't answer for a moment, and I considered how I'd explain why I liked it so much.

"Yes. Here it is. I'll save it until later. What is your mother's favorite?"

"Oh, that's easy. One called 'from the river'," I said.

"It's here too. I'm fascinated by the way poems are punctuated. This one has no capital letters, except for a river named the Chalice River. I wonder why. I wonder where it is."

"I have wondered that too. Would you think it odd if I said it could be in Africa?"

"Probably."

"In Southern California, not far from UCLA?"

"More believable, I'd say."

More and more unbelievable, I should say.

"Will, tell me why you came here from Tanzania?"

He again didn't answer right away. The black polish was drying on my rag.

"Much of that will have to be a conversation in person, I'm afraid," he finally said.

"What *can* you tell me?"

"I can tell you that I was playing in an experimental band in Dar es Salaam, and a piece of music was suggested to us. When I saw the title, I had an irrepressible urge to purchase a plane ticket to the States. The music was called *California Waters*. And here I am."

The silence stretched in the darkening room.

"It's going to be hard to say goodnight," I admitted.

"Yes. It is. But I should let you visit with your folks," he said. "We'll talk Monday."

We hung up, and I finished my boots. I started back into the living room, but I could hear that my mother and father had raised their voices and were arguing about something. I crawled into bed with one of my physics books and read the first sentence three times. *The quantum model of nature encompasses principles that contradict our intuitive concept of reality*. The nightmare could not compete with that.

The next afternoon, halfway around the Palette Loop, so named for its spring and summer canvas of wildflowers, my father and I stopped to water the horses at a creek crossing that was wide and full. My dad could sit a horse like he was born in the saddle, when in truth he hadn't done much riding until he met my mother. We hadn't talked a lot, maneuvering the geldings around bogs and brushing overhanging branches out of our path.

"I'm going to the L.A. Symphony next week with the guy I told you about," I began.

He didn't react as I'd expected. "Honey, just don't worry your mother right now. She's a little stressed at the moment."

"Why?"

"Oh, she was going to tell you, but I guess I could. Some of those *Quantum Crossing* fan clubs want her to talk at one of their get-togethers in a couple of weeks."

I just about fell off old Malibu, which was pretty hard to do. Why now? She had gone through all that nonsense when I was growing up. People trying to analyze every word instead of just enjoying the stories, throwing the books in her face for autographs, and calling at all hours to ask stupid questions, like *Why does Angela leave river water wherever she goes?* "It's a symbol," my mother would say. *What's a symbol?* And so on. I knew those answers when I was five years old.

"Let's go back, Dad. If we finish the loop it will take two more hours," I suggested. I thought he had not been sitting as straight in the last few miles.

We turned the horses, made a steep climb, and then it was downhill most of the way home. Even cutting the ride short, it was late afternoon when we rode up the drive. My father said he'd take care of the horses so I could talk to mom. I hugged him. He felt thin, and I thought he seemed out of breath for a ride on which we had barely trotted. But he would never admit it, so I let it go.

My mother was writing at her desk in the house. She closed her tablet when she saw me and asked if I was hungry.

"No, Mom. I want you to tell me about this quantum cult thing. Seriously."

I pulled a chair up to her side.

"Oh, honey, I've decided to go to one of their meetings and put an end to this. They are making something out of nothing," she said.

I let my heart slow.

"Mom, even if it's *something*, it's not the whole world's!"

"Catherine, it's just fiction," she said forcefully.

"What if it's not? How could just a story plague my childhood with nightmares? How could just a story let me see a girl in the garden when I was six and then again when I was ten? Probably other times I've not remembered."

She looked shocked. Her eyes widened, and she shook her head.

"You never told me about an imaginary friend! But anyway, it's normal. Lots of kids have those."

"But I didn't have any *real* friends. Didn't you notice?"

She clasped her hands on top of the notebook and caught my eyes with hers.

"I thought you would grow into a smart and popular young woman, and you have—earning good grades in college, dating a professional man, your father told me, and making friends like that girl who helped you save the dog," she argued.

"And I've had the nightmare again, a couple of times," I admitted. "It's partly why I'm taking the physics class. I just learned this week the neural networks like our brains, created for *robots*, can dream! You may think *A Quantum Crossing* is just a story, but I have to know more, and not for some kooks in a fan club," I told her.

"You've had the nightmares?"

"Yes."

"Oh, darling, I'm so sorry. I'll just go to one event with these people, even though I've had numerous requests for appearances. I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to scream into the phone. Do you remember we had to change our phone number several times over the years, and—"

"No, Mom. What I remember is screaming myself, when I fell into the river with Angela," I reminded her. "Where is this meeting?"

"Near the university. Your father thought we could spend the night with you since it goes so late."

"Goes 'til when?"

"Midnight."

"Of course you can stay with me. I don't want you driving back to the canyon that late," I said without thinking.

"Catherine, tell me about this flute player you like," she asked, distracting me from talk of Angela.

"Can I wait until I know more about him?"

"I suppose. But I know you. You'll jump into a relationship with both feet...or maybe I should say arms," she said.

"Mom. You don't know me, not really. It's not your fault though. You have a life inside your stories and a life with my father that is the universe to you. I wouldn't want you to give that up because I have nightmares."

"But Cat, I do worry about you. I'm afraid people will take advantage of you."

"Right now it seems that some people are getting ready to take advantage of *you*," I observed.

"Oh, those cult people! Your father thinks I should speak to them, to sort of close them down somehow, but I don't want to do it. Even you have been questioning me about Angela Star. Why is that?"

The girl could not stay out of the conversation for long. I shouldn't have said it, but I couldn't help myself. "Wouldn't *that* be a good way to shut them down! Show them the real Angela Star."

"What are you talking about? I am so sorry I ever read you stories from that book!"

"Are you sorry you wrote it?"

"No. I'm never sorry for anything I write," she said, calming a little.

"Then neither am I," I replied.

"I had a dream last night," Will said, when I met him at the Student Union café for lunch that following Monday.

"A good dream?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't dream."

"Oh. Was it a nightmare, then?"

"Describe a nightmare," he said.

"Something that scares the hell out of you," I answered.

"I have been that scared fully awake," he replied.

Our number was called, and he went to pick up our chicken sandwiches and milk. As he walked away across the room, I wondered if I were dreaming myself. He moved like a dancer about to run ninety yards on the football field. Even with a suit on, his body seemed cut and hard. Others noticed him, whispered behind his back. He was incredible to look at, incredible to be with. But why did he like *me*?

He set our food down and moved his chair closer to mine. We ate a few bites of our sandwiches.

"I think you might call mine a quantum dream," he said.

"Tell me."

"I was walking along a river. I might have been in Africa. It didn't feel like this country. Faces appeared every so often beneath the surface, and a voice behind me would say, 'Choose, choose!' I didn't know any of them. There were black faces, Hispanic and Asian, white faces—all women. The voice said, 'If you choose correctly, you will be rewarded with knowledge.' I walked; the faces looked up at me through the water."

He took a swallow of milk. His eyes seemed distant, as if he were reliving the dream.

"Suddenly, I saw a young white girl, maybe eighteen or twenty. Her long, dark hair fanned out in the river around her sad face. I stopped and she smiled. She had on a ragged, white dress. The only reason I remember this is because I wrote it all down. I said, 'That one. I choose that one.'

"The voice said, 'Well done, son.' And as the girl came out of the river, she aged, her body thickening, her skin shriveling and wrinkling, her eyes clouding, and then she was standing before me, a bent old lady, but I knew her. I said, 'Tell me what you know and where you are.' She said, 'I am where you are. You came to the right place.'"

Will put one hand to his eyes, as if driving out the images, or perhaps sealing them in.

"Was that the end of the dream?" I asked.

“Yes. The woman didn’t touch me or say anything else. When I woke up, I thought it was so strange because I felt such a strong tie to this woman. I never knew my mother. She died bearing me into the world, but I do know she was black.”

A group of noisy students rushed by our table, and the tower bell rang twelve times.

Then, he went on. “Here’s the really strange thing, Catherine. I do have white ancestors, as odd as that sounds. I don’t know the details of the story, but this woman in the river could have been one of those white ancestors speaking to me from centuries ago. What do you think, quantum physics guru?”

He had white ancestors? How long ago? What were they doing in East Africa? But it was the question *he* asked that hung in the air. He would expect an insightful answer, something that would balance the strangeness of the dream with the reality of his African roots and his presence here with me.

“I think dreams about one’s past are meant to heal something in the present,” I told him.

That answer seemed to startle him. “Forgive me, Catherine. I’m...not feeling well. Can we go outside?”

I felt a chill and heard the sound of the river in my ears.

We left most of our lunch and went out to sit on the bench by the marigolds with the blue river of pansies and violas. Will put his hand on my arm, and we didn’t say any more until it was time to go to our afternoon classes. Then, Dr. Halliday covered his eyes again, as if the dream would not leave him.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” I said softly.

He looked out once more at the green landscape with its resilient beds of flowers.

“Oh no, my dear. Walk with me a ways,” he urged. “You must know I am greatly uplifted by your company. It’s just that healing is sometimes slow and painful. There are always reminders...of things that cannot be changed. Words. An afternoon breeze. A piece of music. A touch. Do you know?”

“I am just beginning to,” I answered.

We reached the steps of the music building, and I had to continue across campus to my short story class.

“I can hardly let you go today,” he said.

“Nor I you,” I said.

And then, we parted.

# Angela

I was missing the connection Cat and I had when I handed her the dog from the depths of the San Gabriel River. It seemed that part of her believed me and part of her didn't. She had told me her life had been empty mostly before she met me, but now it seemed her life was rich and full. She was admired and depended on for the upkeep of the beautiful grounds of the university; she excelled in her music and literature classes and though not adept at quantum physics, she adored it; and she had a boyfriend, an intelligent man who played the flute. Why would she need me?

I didn't bother Cat but left her reminders of my presence—a new rock from the river, a silk scarf that Marjorie had given me that more suited Catherine, my signature on the first *Quantum Crossing* story, and a note that said: *You are the only reality I know; I stay for you.*

One day I was in the apartment. I could tell that Cat had left in a hurry; there were books strewn around, some open, some with markers in them. I looked at one of the pages in *The New Quantum Puzzle* and had to sit down on the couch. I read it again: "The quantum leap takes one from an infinite number of dimensions into a reality that has only three."

Cat's phone rang. I hesitated, but then thought I'd see if my leap of out the river would extend to a conversation with someone other than Cat and a lady with dementia.

"Catherine Langley's residence," I said, imitating the way I often heard Cat answer the phone.

"Oh! Who is this?" a woman asked.

"A friend of Cat's. Who is this?"

"Her mother."

*Sela Hart! Sela Hart is talking to me on the phone!*

"Mrs. Langley. This is...Angie," I said.

"I guess I've not met you. Where are you from?"

"San Gabriel."

"Oh, you must be the girl who helped Cat rescue that Border collie," she stated.

"Yes. We became friends after that. May I help you?"

"I just wanted to tell her everything's on for the twelfth. Are you coming?" she asked.

*Coming where?* My mind raced.

"I...I'm not sure," I answered.

"Well, if you haven't read my *Quantum Crossing*, it wouldn't interest you," she said.

When I didn't respond, as speechless as I had ever been, she said, "It's just a meeting of fans of my stories from twenty years ago. Can you believe it? That people would still want to be talking about Angela Star, the main character? That she might have an importance beyond the printed word?"

"Yes. I can."

"Well, I won't keep you. Just have Catherine call me. Please come out to the ranch with Cat, anytime," she offered.

"I would like that very much, Mrs. Langley."

She hung up, and I sat there with the phone in my hand. When it started making funny noises, I replaced it in its cradle and then picked up one of the yellow pens I had seen Catherine use and drew it through a line in one of her texts: "Contact with a quantum parallel universe cannot be ruled out."

