

Applause
By Elizabeth Cain

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It was only a short walk from my house on Bruin Drive to the campus. Most of my classes were in the lit building: first period, The Literary Novel; second period, Classics from Around the World; third period, Quantum Physics Demystified (a ten-minute walk to the math/science building); fourth period, The Romantic Movement in Literature; lunch; fifth period with Mr. Langley, MWF, Writing the Short Story (semester one), Writing the Modern Poem (semester two); and sixth period, graduate studies with a faculty advisor.

If an advisor was not available on a particular day, students could use that time as a study hall but had to check in and out with someone from the English department. My graduate studies room was right across the hall from Mr. Langley's, but my advisor was Lois La Monde. I didn't have any other classes with her that year, but I knew her from my junior Chaucer class, and she had a reputation for a no-nonsense attitude about everything, demanding perfection in speech and dress—which most students failed to live up to—and strict attention to university codes. I had been around UCLA off and on for eight years, and I still didn't know what those were. I guessed Miss La Monde would inform me soon enough. I was already pretty sure that throwing my arms around Professor Langley was on the prohibited list.

That first day, I took a few notes in my classes but mostly marked time until I could be in Room 33 with Mr. Langley. I ate with Melissa and Lee at an outdoor café on campus, barely tasting my food. When the bell rang for period 5, we walked together, three utterly joyful lambs going from the sheltered grounds of what felt safe into the woods, where the wolves of despair and bliss stalked the unwary. Nothing wrong with *my* metaphors.

Langley was writing some very beautiful and succinct quotes from authors we all knew—Ernest Hemingway, Joyce Carol Oates, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde, Annie Dillard—under a large, almost calligraphic heading: “WRITERS TAKE NOTE.” His back was to us, and his desk was piled with books and papers and, sadly, a photo of Natasha in a red-sequined dress at some faculty function. The frame cut off part of one hand that perhaps held an alcoholic beverage.

Then I was absorbed in the words that hit me so deeply I could hardly breathe when he turned around. And there was that just-as-beautiful face and heart-stopping eyes, and he was saying, “Who knows where you can find all this advice in one source?”

No one moved. I raised my hand. I would be the first in my class to address this much-honored and quite adorable man.

“Yes ... Miss Hart?”

So he did remember my name.

“Those words can be found in Ms. Oates's book *The Faith of a Writer*,” I answered.

“Absolutely. Thank you, Miss Hart. First assignment—buy that book. I've ordered quite a few copies for the Student Union, and they can be found at bookstores around town. You have two days to read it. By Wednesday, I want you to find a truth that resonates with your experience

as a writer, something that shows me you are going to know how to live with those words for the rest of your life.”

Any other professor would have said “until the end of the semester,” but not Langley. These were words for one’s life, and maybe he and I were the only ones who knew it. He went on to other things—class schedules, conference hours, his free periods, writing requirements, make-up work, and late assignments. I could not take my eyes off of his face. He didn’t look his age. His eyes were shining, and this was just menial information. I wondered what his eyes would look like when he showed his heart. Then I listened in earnest as he opened up a little more.

He told us he was named after the nineteenth-century British painter William Langley, that in his mother’s room in the Santa Barbara hospital maternity ward there had been a Langley painting expressing the artist’s favorite themes—sand dunes, seascapes—that his father was big into symbolism, took one look at that painting and said his son had to have that artist’s name. Then our professor admitted that Langley was really his middle name. “No one knows my last name, unless they know my folks, who are 90 percent of the time out of the country. I’ve almost forgotten it myself.”

We all laughed. He confirmed the rumor that he never gave a grade lower than a B minus. “But don’t think that floats you a get-out-of-jail-free card.” He said he expected great things out of us because we had given the best answers to his questions that he had heard in a long time, and he was ready to give us his all. This in the last minutes of that first class, his wife barely in the grave, his sorrow and his joy in the hands of twenty-something college students bound to frustrate and annoy and even dig at the tenuous foundation he had built for his life without Natasha Skinner Langley.

I put my hand on the story I wanted him to have. I only hoped, that first time, and maybe every time after that, for my words to be a net into which he could fall—oh, not to catch him, but to embrace him. He was straightening his desk but looked up with a smile as I came closer.

“Miss Hart,” he said pleasantly. “I guess you won’t need to buy that book.”

“No ... but I’ll do the assignment, of course.” I hesitated.

“Yes?” His sixth-period students were coming in.

“Could I turn in a story now?” I handed him a few typed sheets.

“The Range,” he said, looking at the title page. “If there are horses in it, I’ll love it.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, thinking, *Now I know something else about him*, and smiling to myself, because what I had wanted most was for *him* to discover *me*.

When I got home that day, I thought I must have been dreaming, sitting in William Langley’s classroom, answering another of his motivating questions, seeing his beautiful smile. Anne had the TV on. Dr. Phil was saying, “This will be a changing day in your life.”

Oh, my ...

I had to look far back to conjure up that day in high school when Mrs. Jalen told our English class that she had a special visitor for the hour, the newly conferred Doctorate of Literature at UCLA, William Langley, who was to come read to us. I had no idea who he was. Could the power of words be such that I began to love him then?

He came through the door a little shyly, books under his arms, some with sheets of paper between the pages, maybe unpublished poems. He was very handsome, I guessed not quite thirty

years old, with a sweet smile and sparkling brown eyes, if brown can sparkle. His hair was short, and he was dressed informally in jeans; a blue, tan, and white striped shirt; and a tan sweater slung around his shoulders. He moved with confidence to the center of the room, shook Mrs. Jalen's hand, turned to us, and said, "I greet you from the pages of your own work, where you will write better than I, in time."

Mrs. Jalen said, "Dr. Langley, we would be pleased if you would read some of your earlier poems and then a few later, published ones. I would like my students to hear the *development* that comes with learning the craft."

"Craft? Yes, it is a craft," the professor said, "but the heart of it is language that wakes you up in the middle of the night and will not let you go until you write it down! See what you think of this." And he began to read in a deeper, more provoking voice.

Webs

*stronger than steel that filament
the spider leaves behind,
his fragile being bent on some design,
movements honed by dance far older than the grass
which holds the finished piece
released in dew like shattered glass
or higher up enhanced with boxes, honeycombs,
& Ferris wheels.
metaphors all
swinging in woods from branch to branch
or gardens between rose and wall
where running once I fell among the sinews
making ragged tears and crying home to Mother's call
ashamed to tell.
and later in a feverish dream I thought
of prison cells composed of lace
& sweetness pouring down my face
& flying where the sky is taut with twilight.
beautiful and magical as wishing wells,
but—
they are traps.
don't touch, my lovelies.*

Hands went up all over the room.

"But what does that mean?"

"Why does it have rhyme? Mrs. Jalen doesn't like us to use rhyme."

"There's tons of alliteration!"

"I can feel the webs all over me, uck."

He smiled. "What word in the poem stands out to you?"

Several kids said, wisely enough, "Metaphors!"

A few said, "Traps."

I said nothing, lost in the beautiful and magical *released in dew like shattered glass*.

The young professor said, "You've almost got it."

"Metaphors are traps!" an excited voice said.

"The webs are traps!" another cried out.

Langley said, "That's literally true, but how 'bout metaphorically?"

"Some shapes are boxes. Lots of things get trapped in boxes."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Old letters, secrets, keepsakes ..."

"*Poems!*"

"And honeycombs?" he continued.

Everyone went crazy vying for his attention.

"The sweetest things in life ..."

"Made by creatures that sting!"

"And Ferris wheels?" he asked.

"Freedom."

"Joy."

"Loss of inhibition!"

Then, a usually reclusive boy said quietly, "They could break. You could fall out. You could die."

There was sudden silence, but the professor bowed to us and said, "I dearly hope I have some of you in my classes at UCLA."

Mrs. Jalen held up her hand. "Do you see what's happening here, young people? You are discovering the power of language. You are talking about a poem as if it's life itself."

"It is so life," someone said. "What about the spider whose home is ruined?"

"What about the boy who made 'ragged tears' in the sinews of the web?"

"Or maybe it was a girl! We don't know. Was she trapped by her emotions? She ruined the web. She cried," one of my best friends said.

"Does the poem trap *us* in its emotion?"

"What about the line, *don't touch ...?*" Mrs. Jalen asked.

"The poem is a warning that things can break."

"Strong-as-steel webs."

"Ferris wheels."

"Honeycombs."

"The little spider."

"The little boy!"

"The *poem* itself! We are breaking it. We shouldn't touch it!" someone said.

"I think the last line is an opening," I said at last. "For sure we are going to touch it. I think the author is daring us to touch it."

Dr. Langley looked at me for a long moment and said, "Touch it, indeed."

In the end, he admitted that it wasn't a great poem and had been rejected by several magazines, but he said that he personally liked it and delighted in the reactions he got from students. Then he read from his latest book with more up-to-date, award-winning poems and

signed a copy for every one of us. It was the book I had quoted out of to get in his class these almost eleven years later.

On Wednesday, there was a note on my desk in Room 33. It read, "Bravo! May I read your story to the class?" I looked up at my professor and nodded. As soon as everyone settled down, Mr. Langley said, "I'd like to start today with something Miss Hart has already turned in. I believe it will get us to the heart of things." He began to read as though he were William Hathaway, the very broken hero of my stories entitled "William and Angela: A Quantum Crossing." I didn't mean there ever to be a person so true.

The Range

I like the title immediately when I'm handed the script. It implies a vastness upon which we actors will imprint our lines in as true a manner as possible. I am William Hathaway. I've been in this profession for quite some time and know a good story when I read one. This story is woven from the fabric of the early West, where boundaries are unclear. Mexicans don't know what territory is truly theirs; cattlemen from north of the border lay claim to the land; rustlers from as far away as California and Nevada want the horses; jobless men and gamblers desire the women. Single women have very few options.

Our lead character is one of those, played by a lovely half-Mexican actress named Elena Ruiz, in the script called Rose. My part says I am a businessman who has made enough money in the East to buy land and cattle but who knows little of the country and the people of the Southwest. I will court the lovely Mexican girl. Rose comes to Borrego City with her sister from a broken family. They are basically orphans and as vulnerable as newborn calves. A gambler, played by Jonathan Hunt, seduces her, but he is rough and controlling and does not count on the wild, protective spirit of Rose's sister.

But the theme of the movie is not what I wish to tell you. There are things beyond our understanding that *The Range* is calling out of the small company camped in the Arizona desert. You do not need to know all that is passing through the lenses of the cameras to come away with a profound sense of the conflicts during that time in history or of the relationships that are not of the screenwriter's design. The script is only a frame for the truer story that occurs without warning among veritable strangers who know how to act, even when they do not know what is really happening.

Mr. Langley turned the first page over and looked up at us. "Anyone have a quick response to that last line?" he asked back in his own voice.

"I think it's a damn huge invitation to keep reading," Blake Adams said.

And so he continued reading, seemingly satisfied that a small lesson had been learned.

Day one. Hot. Monsoonal rains expected. The set is intimidating at first. I've been around horses and ridden all my life, but at 45, I'm not as agile in the saddle. The horses mill around impatiently, blacks, pintos, palominos, bays. They've done this before. A wrangler is rounding up the prettiest ones for the first day's shooting, which will have lots of close-ups. I am supposed to race with the young, supporting actress (can't think of her name), Rose's sister, down a canyon stream known for its quicksand. "Ride on the outside of turns," they tell us. I have a lump in my throat. Here we go.

The cameras whirr with importance. I step out of the postal station and start loading my saddlebags with packages and letters from friends who thought I was crazy to set foot in this country. I hear the frantic hoof beats before I see the young lady flying down the street on the only grey in the company stock. She glances at half-drunk cowboys and old men, and then she sees me.

"Mister! ... Mister! Can you help me? One of my sister's horses has broken his leg. There are two pulling our wagon, and the good horse won't stop, dragging the lame one without pity. Please come help us," she cries.

So I'm off with this frightened kid (well, she seems like a kid to me), skinny, dressed like a boy, riding like a boy, but definitely not a boy. The camera trucks are rolling beside us, trying to keep pace with two very fresh horses. Thunder booms some distance away. In two miles we reach Rose struggling with a striking Paint mare to keep her from charging ahead with the injured bay barely able to move.

I dismount quickly, handing Rose's sister my reins, and pull my Winchester from its scabbard. I remove as much harness as I can before ending with one shot the poor animal's life. Rose falls forward with her hand to her heart, and I try to calm the Paint, who is freaking out at the gunshot. Rose looks over the back of the horse at me. She is certainly beautiful with her Mexican brown skin and dark eyes. I know Elena from a few encounters in the studio and see that this will be a good role for her. She exudes strength but can seem as fragile as a butterfly.

The cameras close in, just the two of us in the eye of the lens.

"Gracias," she says breathlessly.

"De nada," I respond and then tell her I don't speak much Spanish.

"Bueno. I speak English."

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Our mother and father have many problems, other children. We are a burden. So we have come from Mexico to make a new life."

"Brava, muchachas," I say and tip my hat.

The sister has hitched her grey in place of the dead horse and climbs up next to Rose.

"What about the horse?" Rose asks.

"I think you'll have to leave it for the wolves."

She looks about to faint. There are other men and wagons on the road now, so she urges the horses on. She stares at me and asks,

"Su nombre?"

"Ryder ... just Ryder."

"Cut!" the director calls out.

We are all parched from the sun. The horses are pulled aside and watered. We are led to shade and cool drinks. I am feeling strangely tired and hope we don't have to reshoot any of the scenes. The director suggests that the sister stay more out of the camera view and reminds her that her character is not as vital as the character of Rose. But I am amazed at the eloquent presence of the sister with fewer lines and less contact in the scene with Rose and me. Her passion seems to come from another world, and the director doesn't want any part of it. Rain gives us an early break, and we are driven back to our trailers on the outskirts of Borrego.

In the script I am haunted by Rose, catch glimpses of her calico dress floating into the mercantile or a hand on the harness of the Paint, called Spooky, and the sister's grey. I haven't been in Borrego City long when trouble starts. I walk out my front door one morning to a gruesome sight. Cattle lie scattered, dead, around the water tank, which has been poisoned. I lean on the porch rail, devastated. The girl, Rose's sister, appears out of a thick stand of saguaro to the south with her arms around a golden heifer.

"I saved one for you, mister," she says.

"So you did."

She starts to hand me the lariat holding the animal steady.

"No," I say. "Take it to Rose."

"Gracias," says the girl, "mi amigo."

She and the yearling blend into the blinding desert light as they move off toward the slumbering hills and Rose's small piece of borrowed earth.

The cows wake up from their tranquilized state and are herded away by the wranglers. In the movie it doesn't show what Ryder does with the dead animals, but he wearies of the friendless life. There are scenes after that depicting the hardships faced by Ryder and by the women alone in a harsh landscape. When their paths cross, there is a silent bonding that hints at something more.

I act the outsider, disdained by locals, but I decide to play their game and sit down one day at the poker table. Rose is at the bar alone. Her sister lingers in the shadows. She is barely old enough to be in the bar, but she watches everything. It's smoky and hot from the lights. I look over at Rose with compassion and admiration. Her betrothed, Wyatt, spits his line.

"Git your eyes off her, man, if you want to keep 'em!"

I feel dizzy, literally, and should ask for a reprieve, but I'm sure my discomfort fleshes out the scene. Wyatt is shoving chips at me angrily. I see that I've won, but I only want to talk to Rose. My head is splitting. Suddenly Rose is gone. I want to go after her, comfort her. Something is wrong. I push the chips back to the center of the table, stand unsteadily.

"You can have the money," I say and make my way to the door.

Just outside, Rose's sister grabs my arm. "Don't follow her. Wyatt'll find her. I know where she goes. I'll take you later. Sit here a while."

There's an old couch on the rotting boards of the porch. I'm relieved to sit down. My head is killing me (not in the script). Tears fall out of my eyes. The girl reaches a hand out and wipes them away (not in the script, but it works, the director says later).

I say to Rose's sister, "Are you real?"

"Some people think that I am," she replies.

"Cut!" we hear, still looking at each other.

Later she comes to my trailer with ginger. "Eat a little of this," she says, "for the pain." And then she lays cool cloths on my forehead and massages my shoulders. She sings something about a river with a hint of desperation that springs from the rough waters. I hear the rhymes but don't really understand what she's saying, just feel healed. Without question I fall in love with her. Her name is Angela Star. She doesn't have a name in the movie. She's just the sister.

She calls me William. Nobody does that. We don't have a lot of scenes together, but they're powerful ones. I think the movie turns on them, surprises the viewer with their emotional impact. Angela always touches me, in the movie and on the sets after shooting. She does it in a casual way, but it sends chills through me.

One day we both are off the set. It's raining anyway and not much is getting done. The horses are huddled against each other, muddy and spent. We stay in my trailer. No one seems to notice. I grip her hand and we don't speak for a long time. Finally she says, "I've had a crush on you since I was ten years old." She stands up

and leans over me, slowly bending down to put her mouth on mine. I kiss her back with everything in me, and I don't know where I am.

"I can't be here," she says quietly, and I am suddenly alone with my pounding heart.

There's a scene one day where Angela puts on one of Rose's dresses and lopes away on Rose's Paint. Wyatt gets confused and angry and searches the hills and farms for his woman, while Rose and I make love in the basement of my ranch house.

"Why does she put herself in such danger?" I ask Rose.

"She protects me. She always has," she answers. She pulls me closer to her, while I yearn for the body and breath of Angela Star riding somewhere out in the fields, the camera catching flashes of her among wildflowers and beneath blue skies.

The movie feels like my life, the aching for love, the bad guys knocking down my door, killing my dreams like the poor heifers, and the unreality of playing a part. Who am I? I'm sure I'm giving my best performance. Everyone says so, but I am counting the hours until Angela comes to me, caresses me through my fatigue and misgiving. Then we'll go to my door and hold each other for a long time. We don't have sex. *The Range* consumes us. We seem to need only those sweet embraces, but when she leaves, I weep.

One day she's not on the set.

"Where's the sister?" I ask.

No one knows, but the day doesn't go well. The horses are jumpy. We have dozens of retakes, and actors stumble on their lines. There is no dialogue or action for Rose's sister to hide Rose or keep her secrets or lie to the abusive Wyatt, but the company is falling apart. Without Angela in the wings, the show does not seem to be able to go on.

I wonder at this, but later that night Angela steps through my door. She has been crying, but I don't question her. I take her in my arms and kiss her wet face and tell her I'll love her forever. That seems to calm her. We have a big scene tomorrow, the last scene. Neither of us feels up to it. We go over a few lines, but then she throws one in that is not on the page.

"I have loved you for so long in my mind, I had never imagined what the real love could be. Don't let go of me, William," she whispers. "Don't let go of me."

And so, we lie together all night curled up and hungry for the consummation. When *The Range* is finished, we will find the part that is meant for us. For now, some kind of fantasy is playing itself out.

The morning shoot brings us back to reality. Even the horses know it's a big day, strutting around tossing their heads and

whinnying. We mount up. It takes a while to get it right. It's a difficult and exhausting task. By afternoon we are certain of our portrayal.

The sister is on Spooky and I on the big black gelding that has been mine throughout the story. The director has called several times for a stunt double for Angela, but she refuses, saying, "I have to do it."

Wyatt has found Rose's hiding place and is ahead of us on the road with his "boys." We are galloping now. The trail is twisted, and it's hard riding. Once, Angela pulls up beside me, reaches over, and puts one hand over my hand that is on the reins (not in the script, and if the camera catches it, it will be edited out).

Rose is waiting by a crystal pool in a black and burnt-orange rock canyon. Wyatt is screaming at her, "I'll kill you!" when Rose's sister leaps from Spooky and slams Wyatt's body from his horse to the ground, snatching his rifle from his hands. Angela fires at the men, just grazing them, until there are only a few bullets left in the rifle, and she is the only one standing on the red-stained desert floor.

I am calling to Rose who seems frozen to the spot. She moves dazedly toward me like a person already drowned, her hair and dress dripping water. I throw the reins to her, and she swings up on the mare, her long, black hair flying out with the movement. She hesitates again.

"We're going to Mexico!" I shout, kicking the gelding forward.

She says, "I'll be a gringa there ... scorned."

I say, trying to get her to grab the reins, "Would you rather be a live gringa or a dead Mexican in a foreign land?"

Her sister is turning all Wyatt's horses loose and holding the gun over a man on whom she didn't inflict a serious enough wound. We look at each other. Her eyes say, *Good-bye, my love* (not in the script). I slap the Paint's rump, and soon Rose and I are racing south. It's fifteen miles to the border. Of course, they don't let us ride all the way. They trailer up the horses, and Elena and I ride in silence in the truck, thinking of our final lines, as the sun flames down the horizon corralled by the blackness of night.

On the desert set a few miles away, the crew is arranging special lights so that the black gelding won't fade into the background. I cannot get Angela out of my mind. Even though it's just a story, I can't help feeling she is in actual danger.

Final scene. We are far out in the Mexican flats, the horses heaving and a dark night closing around us. We're safe now, but the script calls for me to turn my horse back and tell Rose, "We can't leave your sister. I'll go for her."

"Ryder ..." she pauses. "My sister has been dead for twenty years."

Of course I know how the movie ends, but hearing those words shakes me to the core (a look worthy of an Oscar nomination but hard on the heart).

"Cut! Wrap!" the director yells.

"Where's Angela?" I ask immediately.

"Who's Angela?" somebody says.

"Angela Star, Rose's sister, the actress?"

"There's no Angela Star. The sister is played by Katie Turin," someone else answers.

And a young woman whom I've never seen approaches us and speaks through the sage-scented air, "Nice working with you guys."

"Yeah, Katie, good job," Elena says.

I dismount and stand on solid ground. The horse rubs his sweaty head against my shoulder. Somewhere a coyote yips. The wranglers are handling the animals, the set being broken down, people drifting off in small groups. Someone slaps me on the back.

"Great work, Bill ... Are you okay? This last day was a tough one, huh?"

I mumble something, but I am not okay. I will never be okay.

Everyone gasped at the end, and students were waving their hands frantically.

“Mr. Langley!”

“Mr. Langley, isn’t that science fiction? Are we allowed to write that? That’s just make-believe.”

“Is it now?” Langley shot back. “Does anybody else have a different idea?”

Words were tossed about: fantasy, dream-state, even stream-of-consciousness. And then William Langley shocked everyone, including me, when he said, “How ’bout quantum consciousness?”

“There’s no such thing!” Riley Starkes announced.

“I think you’re looking at it,” Mr. Langley said, holding up my manuscript.

“There’s nothing about quantum dimensions in *The Faith of a Writer*,” Suzi Han noted.

“But there is something about revelation and surprise, if I’m not mistaken,” Langley said.

“But let’s start someplace else for the moment. What’s the first thing that involves you in this story?”

“The movie script,” Blake said.

“The history part about women not being treated so well,” Melissa suggested.

“The actor, William Hathaway,” someone else said.

“I don’t believe so,” Mr. Langley said and waited.

“I’ll bet Sela doesn’t even know!” Calisha Sims teased.

“Oh, I think she does.” Langley looked at me. “Shall we say it together, Miss Hart?”

And we both said at the same time, “The title.”

Risa Hollingsworth practically leaped out of her seat. “A *range!* A whole range of things— an actor’s life, a story, or two stories within a story! Love with sex, love without sex, mistaken identity, the very *land*, the role of the horses, the role of *reality* itself ...”

Langley broke in, “You got it, Risa, and yes, yes, yes, all of those things. The title dares you to find all of these themes.”

“Range of emotions!” Lee called out. “Range of the actor’s ability.”

“Or believability!” someone added.

“The range of possibilities at the ending,” Suzi offered.

“But what about the ending? Did you know when you started how it was going to end?”

Lee asked me.

“No,” I answered truthfully.

“Isn’t that one of the rules?” Blake asked.

“There aren’t really any rules that you can’t break,” Langley tried to explain, “if you have a damn good reason. Miss Hart, would you like to enlighten us?”

“To be honest, all the way through the story, as I was writing, I thought Angela Star was the actress playing Rose’s sister. The whole ending came to me when the script has Rose say, ‘My sister has been dead for twenty years.’ That just led me to the double meaning of that statement, that Angela may be a ghost too.”

“But is Angela real or not?” someone asked.

“Why does Hathaway not see the actress Katie Turin during the actual shooting of the movie?” Suzi continued.

“How do we know what to believe? There are so many levels ... oh, wow, *dimensions*, to this story!” Lee said. He turned to me again. “Sela, it’s genius!”

“Look what we’re doing here, folks,” Langley interjected.

“We’re talking about it! We’re captured by the story!” Melissa called out.

“Exactly,” Langley said.

More hands went up, but Professor Langley said he needed to spend some time hearing our quotes from *The Faith of a Writer* that were especially engrossing for us. Almost everyone had found something meaningful, and the class ended on an upbeat note. There was excitement about writing, about language, about revelations. Mr. Langley seemed very pleased. When I passed his desk, he said softly, “Sela, may I keep this?”

“Of course. I’d be honored.”

Then, even more softly, he said, “Are you real?” with his hand on the top page of my story. It felt like a caress.

On Friday, he looked tired. This first week of school must have been hard on him, having to go home every night to an empty house, fix his own meals, grade papers in the darkening silence. My heart just ached for him. I couldn’t help asking him if he was okay when I went by his desk. His eyes sprang to life for a moment. “Nothing another story of yours wouldn’t fix,” he said.

“The next story will not be easy for you to read. I’m sorry.” I noticed that the photo of Natasha was missing.

“I think I’ll take that chance, Miss Hart.”

So I handed him “A Story in Two Hearts.”

“Sentimental?”

“Not at all. Just very literal. You’ll see.” And I took my seat.

Langley began telling us his plans for the first semester. He said there would be no tests, a metaphor workshop closer to the beginning of next semester, and independent projects for extra credit. He added that if a particular assignment wasn’t working for us, he’d accept a poem.

“I’m also not opposed to short stories having a connection or running theme. Sometimes there’s a novella or a novel developing in the writer’s head.”

Blake raised his hand. “Mr. Langley, sometimes it takes me a while to get anywhere with a short story idea.”

“You may turn in drafts, first pages, or outlines. I understand you can’t force the process, but today I have some ideas to help you. Thinking back to our discussion of knowing the ending before you begin, I’d like to suggest a few lines that could be endings. Actually, if you feel drawn to use them as first lines, that’s acceptable. The idea is just to get you writing.”

He read some lines, and we copied down the ones that appealed to us.

“and wine from the wounded deer”

“He held the rock as long as he could.”

“She looked back once.”

“no limits”

“a place for me”

“with everything undone”

I especially liked the last one. It was so inviting, mysterious, ambiguous. I might try it. Mr. Langley was saying, "Let's take some time to write other possible endings. I'd like to hear them aloud in ten minutes or so."

We set to work inventing endings. I could only think of one thing: the white bed in the white room waited.

Langley grinned when I read that. "My, my, Miss Hart," he said.

The bell rang.

But I didn't write that story. I had homework in my other four classes and a graduate project that needed some research. I thought maybe I'd turn in a poem where I'd written the last line first. I had plenty of those. I looked through the ones I'd written in Africa and tried to stay away from anything with death in it. My heart shuddered worrying about the story I'd given Mr. Langley. It would be a double reminder of the reality of death, and I wished I hadn't let him have it.

I was alone at the house. Melissa and Anne had a drama club meeting and probably wouldn't be home for a couple of hours. The phone rang. I didn't rush to get it, wondering who would call on a Friday home game night.

"Hello?"

"Sela."

I almost dropped the phone.

"How did you ...?"

"Melissa gave me your house number. I hope that wasn't inappropriate."

"No, of course not."

"Sela, I loved the stories. I just had to tell you. I knew you'd have second thoughts about letting me read them."

"I did, Mr. Langley."

"I'll admit I cried a little, but then, I think I needed to. I'm going to read them again right now. I would be pleased to know you were reading them along with me. I had an idea for class, but I'm not sure I can do it."

"What's that, Mr. Langley?"

"I would read the first part as though I were William Hathaway, and then you'd read the next as if you were Angela," he said.

"I'm not sure I could get through that either, sir."

"Why?"

"It's a little close to home—parts of it anyway."

"When did you write this?"

"Last year, standing in line for your class," I admitted.

There was a moment of silence.

"Did you know the last lines of these two stories?"

"I did."

"Wherever did they come from?"

"From the characters themselves," I said.

"Well, they're amazing. You can use them for your 'last line first' assignment."

"I appreciate it, but I'm trying to revise something I started in Africa where the last line followed me around for days looking for the rest of the words."

"A short story?"

"No. A poem."

"I'll be interested in seeing that, Miss Hart," he said quietly. "Now, pick up 'A Story in Two Hearts' and read with me."

"Okay, sir ... Good night."

"Good night, Sela."

I reached in my fifth period folder and pulled out my copy. I felt Langley's vision streaming through my eyes as I read the words. I knew he wouldn't call again.