

Diary of a Teenage Girl

Maya Book No. 2

It's a
Green
Thing

a novel

MELODY CARLSON



MULTNOMAH
BOOKS



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June 9

My cousin Kim gave me a new diary yesterday. She received it for graduation, but she prefers to journal on her computer. "With a security lock, of course," she confessed. Anyway, this nicely bound book (a green product made of recycled materials) seems to be enticing me to write. Especially since I already filled up my old diary, which is safely hidden away in one of my suitcases tucked into the back of the guest room closet. Okay, as both Kim and my uncle keep telling me, "It's *not* the guest room, Maya. It's *your* room." I'm trying to see it that way. But it's not easy. So much about my life is not easy...but I must admit that it's getting better. And I do have hope.

Anyway, since today was rather interesting and the beginning of summer vacation, I will start here. Although to get "here," I need to go back to before the school year ended. I'd been attending Harrison High for several weeks when Mr. Fenton challenged our art class to volunteer for a community project. We'd been invited by the park district to create a mural on a downtown youth center. A lot of kids signed up, and everyone seemed supportive and

interested. But today, the first day of the project, Marissa Phillips and I were the only ones to actually show.

"It figures," she said as the two of us stood gazing up at the big, boring wall. The paint was splotchy looking, with random beige smears that resembled a bad case of psoriasis. Probably someone's attempt to hide the graffiti and tagging, although a few offensive words still showed through.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"That no one else would come."

"Why's that?" I adjusted the twisted strap of my OshKosh overalls. I'd gotten dressed pretty quickly this morning, barely managing to catch the downtown bus.

"Because people are basically selfish."

I turned and looked at her. With hands planted on her hips, Marissa stared at the ugly wall and frowned. For some reason, when I first began attending Harrison High, I felt drawn to this girl. Like we shared some commonality. And I suppose we do have some physical similarities. We're both tall and have long hair, although hers is straight and mine is curly. And because she dyes it black, her hair's a lot darker than mine. I think that's why her complexion looks so pale. Whereas mine (thanks to my dad) is the color of café au lait.

But our looks aside, we are similar in other ways too. Or maybe we both just have an attitude. She's not afraid to speak her mind and has opinions that not everyone shares. She's two years older than I am. In fact, she just graduated with my cousin Kim.

Not that she seems older exactly. Or maybe I just feel older than sixteen. Sometimes I feel like I'm in my thirties. But a hard life can do that to a person.

"So if that's true," I asked Marissa, "if people are basically selfish, why are you here?"

She laughed. "I thought you knew."

"Knew?"

"I'm doing community service."

"For what?"

"Oh...something that happened a couple of months ago. I guess you hadn't moved here yet."

"What did you do?"

"I got caught with alcohol in my car."

"Driving under the influence?" I knew Marissa was kind of a wild child, but I thought she had more sense than that.

"No." She shook her head firmly. "I wasn't under the influence. I was underage."

"Well, obviously."

"It didn't really help much that my dad's a cop." She made a face as she reached into her bag and retrieved a pack of cigarettes. She shook one out, quickly lit it, then blew out an exasperated puff.

"Your dad's a cop?" Now this caught me off guard. Of all people who might have law enforcement officials in their family, Marissa just doesn't seem to fit the profile. I can only imagine how frustrated her father must feel.

"Oh yeah..." She peered back at the wall. "In fact it was his recommendation that I spend my summer vacation performing community service. If dear old Dad hadn't been in court that day, I probably would've gotten off a lot easier."

"You're doing community service for the whole summer?"

"Yep." She blew another puff of smoke over her shoulder.

"And you're okay with that?"

"It was either that or give up my car and move out of the house. And I wasn't financially ready for that...not just yet." She took in a slow drag, then looked curiously at me. "So what's your excuse?"

"Excuse?"

"For being here."

"You mean because I must be basically selfish too?"

She shrugged.

"I just wanted to do it," I admitted. "I mean, when Mr. Fenton described the project, it sounded kind of fun to help someone else, and he made it seem like it would only take a week."

Marissa laughed sarcastically. "Yeah, right. Think again."

I frowned back up at the wall. "With just the two of us, this mural could end up being your entire summer of community service."

"I wouldn't mind so much, except that it's going to be scorching out here before long, and this wall is in the sun most of the day." She reached in her bag again, and this time pulled out her cell phone.

"Who are you calling?"

"Friends... Hey, Spencer," she said warmly. "What's up, dude?" Then she winked at me. "Well, Maya and I are downtown right now. We volunteered to do this mural project, and we sure could use some big, strong guys to help out." She smiled knowingly. "Oh yeah, for sure. Maybe you could get Jake to come and help too... No, it's no big hurry. I mean, we need to kind of figure out where we're going with this mural and get the paint and stuff. Maybe not today. But how about tomorrow? First thing in the morning?" She got a catty smile now. "Oh yeah, totally." Then she hung up.

"Help on the way?"

"Sounds like it." She slipped her phone back into her bag. "Spencer is such a pushover when it comes to good-looking women."

"I hope he didn't get the wrong impression."

"We're talking about Spencer, right?" She laughed. "Of course he has the wrong impression. It's just the way that boy's brain is wired."

And I was fully aware of this. Spencer had begun hitting on me as soon as I started going to HHS a couple of months ago. I'd been flattered at first, but as I got to know him better, I realized that I needed to draw some boundaries. Even so, I wasn't going to admit that Spencer wouldn't have been my first choice for help. "So...do you think I should call anyone else?" I offered.

"Sure. Do you know anyone else?"

I kind of shrugged. The truth is, I still don't know that many people in this town. Kim and her best friend, Natalie, already have summer jobs. But I was thinking about the kids in Kim's church youth group—particularly Dominic. Any excuse to spend time with Dominic seemed like a good excuse to me. But I didn't know his number, so I called Caitlin. She and her husband, Josh, are the youth leaders, and she's been sort of mentoring me since I committed my life to God a couple of weeks ago. She answered, and I quickly explained the mural project and our lack of volunteers.

"It was supposed to take only a week," I said finally. "But with just Marissa and me and this great big wall, well, it's a little overwhelming. She's already called a guy to help, but—"

"What a cool project," Caitlin said. "That building is a real eyesore. It's great that someone wants to make it nice, and I'm sure that'll be a blessing to the kids who use the center. Why don't I call around and see who might be willing to help out?"

"That'd be awesome, Caitlin."

"When do you want your helpers to show up?"

"We have to figure some things out first. We probably won't need anyone until tomorrow morning."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks." I hung up and smiled hopefully.

But Marissa was frowning at me now. "Why are you calling in the church people?"

"Why not?"

"You want me to make you a list of reasons?"

"Are you willing to turn away free help?"

She dropped her cigarette butt to the pavement and ground it out with her heel as she shrugged. "I guess not. So what's the deal, Maya? Are you *one of them*?"

"One of what?"

"Are you a Christian too?"

I took in a deep breath, then slowly nodded. "Actually, I am."

She shook her head in a dismal way. Like this was really unfortunate.

"I'll admit it's still kind of new for me," I said.

"Why?" Her dark eyes narrowed as she studied me closely. I started to feel like a bug beneath a magnifying glass.

"Why?" I repeated, confused. "You mean why is it new for me?"

"No. *Why did you do it?*" The way she said this made a woman walking through the parking lot glance nervously at me, like she assumed I'd committed some horrendous crime.

"Become a Christian?"

"Yeah." Marissa made a sour face. "I mean, I can understand girls like Kim and Natalie... They're such goody two-shoes. But you, Maya? I thought you were different."

"I *am* different."

"Then *why*?"

"Because I was unhappy and lonely and hopeless and depressed and just really, really lost."

"And now you're found?" I could hear the teasing note in her voice.

"Actually, I do feel kind of found."

She rolled her eyes.

"Look, Marissa, if anyone had told me just a few months ago that I was going to make a life-changing commitment like this... well, I would've reacted just like you. I would've said they were crazy. Seriously, I never would've believed it myself."

Her countenance softened ever so slightly, and she didn't question this statement.

"And like I said, it's still new to me. Basically, all I can say is that I was totally mixed-up and messed up and just plain lost...and now I have this real sense of peace. Honestly, it's something I never had before."

"Peace?"

I nodded eagerly. "Yes. It's hard to describe it, but it's like my life is in good hands now, like I feel hopeful."

"You sound like Chloe Miller now."

I smiled. "I'll take that as a compliment." The fact is, of all the Christians I know, which aren't that many, I can relate to Chloe best. I mean, Kim is cool and takes her faith seriously. And Caitlin is sweet and sincere and helpful. And Nat... Well, don't get me going there. But right from the start, I seemed to get Chloe. And she seemed to get me. Maybe it has to do with the whole music thing—a kind of artistic, outside-the-box sort of thing.

"So what do you think we should paint on this wall?" Marissa seemed eager to change the subject, and I felt relieved.

"I'm thinking we should get some sketches going." I unzipped

my pack and retrieved a sketch pad. "We're not supposed to do anything out here without Mrs. Albert's approval."

"Who's that?"

"The superintendent. But if we can get her okay, we could probably start putting the drawing on the wall before our other volunteers show up. That way we can put them to work."

"Yes sir." She gave me a cheesy grin. "You the boss."

Before long we were sitting there on the curb, discussing ideas and playing with images. Unfortunately, Marissa's ideas leaned toward the dark side, and when I challenged a particularly frightening image, she seemed slightly offended.

"So what do you want to paint?" she shot back. "Sunshine, flowers, and sweet turtledoves?"

"No, not exactly. But something more cheerful than a dragon burning a gnarled tree stump."

"I was just trying to come up with something that graffiti artists would respect," she said defensively. "Something they wouldn't make fun of and want to deface."

"That's a good point. We don't want it to be too childish."

"But I suppose a dragon might be scary to some of the little kids who come here."

"What exactly is the purpose of this building?" I ventured.

She shrugged. "It's a youth center. Duh."

"So it's a place for kids to come...for what purpose?"

"To hang. To play. For kids who need something like that."

I kind of frowned at her. "Why?"

"You know, it's for kids who might be kind of underprivileged, or maybe they're unsupervised. The center has a day-care program and all kinds of classes and activities for after-school programs. Stuff like that." Now she laughed. "Oh yeah, I guess you wouldn't have had anything like that back in Beverly Hills, little Miss Rich Girl."

Sometimes I wish I hadn't told Marissa so much about myself. But at the time, when I needed a friend a couple of months ago, it seemed right. And I thought I could trust her. Not that I can't.

"I'm not a rich girl."

"Says you."

I just rolled my eyes. The truth was, I would've appreciated a center like this when I was a kid. Not that I plan to admit that to Marissa. But despite her misconceptions, my childhood wasn't exactly ideal or nurturing, and I certainly never felt rich. Of course, Beverly Hills isn't the sort of town where people are terribly concerned over the welfare of the younger generation. Like Marissa, people just assume that if you live there, your parents have lots of money, and you'll be just fine.

"So it sounds like it's a place that's meant to encourage kids, to help them grow into better people, to give them hope," I finally said.

Marissa laughed loudly. "Hey, maybe you should go into politics or public relations or advertising or something."

"Come on. The sooner we figure this out, the sooner we can

get some serious sketches going. And the sooner we can get started, the sooner we can get done, and we won't be out here baking in the sun all summer."

"You seem to have it all figured out, boss. Go for it." Marissa pulled out another cigarette.

Now I was tempted to point out the risks of emphysema and lung cancer, as well as how smoke makes your hair stink and yellows your fingernails, but I figured she was probably already aware of these facts.

"Fine. I think we should create something that feels hopeful." I squinted up at the blotchy-looking wall again. "Something colorful and cheerful and happy."

"Maybe we could paint a *pwetty wainbow*?"

Just before I made a smart retort, I stopped myself. "Hey, maybe you're right." I grabbed my sketch pad and began to draw. "But we'll design it in a more modern style. Sort of cubist." She looked over my shoulder as I drew a series of sharply angled shapes, working them together to make an arch.

"Interesting..." she finally admitted.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I can kind of see it. And it would actually be fairly easy to put a team to work on it since it's mostly shapes."

"Exactly. We'll draw them out, and they can paint them in."

"We'll need a lot of different colors."

"So you can see the rainbow?" I asked. "I mean, since there's no color in my sketch?"

"Yeah. I get where you're going." She snuffed out her cigarette, then reached in her bag for a tin of colored pencils. "Here, add some color."

By midmorning we had a final colored sketch as well as Mrs. Albert's approval. "Very nice, girls," she told us as we were ushered out of her office. "And anything will be an improvement over what's out there now."

"Well, that was flattering," Marissa said as we headed down to the storage room to meet the janitor and check out the ladders and painting supplies.

"At least her expectations aren't too high."

Marissa laughed. "Yeah, I'm pretty good at meeting people's *low* expectations."

I wanted to ask her why that was, but we needed to get busy if we were going to put more volunteers to work tomorrow. And to my relief, Marissa actually knew how to work hard. By the end of the day, Marissa had gotten the paints, and I had managed to get a fair amount of the sketch onto the lower part of the wall.

"Nice work, boss," Marissa said after we'd put the supplies away and stood looking at the beginning of our mural.

"Same back at you." And I have to admit that I was kind of excited to see how this whole thing would turn out. And hopefully more people will show up to help tomorrow.

Maya's Green Tip for the Day

Don't pour harmful wastes down public waterways. Storm drains on public streets are for rainwater to run off so the streets don't flood. They're not a convenient way for people to get rid of chemicals or solvents or even the bucket of soapy water after you wash your car. Unless you use bio-friendly car-wash detergent, which I highly recommend. You need to respect that the water that runs off our streets eventually winds up in streams and waterways and can harm innocent fish or other marine wildlife. So don't use your street drain as a dumping spot.

June 10

As it turned out, we had a crew of seven workers this morning. Okay, not first thing. But by the time Marissa and I had gotten the ladders and scaffolding in place, the other five had arrived, and we put them to work applying paint. I was sketching fast, trying to get the outline of the mural onto the wall, with Marissa following me, chalking in numbers that we had pre-matched with colors for our painters to fill in.

"It's a kind of paint-by-number thing," I explained, trying not to stare at the odd assortment of volunteers. First there was Spencer, a hard-case dude with a reputation for all kinds of stuff, and his buddy Jake, who still has some rough edges himself, although he's a Christian. And then we had three clean-cut, preppy-looking church kids that Caitlin had managed to talk into helping us. To my dismay, Dominic was not among them. However, one of these kids turned out to be a quiet but hard-working guy named Matt Stephens. How he got mixed up with the other two, a couple of airheaded girls, was a mystery.

Okay, I know it's wrong to call Brooke Marshall and Amanda Groves airheads, but even though they're part of the youth group,

they're not exactly the kind of girls I've been dying to get to know better. Unfortunately, they remind me of Kim's buddy Natalie. Meaning they talk too much, have opinions that I don't necessarily agree with, and seem to think they are better than everyone else. Okay, that's my honest take on it. And this is my diary, so I can say what I like!

Anyway, by noon it seemed that our ground crew of five painters was making progress. The color was going up, and despite Brooke and Amanda questioning stupid things like whether number seven was fuchsia or magenta, we were doing okay. Matt was a pretty fast painter, and Jake seemed willing to work, but Spencer acted like this was supposed to be a big party, and he spent most of his time harassing either Marissa or me (or perhaps he thought he was flirting). He kept a safe distance from the "church girls," as he called them. And naturally, they were quick to point out anything that Spencer was doing wrong. Of course, he made this easy for them. And I suppose I don't really blame him. Brooke and Amanda seemed to invite it.

But tonight as I write this, I'm a little concerned. I'm wondering, as a Christian, whether it's wrong to have bad feelings toward other Christians. There's no denying that Brooke and Amanda are Christians. They've made that pretty clear. But at the same time, I don't really want to be associated with them. And then I feel guilty. I guess I'll have to ask Caitlin for some clarification on this. Because the truth is, Brooke and Amanda make

me want to run in the opposite direction or maybe just scream some loud obscenity like Spencer does.

"Don't use the Lord's name in vain," Brooke corrected him—over and over today. And it seemed that the more she said this, the worse he got.

"Hey, Spencer," I called. "Maybe you should come up here and work." I thought some space between him and the church girls might help.

His eyes lit up. "Yeah, babe, I'd like that."

"Great." I climbed down the ladder. "Go for it."

"I thought we were both going to be working up there."

"Like you really wanted to work with her," scolded Amanda. "We know what you are up to."

And so it went. Oh, it's not just that these girls seemed afraid to get their hands dirty or break a nail—although that was the case at first. But they had this superior attitude. I'm not sure if it's because they're Christians or because they just honestly believe they're better than the rest of us, but it was like they were doing us this huge favor by lowering themselves to help out today. Such saintly servants of the Lord. Really, someone should've just handed them their crowns and sent them packing. Quite honestly, I hope they don't come back tomorrow. And unfortunately, I have no doubt that Marissa feels the same.

Anyway, it was a relief to call it a day. Although even that started another disagreement. "Don't pour that down there!" I

yelled at Brooke. She was about to pour a bucket of sludgy paint water down the street grate.

"What?" She looked up in surprise.

"There's paint in there."

"So?"

"So that grate is for rainwater runoff."

"So?" Now she gave me a defiant stare.

"So the paint in there will harm fish and plant life."

Brooke just laughed, and before I could stop her, she poured it down.

"Brooke! What are you doing?"

"The fish won't mind a little paint in—"

"That is so wrong!" I went over and looked down on her. She's this petite little blond thing (a gymnast, she's told us several times). "Don't ever do that again. Do you understand?"

"Don't get so worked up, Maya." But she took a couple of steps back like she thought I was going to hit her. Okay, maybe I felt like hitting her, but I would never do something like that.

"And quit being so mean to Brooke." This came from Amanda, who was standing by her friend now.

"I'm not being mean," I said as calmly as I could. "I just think we should show some respect for the environment."

Brooke laughed. "What are you? Some kind of environmental freak? A green bean?"

"A tree-hugger?" added Amanda.

Well, all I could do was just walk away. Still, I plan to stand my

ground on not contaminating the environment. To my surprise, Marissa, Spencer, and Jake all backed me on this—although it's possible that it was simply their way of standing against Brooke and Amanda. I think Matt was afraid to say anything. Mostly I'm hoping that Brooke and Amanda won't show tomorrow.

After Marissa dropped me at Kim and my uncle's house (I still have a hard time calling it home, although I want to), I was still feeling grumpy. And when I saw Kim putting something in the garbage can, well, I kind of lost it.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh?" Her dark eyes grew large. "Taking out the trash."

"But is that really trash?" I pulled an empty tomato soup can off the top of the bag in her hands. "This can be recycled."

She shrugged. "Yes, I know that."

"And this." I grabbed an empty peanut butter jar.

"Yes..." She frowned.

"And these newspapers?" I pulled a section of the news out, sending garbage tumbling onto the garage floor. "I can use these to compost with." I've already been scavenging items for the compost station out in the garden. Although my uncle has been forgetting and throwing his used coffee grounds down the sink. But this morning I told him that coffee grounds can mess up his plumbing, and he seemed to listen.

Kim made a face at me. "Looks like I've been arrested by the EP."

"EP?"

"Environmental Police." She set down the garbage bag. "Do you plan to lock me up, or can I get off with just a fine?"

I forced a smile. "Sorry, I guess I came on a little strong." Then I told her about Brooke. "I guess I'm hypersensitive today." I looked down at the spilled trash. "And this is your house. I really don't have any—"

"Look, Maya..." Kim paused. "You're absolutely right to care about the environment. And I totally agree with you."

"You do?"

"Yes. Except that recycling takes time. And I work all day. And then there are household chores and dinner and—"

"And I should help out more," I said, feeling guilty.

"No, you've been helping a lot."

"How about I take over the trash detail? I could separate recyclables and make a system that's easy for everyone to use."

She nodded. "That would be awesome, Maya. I'm sure Dad would appreciate it too."

So that's just what I did. And it probably sounds crazy to some people, but getting everything all organized actually felt really good to me. Okay, maybe it was one small step for Maya Stark, but it was one giant leap for the Peterson household—and not bad for the environment either. To start with, I retrieved several old five-gallon buckets from my aunt's garden shed. I cleaned them up and clearly labeled them. One for glass. One for metal. One for soda cans that can be returned to the store for a refund. One for newspapers. Then I called the garbage service to find out

if and when they pick up these things. As it turned out, they don't. And I thought that was wrong. So I approached my uncle.

"I can't believe your town doesn't encourage recycling," I said as I showed him my new system. "Lots of sanitation businesses offer special boxes for their customers to use to separate their recyclables."

To my surprise he wholeheartedly agreed with me. And he appreciated that I'd set them up to recycle. "Maybe there's a way we can encourage this through the newspaper," he said. "Because you're right. We need to catch up with the times here."

And so, despite the irritation of people like Brooke Marshall, I am feeling hopeful. There are people who are concerned about the planet. And really, shouldn't Christians be extra concerned? I mean, they know the God who created the planet. Doesn't that make them want to take special care of it?

Maya's Green Tip for the Day

It's easy to create your own home recycling center. First, decide where to put it and determine how much room you have. Then find some containers large enough to hold your recyclables. I recommend containers that are washable like garbage cans or wastebaskets, but you can use a cardboard box or grocery sack lined with a plastic trash bag. Clearly mark the containers: Glass, Metal, Newspapers, Redeemable Containers, Reusable Bags. The keys to making this work are a handy location, clearly marked containers, and diligence.

Praise for
It's a Green Thing

“Maya is a fun character! It’s not even possible to read *It’s a Green Thing* and not relate to her questions, her challenges, and her struggles as a teen and Christian. *And* I found myself jotting down her awesome eco-friendly tips!”

—JENNY B. JONES, award-winning author of *In Between* and the Charmed Life series

Praise for
A Not-So-Simple Life

“As Maya Stark pours her heart out in her journal, readers are treated to an inside view of a life that is at times exotic and unfamiliar and at other times hauntingly similar to our own. Maya’s struggles become our struggles, her pain our pain, and her successes, therefore, even sweeter. *A Not-So-Simple Life* is another triumph for Melody Carlson.”

—VIRGINIA SMITH, author of *Sincerely, Mayla* and *Stuck in the Middle*

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“Melody Carlson has proven her skill once again at writing gritty stories about characters in difficult situations. In *A Not-So-Simple Life*, Maya Stark seeks to escape life under the controlling hand of her drug-addicted mother by acting on a plan for independence with admirable determination.”

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“I just finished Melody’s book and loved it! The journal format makes the story, and Maya, so real and believable. Readers will easily be able to identify with the realistic approach to a prevalent situation.”

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