

Only later did I learn why they pushed me so hard

# Mama and Miss Jordan

By MARY HATWOOD FUTRELL



**M**AMA WAS calling to me, grasping my chin in her hand with a firmness that meant she wanted me to pay attention. I started awake, realizing it must be nearly midnight. Her expression was severe. "Mary," she said, "where's your homework?"

Then I remembered. I had not finished my assignments. I had not left my completed papers on the kitchen table where she could see

MARY HATWOOD FUTRELL, who has served as president of the National Education Association for six years, finishes her last term in September.

them when she returned home from the last of three jobs that she held. "Oh, Mama, I fell asleep," I told her weakly.

"Well, you better get up now and finish your work. Your studies come first!" she said, releasing my chin at last.

I dragged myself out of bed, found my books and papers and set out to finish my assignments. As I did so, I could not help feeling a burning injustice had been done. Why me? Why did she always seem to single me

ILLUSTRATION: CHRISTOPHER CALLE

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out, especially, for such harsh treatment?

Those feelings were nothing new, but I did not give voice to them. With Mama, you didn't argue. You just obeyed. I finished my work and gave it to her to check. By this time she was dozing in the rocker, exhausted by a workday that had begun before sunup.

My mother, Josephine Hatwood, had wanted to be a nurse. But her parents died when she was a child, and she had to leave school in the sixth grade. Mama has worked ever since.

My first memories were of the nice house we had in Altavista, Va. It was an attractive bungalow with a small garden. My father worked in construction. Those were happy days. I remember my older sister Ann taking me to school with her when I was barely three, so my mother could do domestic work. Later, when Daddy became ill, he had to go into the hospital in Lynchburg, about 25 miles away, because Altavista did not have a hospital.

We used to ride the train down to Lynchburg with Mama to visit Daddy. She would take him newly laundered pajamas and flowers from our yard, and we would take pictures we had made in school. But he got worse and worse, and we could see Mama fighting off tears on the ride back home.

Then Daddy died, and there was no insurance to pay the mountain of medical bills and Mama had only

Daddy's \$18-a-month Social Security check coming in. We lost the house and moved to Lynchburg, where Mama worked for three families, in addition to cleaning churches, to feed and clothe us. She wouldn't even consider going on welfare.

I remember when Ann and I walked barefoot to school one fine September day because our shoes had worn out and there wasn't enough money for Mama to buy us new ones. The principal looked at us and raised his eyebrows, but didn't say anything. The next day we thought he would speak, but he didn't. The third day he met us at the door.

"Why don't you have shoes on?"

We explained that Mama couldn't afford to buy us shoes. "Well," he said, "you'll have to go home. We can't have you attending school barefoot. You'll have to tell your mother."

Ann took my hand, and we turned to go back home. Being the more mischievous one, I suggested we spend the day in a nearby cornfield instead. Just about the time school was over we went home. There was Mama, waiting for us. That was most unusual, but the gossip line is faster than Western Union in a town like Lynchburg.

Mama was frowning—and standing straight as a tent pole. She asked us where we had been. I made up a story rather than upset her. Then she started crying. "You were not in school today," she said.



It was clear she knew everything. She told us how important it was to get an education. She also told us never to be ashamed of being poor. "It's not what you wear, it's who you are," she said. "That's what matters." A few days later, when she got paid, she took money she would have used to pay bills to buy us new shoes.

MAMA HAD SO FEW private moments with us that we cherished each one, especially those times when we read aloud. I'd climb into her bed and wait until it was my time to read. Then I got to be right next to Mama until it was another sister's turn.

But for all the warmth I felt, Mama's toughness with me always left me feeling as if I pleased her less than her other children and that I could never entirely gain her good wishes. My sister Marianne, whom Mama took in as a foster child when her mother died, seemed to have advantages I never enjoyed. I remember how envious I was when Mama got Marianne an extra coat while I had to make do with my old worn one. I couldn't understand it. But Mama had sensed that Marianne's needs were greater than mine, because of her early loss.

Mama had given me one gift, however, that has always stood me in good stead. I had the habit of happiness, so even if my small world was not entirely sunny, neither was it sad. I also loved to talk, a

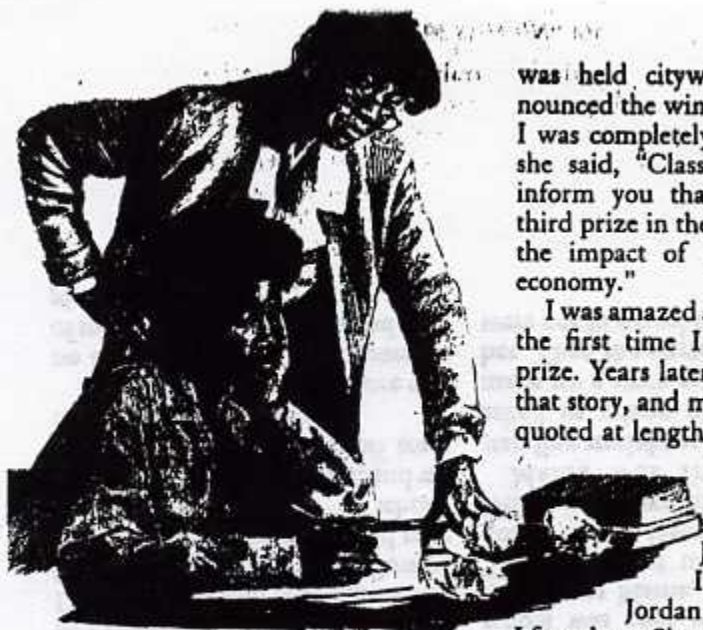
trait not always appreciated by Miss Jordan, my tenth-grade English teacher.

She was a teacher no one wanted because she was so strict. She stood about five-foot-five, was very thin and wore her hair pulled back in a way that gave her a horsy look. And she wore those half-circular reading glasses. Whenever she got upset, she would lower her head and peer at you over the tops of her glasses. You could feel the temperature drop when she set her features like that.

One day in her class I was so busy talking I didn't realize she had stopped teaching and was scowling straight at me. "Young lady, I would like to see you after school."

Later Miss Jordan explained in a low, but very firm voice that when she was talking she expected me to listen. "For punishment I want you to write a thousand-word essay on education and its impact on the economy," she said, "and turn it in by next Wednesday."

Well, I met my deadline. I was confident. It was a good paper. And I expected a sign of approval from her. Next day in class, however, she was peering at me over her glasses. She called me forward and returned my paper. "Go back and rewrite it," she said. "Remember, each paragraph is supposed to begin with a topic sentence." When she returned my paper a second time, she corrected the grammar. The third time, the spelling. The fourth time, it was



was held citywide. They've announced the winners." She paused. I was completely perplexed. Then she said, "Class, I am happy to inform you that Mary has won third prize in the essay contest—on the impact of education on the economy."

I was amazed and thrilled. It was the first time I had ever won a prize. Years later, I told a reporter that story, and my comments were quoted at length in a newspaper—

including my unflattering description of Miss Jordan's appearance.

I didn't know Miss Jordan was still alive. But I found out. She wrote me, and said that her appearance wasn't what was important. What was important was the lesson I had learned. When I wrote and rewrote that paper for her, I began to learn how to discipline myself.

I was touched by her letter. Except for Mama, she was the person I most wanted to please in this world.

At the end of tenth grade, the whole class took a comprehensive achievement test, and I came in number five. Suddenly all the teachers began urging me to consider college. But it remained a remote hope. There was no way I could afford to go. I applied anyway and was accepted to Virginia State College in Petersburg.

When graduation night came, Mama was there, especially proud

punctuation. The fifth time, it wasn't neat enough. I was sick!

The sixth time, I rewrote the whole paper slowly, in ink, leaving generous margins. When she saw it, she removed her glasses and smiled. She finally accepted the paper. After that, I put the whole thing out of my mind.

It must have been two or three months later when, again, I was talking in class. The kids were saying, "Mary, stop! Miss Jordan is staring!" I glanced up, and she had that same look on her face. "Did you hear what I said, Mary?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't." I looked around for one of my friends to whisper the answer to me, but no one did.

Miss Jordan continued: "I was talking about an essay contest that



because I was the first member of our family to finish high school (followed, a year later, by my sister Ann). Mama was sitting up near the front, and I caught her eye as I got my diploma. She was smiling through the tears.

Even that wonderful moment wasn't the high spot of the evening. To my amazement, they called my name, and they just kept calling. Each time, another announcement of another scholarship for college. From sororities and fraternities and businesses and churches there came one award after another—\$1500 in total, at a time when an auto cost about \$2000. I could go to college after all!

They hadn't told me or Mama anything. But I think my favorite teacher, Miss Jordan, knew because she was smiling and nodding her head as if to say, "See, now, what you can do with discipline?"

I MAJORED in business education and kept winning scholarships and also worked summers. Even at college I heard remarks about my simple clothing—most of it handed down or sewn by Mama. I just kept remembering her words—"It's not what you wear, it's who you are." Still, when no one could see, I cried a lot. Yet I knew it was nothing compared to the pain and suffering Mama had gone through for me.

Some of my friends in graduate school became incensed when they began to appreciate what generations of discrimination had cost

them. But Miss Jordan's admonitions on self-discipline kept me intent on my studies. And Mama's example and words kept me from ever being angry or discouraged. "Mary Alice, if you're unhappy with things, try to change them," she would say. "And if you're knocked down, get up and start over again!"

Since then, the strengths and skills that I acquired from both Mama and Miss Jordan have acted as twin beacons that have guided me, for many years as a classroom teacher in Alexandria, and more recently as president of the National Education Association. I have tried to emulate Mama's fortitude and Miss Jordan's clarity of mind. And in my battles against discrimination and in behalf of teachers, I have come to appreciate the value of Mama's unyielding demands. Still, one question continued to gnaw at me for more than 30 years.

Then Mama came to visit. We were standing side by side, washing up some pots and pans after a family gathering. I drew a deep breath. "Mama, how come you were always so much tougher on me than on any of the others?"

She laid down her dish towel and looked pensive. But she didn't say anything.

As I waited, I sensed that Mama was wrestling with strong feelings, trying to find a response. But there was to be no reply that day.

The next morning Mama and I

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sat at the breakfast table, looking out to the garden. We talked about nothing in particular, and then I poured both of us a second cup of coffee. We sat in silence for a moment more when Mama took my chin in her hand with that calm firmness. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "You asked me a question yesterday, Mary Alice. I've been thinking of an answer. You had strength. But you were very strong-willed. I had to be

harder on you because you had more gifts, more to give, and it was more important for you to get all the schooling you could because I just knew that many other people would be depending on you to do your best. That's my answer to your question, Mary Alice."

She was still holding my chin, and I could hear the grandfather clock ticking in the den. I nodded, and she relinquished her grip. "I understand, Mama." At last I did.

Reprints of this article are available. See page 212.



### Headline Hits

Headline on a story in the Appleton, Wis., *Post-Crescent* about judges for a cheese contest: "THEY KNOW WHICH WHEY IS UP."

In the Allentown, Pa., *Morning Call*: "FLEA MARKET IS FOR THOSE ITCHING TO FIND BARGAINS."

Over an article in the Los Angeles *Times* about a special reunion: "POLICE IN ACADEMY'S CLASS OF '37 RETURN TO SCENE OF THEIR PRIME."

### Night Traveler

THE PURPOSE OF MY EVENING WALK is the walking itself, and the mental, emotional and physical benefits it brings. But the ultimate goal is a different perspective.

As I return from my contemplative constitutional, there on the corner stands my house. From across the street I pause and look. I think of our three young sons asleep upstairs, and of my wife who sits in the living room reading, or in the study as she plays her guitar and sings quietly to herself. I take a deep breath of the clean night air and think, "In that house is all that is most precious to me."

That is the main reason that I walk one mile away from home each evening, then one mile back, and then pause: to remind myself of the sacred things in my life.

It's not a bad reason for taking a walk.

—Mitch Finley in *The Christian Science Monitor*