

Gettin' Above My Raisin'

Mama died of eye and tongue cancer when I was in eighth grade. She'd been blind and hadn't talked for many years. People called her "The Eaten-up Woman" and came from miles around to see her. Daddy didn't come right out and say they had to pay. He just turned away anybody who showed up without a bag of flour or such. I was embarrassed, but he made me stay on hand because "visitors were more generous in the presence of beauty flowering in the midst of poverty." Daddy made me leave school so he could hire me out to make up the "lost revenue." I'd done all the house-tending anyway, but he slapped me when I objected and said he'd not have me "gettin' above my raisin."

I was known as book-smart, and my teacher, Mrs. Swinson, tried to get the School Board to intervene, but Daddy's "situation of hardship" won out. On my last day, she gave me some of the books she'd lent me to read "on the side." They were my favorites, along with *Jane Eyre*, at that point—*A Tale of Two Cities*, *David Copperfield*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Adam Bede*, and *Robinson Crusoe*. She said, "Polly, I've never seen a girl with more possibilities. Just you remember that."

When I was in the seventh grade, I had my classes in the "high school building" for the first time and got to attend the senior play, *Jane Eyre*. Mrs. Swinson was the faculty advisor who picked and directed it. I still have the program in my scrapbook. Helen Torrans—Jane—was my idol. "?????" played The Maniac. Can you imagine putting "?????" in the program? I thought the whole business was the most wonderful thing I could ever hope to see and wrote Mrs. Swinson a note telling her so. She gave me both

the play and the book, and we became friends. I never told her that my brother Nev tore them apart. But at least I'd memorized the whole play before he did.

"Mrs. Swinson," I said, "What I truly will remember is you telling us that we can often put more trust in books than real life. I'd rather be Robinson Crusoe right now. Or even Friday. But I've got to go into a different wilderness." We both cried then, and I had to pull away and run from that good place. I thought I'd die and was close to wishing I would.

I couldn't tell Mrs. Swinson, but she'd issued a death sentence on those books, too, because Daddy, if he couldn't sell them, would destroy them. They'd be another example of me "gettin' above my raisin'."

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