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Martha Jordan

When Paul and I arrived in Chapel Hill in 1948, we were impressed by the scarcity of secretaries in the academic departments we had business with.

Paul had received a strange confirmation that he had a job as a part time instructor of Mathematics. It consisted of a two-cent postal card bearing a single line stating when his duties were to begin and signed by Archibald Henderson, head of the department until the arrival of W. M. Whyburn, the new head. The department had no secretary. In fact, the following summer Dr. Whyburn persuaded me to work several hours as his secretary. He led me to a cubby hole on the third floor of Phillips Hall equipped with an old Remington typewriter and a phone on a small table. He returned to his office on the first floor. When he wanted to talk to me, he buzzed me, I picked up the phone, and we carried on our conversation above the dial tone of the telephone. He had very little use for a secretary, and I was happy to return in the fall to my teaching duties.

The English Department had a single secretary who was very pleasant despite being overworked by the senior professors of the department. Those of us in 115 Sanders had no contact with her. In fact, I became acquainted with Marilyn only because she was a neighbor of our friends, the Caldwells, in Victory Village, the pre-fab married student housing.

The Department of Statistics had a single secretary, too, but she was the queen of secretaries and a powerful presence in our lives. She was Martha Jordan, who handled the routine work of Dr. Harold Hotelling, the chairman, but spent most of her time mothering (and bullying) the graduate students. She made her presence known especially in getting the various graduate students to qualify for their foreign language requirements. Considering herself an expert in the reading requirements for German, she badgered each one until he (or she - there was one woman student at that time) took the course she prescribed even though he might already be proficient in, say, German. She stuck with each student until he had successfully finished the foreign language requirements for his graduate degree. At graduation, she supervised the students' dress, making sure that no one wore white socks or brown shoes, which she deplored, feeling those items spoiled the effect of their academic gowns when they marched across the outdoor stage in the football stadium. Moreover, she went to the graduation ceremonies to be sure that each one had heeded her advice.

Before their graduation, she took charge of their social lives - and Paul and I allowed her to do so when we came in new and unsure of our ground in the school and town. She had informal parties at her house not far from the campus, getting acquainted with wives as well as students. She organized trips to nearby towns to have dinner. It was in that guise that Paul and I got especially well acquainted with her. My job as instructor in the English Department, which paid \$3,600 a year, meant that Paul and I had a bit more disposable income than most of the other students, especially those married students with one or two children.

She instituted the custom of a student giving a beer blast the evening after he had passed his orals. If he lived in the dormitory, he had the party at Martha's house, with her supervising the bringing in of the beer, cheese, crackers, and nuts.

Martha was a great deal of fun, and we liked her very much. She had been the Statistics Department secretary for years, and was a great source of information about the professors and their families. She also was well acquainted in the friendly little village of Chapel Hill and kept us entertained with benign gossip about the various inhabitants. We learned such things as the turmoil in one father-dominated house when he embarrassed his attractive teenaged daughter by placing a red light bulb in the lamp post at the entrance to their driveway. But, as time went on, we found ourselves occasionally smothered by her constant attention to our lives.

To know Martha was also to know Catherine (of Aragon) her intelligent black cocker spaniel. Catherine was a charmer, captivating Paul and me. In our first winter when Martha had to leave town for several days, she asked us to take care of Catherine in our virtually unfurnished pre-fabricated house out on Purefoy Road. We were reluctant to have Catherine because of her long, silky black coat which shed a heavy trail wherever she went. We reinforced each other's decision that Catherine would have to learn to sleep on her pillow on the floor in our bedroom. However, the weather turned very cold, and when Catherine jumped into our bed, we discovered that she was a wonderful supplemental source of warmth. Then the problem was which one of us she would sleep closer to. We courted our furry blanket regardless of the black hair on our bed clothes.

Martha was an expert in getting students and their wives to help her with various chores about her house. One couple spent all day Saturday helping Martha paint the baseboards in her large otherwise white kitchen/dining room a shiny black enamel. Her theory was that the black baseboard would hide Catherine's copiously shed hair. Actually, the satiny black highlighted each of those many hairs.

When she was troubled by a balky 1947 Chevrolet, Martha consulted each of "her" students about her car problems. The car regularly stalled after she had driven a couple of blocks. Peanut, the local car repair expert at the Gulf station, worked on the car and returned it to Martha, but it still stalled. Finally, after she had returned the car to Peanut several times, with no success, he suggested that she drive him about Chapel Hill so that he could see just exactly the nature of the stalling. She settled herself into the driver's seat, adjusted the rearview mirror, and pulled out the choke knob to hang her purse on, out of her way. Peanut immediately solved her problem. Once the car had started, the choke provided such a rich mixture of gas that the car stalled and flooded. With her handbag on the seat beside her, the car no longer stalled.

We had many adventures with Martha. She was indeed a good friend and kept a maternal eye on both Paul and me. However, by our second year on her list of the first ones to call, we discovered that her attentions were occupying too much time of a serious graduate student with heavy studying to do, as well as a conscientious English teacher who needed

more time to mark her ubiquitous English papers. We found that tapering off our almost constant association with Martha was a big problem, for we still liked her and wanted to be friends - just not quite such *good* friends. We were scrupulously honest with her about the ever-present burden of work, and she, fortunately, understood.

After we left Chapel Hill, we corresponded with Martha and thus were able to keep up with the comings and goings of most of our friends. When Paul had a sabbatical leave which we spent in Blacksburg, where Roland was born, we made one trip down the mountain to see Martha and show off our offspring, three-year-old George and three-month-old Roland. When Roland needed a nap, we were afraid to put him to sleep on her high bed; instead, we made a soft nest for him of folded quilts on her bedroom floor. Roland had his nap, but I spent most of the trip back to Blacksburg picking Catherine's black hair off his clothes and covers.

That was the last time we saw Martha and Catherine, although we continued our correspondence with her until her death in 1960. We retain fond memories of our adventures with that secretary of secretaries in Chapel Hill - Martha Jordan and her companion Catherine.