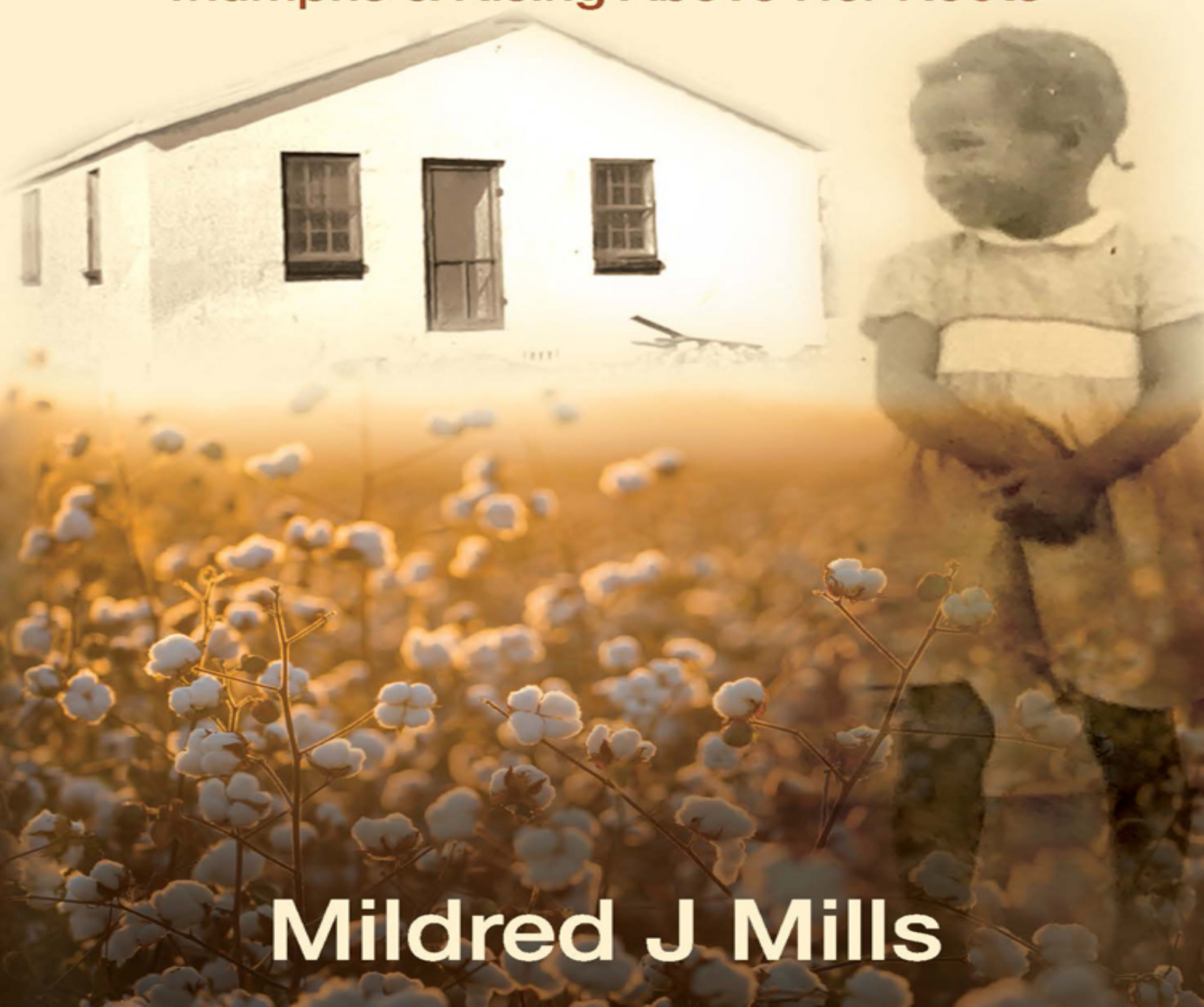


# DADDY'S HOUSE

A Daughter's Memoir of Setbacks,  
Triumphs & Rising Above Her Roots



**Mildred J Mills**

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This book is a memoir. The events are portrayed to the best of the Author's recollection of experiences over time. While all the stories in

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## CHAPTER 1

# A Mother's Dowry

**O**ne starlit morning when I was eighteen, a lump like a fist clamped my heart as I rushed out the back door and down the steps with my blue Sears Roebuck suitcase containing everything I owned. I grabbed the door handle of the pink Super 88, where Daddy sat behind the wheel, beckoning me to get in. A chorus of bullfrogs sang harmoniously with the humming engine, and the car's headlights beamed a path across the cow pasture, drawing me forward.

I turned and gazed back at Mama, a silhouette in black plastered against the white cinderblock wall. She stood on the concrete porch, her too-thin pink-and-blue floral shift waving like a flag in the gentle breeze. Tears, illuminated by the reflection of headlamps, gleamed against her cheeks as she watched her namesake walk away, the first of her children to do so. It was June 1969.

I was the third of Abraham and Mildred Billups's seventeen children, born in Wetumpka, Alabama—a small, dusty community in the sticks of Elmore County. Our white cinderblock house sat at the dead end of a red dirt road that ran straight through the woods at the butt end of the earth. I stood there torn between the two people who gave me life: Daddy at the steering wheel and Mama on the porch. When I looked from one to the other at two o'clock that

morning, it was abundantly clear I wanted freedom from them both. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder if I was doing the right thing.

I glanced over my shoulder and waved a last goodbye to Mama. She threw open her arms and reached for me. A strong breeze whipped open her flimsy duster and exposed her large breasts, protruding stomach, and big thighs shaped like cured hams. In pitch blackness, this startling sight was like something out of a comedy, but nobody laughed. I asked myself: *Is it wrong of me to leave her?*

I wondered what life would be like waking up mornings not guided by those hands, rough and steady, or encouraged by her gentle voice. I was too young then to grasp the magnitude of the dowry Mama had already given me. She didn't have a penny to offer but had bestowed on me a sense of worth, pride, and independence as much a part of me as my skin color.

I ignored Mama's nakedness and focused on the curly ringlets above her shoulders, creamy skin the color of a banana peel just before the brown spots come, full lips, and raggedy yellow flip-flops held together by a pink safety pin. I had no idea then that she was already eight months pregnant with my youngest sister, the seventeenth and last child she would bear. I drank in her beauty under the crescent moon that hung like a front porch swing, and my heart crumbled, hearing each muffled sob that escaped her throat. But no amount of crying would keep me here with my fortress, my friend—my strength.

I raced back up the steps, and Mama folded me into her arms like egg whites into a cake batter. I absorbed her warm, firm body, felt her heartbeat, pressed my face against her cheek, and tasted salty tears. Mama squeezed and held me like she feared I might disappear. "Mildred, I knowed from the day you was born you would be my *first* child to grow up and leave me," she said in a soft-voiced wail that tore at my heart.

But I was past feeling guilty about finding my place in life. Hell, yes. I was leaving my Mama.

I looked behind her at the sagging screen door and whispered, "Mama, I can't stay. I need to make a better life for you *and* me."

I will never forget the resignation on Mama's face as she wiped the tears from her eyes, faced me with her hands on my shoulders, and repeated a passage I'd heard her recite many times: "Trust in the Lawd wit' all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In *all* your ways, acknowledge Him, and He will direct your path." She chuckled nervously. "I ain' never told you this, but that's my favorite scripture. Proverbs."

Daddy laid on the car horn, and Mama and I winced.

"Do the best you can with what you have, and remember, Mildred, nothing beats a failure but a try. I done packed everything a girl needs in your suitcase." I nodded but didn't speak. With that teaching, Mama gave me her blessing and released her young daughter into the night, covered by God's grace and mercy.

I walked away from Mama wrapped in love, the remembrance of her raggedy-toothed smile emblazoned on my heart. I slipped onto the bench seat across from Daddy and waved through the passenger side window until the car backed away from the house, and I could no longer see her standing on the porch in the dark.

Tears threatened to slip down my face as I thought how, only yesterday, I had sat alone on that same little porch, perched like a cat with a fresh bowl of milk. I remember thinking then that it had been two months since my eighteenth birthday, six weeks since Daddy last beat me, a week since high school graduation, and the first time since I was five that I was *not* in the cotton field on a weekday. I felt twelve feet tall on that June day, lighter than a feather.

On that porch, I'd been ecstatic, knowing that in less than twenty-four hours, I would wave goodbye to the cotton fields of Wetumpka, Alabama, when Daddy drove me to a technical college in Columbus, Ohio. I had locked my fingers behind my head, closed my eyes, and leaned against the concrete wall of the only home I'd ever known. Then, I said to the rising sun, "Kiss. My. Face." Shivers of excitement pinched my nipples as sparrows soared and bumblebees buzzed—unrestricted. Soon, I'd be free from the sights, sounds, and

smells of Mama, Daddy, and my fifteen surviving brothers and sisters.

With so many people always buzzing around, I'd thought my home was a place of confusion; I couldn't decide whether to love its beauty or hate its stench. Every time I stepped outside the house onto the little porch, the smell of chicken shit, hog pens, and the maggoty red outhouse spread its arms like a greeting committee. Yet, beyond the pigpen, where the soil was rich and black, the sweet smell of honeysuckles and cultivated fields eased into my bloodstream.

As Daddy backed away from the little porch, just outside the door where my sisters slept, I wanted to soak in every part of the cinderblock house and the family I left behind. I envisioned my seven younger brothers sleeping on one narrow bed or the floor of the screened-in back porch, then glanced through the car's rear window as we passed the front porch, where, as a child, I had delighted in the joy of playing jacks with my older sister, Bunny. The house faded to black amid crackling pea gravel under Daddy's racing tires. I faced the road ahead and thought, *So many porches, only two bedrooms.*

Burrowed into the corner of the Oldsmobile passenger seat, hoping Daddy wouldn't notice me, I gripped my purse so tight my knuckles were white. I should have been shouting hallelujah and jumping for joy that I had graduated high school and was off to a bright future. But I knew I was never more than one wrong word and a U-turn away from being back in the cotton field. So, there I sat, strung tight enough to have a nervous breakdown, trying not to set off the lunatic in the driver's seat.

Daddy flew down country roads, gripping the steering wheel like a lover as we headed toward I-65 North, leaving a trail of red dust in the dark. I closed my eyes, inhaled deeply, and filled my lungs with country smells from the open car windows—fresh-mowed grass, honeysuckle blossoms, pine needles, and skunk. The farther north I rode in Daddy's car, leaving everything and everybody familiar, the



more I wondered what aromas would greet me in the unfamiliar territory of Ohio.

With that thought, I was suddenly afraid. I realized that in my haste to be free of my parents, I hadn't thought of what a sheltered existence I had lived in my two-parent home where, despite struggles, they remained together to raise their family. I remembered a story Mama told me when, as a young girl, I asked her how she and Daddy had met and ended up on the farm.

My parents grew up two miles apart and knew each other from church and school. Mama was the youngest of ten, Daddy the youngest of twelve, and both were the first high school graduates in their families. Mama and Daddy married in 1946, a year after he returned from Egypt. He was twenty-five; she was twenty.

In October 1950, after purchasing a sixty-acre farm with Daddy's GI Bill money, they left his mother's house on a horse-drawn wagon, carrying all their worldly goods and my two older siblings: four-year-old Brother and seven-month-old Bunny. Mama was already pregnant with me.

I imagine Daddy at the reins calculating how long clearing the land and building a farm would take, facts that come naturally to a brick mason and carpenter. I envision Mama thinking about me, embracing me, protecting me, the three-month-old pod growing inside her belly. She told me how happy she had been to have a place of her own but how terrified she was of being miles away from her mom (ten miles), moving to an isolated, wild, and untamed place.

Recently, sitting across the dining room table from Mama, I asked how she adjusted to the unfamiliar surroundings and overcame her fear. Mama clasped her hands and smiled. "Eventually, I grew to love the peace and quiet and watching things grow." Remembering her words, I was swaddled in a cloak of peace and calm, heading to a faraway place with an opportunity for my own growth. I faced the road ahead. A kernel of hope and satisfaction sprouted inside me with every mile, remembering what I was leaving behind. I knew I had taken my last ass whipping from Daddy. And I decided right

there in that car that if Daddy couldn't break me, I would *not be broken*. I also remembered that I had left a praying Mama behind, one who had breathed prayers into my spirit as she held me to her bosom only minutes earlier.



## CHAPTER 2

# Honor Above Resentment

I grew up believing—as I still do—that Mama had a direct line to God; she called on Him often and with such fervor that I knew He would grant her wishes. Almost every time I walked through our home and found her seated, her eyes were closed in prayer.

Mama prayed about everything. She even prayed before whipping me. I recall the creased face, quivering lips, and sad pleas as Mama lectured me after I committed a punishable offense. This time, I'd hurled a fork at Brother. I had cooked dinner and was setting the table, and he shoved me. I was ten; he was fourteen. I cocked back my right arm like Sandy Koufax and hurled a fork that sailed past his head and through a windowpane, shattering the glass. Mama huffed into the dining room from outdoors in time to witness the whole thing.

"Git out there and bring me a switch," she yelled. "You and your hot-headed temper." I handed her the switch. "Lawd, have mercy, Mildred, this gonna hurt me more than is' gonna hurt you." I stood eye-level with Mama as she sat on the edge of a ladder-back chair, making this declaration. In my young mind, I thought she was nuts. Why pray for God's mercy, whip me anyway, and claim it caused *her* pain?

I didn't want to add to Mama's agony, so I lowered my head and tried to look repentant, although I wanted to punch something rather than get hit. By the time she was mad enough to whip me, I had deserved it.

"I'm gonna let you slide this time," Mama sometimes said, only to come back weeks later with "I'm gonna beat you for the old and the new" and order me out of the house to pick a switch from a peach tree. I trudged along slowly, looking over my shoulder, hoping she'd get distracted by some other disaster. I even wished God would remind her through Psalm 127:3 that "Children are a gift from the Lord; they are a reward from him." But after so many babies, she likely didn't view them as gifts anymore.

With a peach branch in her hand, Mama became Superwoman. I skipped around, yelping like an excited puppy, while she flailed that switch through the air. It sounded like a swarm of bees, and upon contact with tender little legs, it left an impression. Mama's whippings didn't last long, but she raised her voice an octave during the act. "You know why I'm beatin' your tail?" She didn't wait for an answer, and I didn't offer one. "I ain't gonna let you grow up like you was hatched by the buzzards and raised by the snakes." I still don't know what that meant, but it sounded awful.

Some Friday nights, I was thrilled when Daddy disappeared to places unknown, even though it left Mama home alone with their house full of babies. The house was filled with laughter and lightheartedness on those nights. I felt like the little girl I was—free to dream and be anything or anybody I wanted to be, even a butterfly. Mama allowed us to express ourselves freely, not fearing Daddy's wrath. She'd gather her children in the living room, saying, "Let's have a prayer meeting." She'd begin the service soft and slow with a song like "Tell Him What You Want," a call-and-response spiritual, in her off-key voice. Mama would sing, "You know Jesus is on the main line." We'd chime in, "Tell him what you want/tell him what you want." I loved the call-and-response section. Mama would yell "Call him up!" three times, a sound of desperation in her shrill

voice. We'd echo the call, ending with the refrain, "And tell him what you want."

I often wondered if those prayer services occurred when Mama craved human touch to fill lonely nights. I now realize she taught us how to pray, share, and bond with each other on those Friday evenings as we clapped, laughed, and sang like we were part of the Hallelujah chorus. Mama called our names in chronological order. "Now it's your turn. What song you wanna sing, or would you like to pray?" She never forced participation yet encouraged us, making us believe we could perform like Mahalia Jackson or James Brown.

After singing, Mama would drop to her knees in front of our old sofa—its floral cover meant to conceal bare wood frames and broken springs hidden like skeletons in a casket. She'd prop her elbows on the couch and rest her chin in her palms. We'd bow our heads, close our eyes, and clasp our hands.

Mama spoke to Jesus like He was sitting on the couch drinking the wine He made from water at the marriage at Cana. Her prayers were almost always the same: "Dear Heavenly Father, I come before you in the humblest manner I know how." She asked Him to bless the sick and afflicted everywhere, the prison-bound and those less fortunate than us. Mama asked forgiveness for her sins by thought, word, or deed, and for things not pleasing in His sight; forgive those who had sinned against her. "Father, throw your long arms of protection around us and keep us safe from all hurt, harm, and danger." Every request sounded more urgent than the last. She wrinkled her face and pleaded with God as if her life depended on it.

"Hallelujah," we'd shout. "Amen." The more we responded, the longer Mama prayed. Sometimes we'd peep from under our eyes at each other, crinkle our faces, and giggle silently. But there was no more giggling when Mama said, "Lawd, let me live long enough to raise my own little chillun so they won't be scattered everywhere. When my work on Earth is done, please give me a resting place somewhere around your kingdom, for Christ's sake. Amen."

As the words to her prayer sank in, I couldn't decide whether to cry or sneak off to bed. I'd look at my siblings, barefoot and dusty,

sitting in a semicircle around Mama. We played and worked outside every day, did not own a change of clothes, and only bathed on Saturday nights. Who but Mama would want such a raggedy crew?

Sometimes, Mama spoke to us like she was going away. "I done taught y'all to take care of one another, no hittin' and fightin'. Whatever one got, I expect you to share." She would lower her head, shake it slowly from side to side, and sit silently for several seconds. We stared at Mama and each other with our eyes glazed over like we were destined for an orphanage. No one moved, just sat on the floor with our faces twisted up, lips quivering, and eyes unfocused. For the next few days, we were helpful children, no bickering—perfect church scholars.

Years after I left home, I asked Mama, "Why did you wake *me* in the middle of the night to take care of your children? Why not Bunny or Rachel?"

We sat across from each other at the twelve-foot rectangular table that Daddy and his sons wrestled down several flights of stairs at an office building to provide seating when all his children came home. Mama slowly rubbed her palms together in a handwashing motion.

"Well, Mildred, you just had a way with my babies; they responded to you." She rocked gently on a chair and stared through the sliding glass patio door at cows grazing near the lake.

I let that sink in for a moment. "Mama, what does that even mean?"

She squirmed on her chair and looked directly into my eyes. "Well, Bernice wasn't no good with chillun, and Rachel couldn't stay awake." Bunny, whose given name was Bernice and the name Mama always called her, was a year older, and Rachel—a year younger.

I resented having my sleep disturbed, but I took Exodus 20:12, "Honor thy father and mother," seriously as a child, and I still do. I greeted each screaming baby with a sharp pinch to their little fat thigh. What the hell? They were already squalling, and I was tired and filled with resentment. Why was *I called* at five o'clock every

morning for the last nine or ten years I lived at home to cook homemade biscuits, grits, eggs, gravy, and sausage or bacon for a house full of people?

Those last years at Daddy's house, I would think, *That is not my husband peering across the hot stove looking for a meal, and Those aren't my hungry children with the wet diapers that I rocked back to sleep at night.* Did they call me because I never complained and meticulously performed tasks like a bionic servant? Of course they did! They were no different than an abusive employer, husband, friend, or slavemaster who piled work on a willing spirit until she was ready to snap. But I would bide my time and bite my tongue, focus on one goal, get the hell out of Alabama, and make my own way.

While questioning Mama about choosing me as a caregiver, I asked if she remembered packing my suitcase when I left home at eighteen. Her eyes lit up. "Oh, yeah. I'll never forget it," she said. "I packed needles, thread, a thimble, and everything I thought my girl, who wasn't never coming home again, might need. Oh, I knowed you'd always come back to see me but never again to stay."

I was pleasantly surprised that without ever discussing it, Mama knew precisely how I felt as a child leaving home. Yet, she did not cling or insist that I stay. I asked, "How did you know I would never return?"

"I just knew. You was just a girl but looked like an old woman, tired and ready to go." She told me she understood why I ran away from the burden they placed on me. While writing this book, I remember Mama told me, "Mildred, you was a brave and fearless girl, courageous enough to leave home," a strength she told me she lacked.

Two days before I sat in Daddy's car with my packed suitcase, he'd sidled up to me in the middle of a cotton field full of waist-high Johnson grass and gnarly nutgrass that I thrashed with my sharp hoe. He said, "We done come to count on you a awful lot 'round here, Babe. I dunno whether we can afford to let you go to Ohio. Who you reckon can cook and do all the other things we trained you to do?"

I felt a tight ball in my stomach as I hoed and chopped weeds like they were Satan's horns. I lowered my eyes and said, "I don't know," and wondered how that was my problem. I thought, *I'm no special monkey; "train" somebody else.*

"Well, me and Mama gonna talk it over tonight and see what we need to do."

I stared at the ground and chopped even harder. "Yes, sir." *God, help them make the right decision. Please don't make me run away.*



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