

July 1, 1963

Dear Miss Anderson,

My teacher, Mrs. Warren, says I have to write you, and when Mrs. Warren says to do something, you do it. She has taught at the black school for thirty-seven years. My daddy does what she says, the preacher does what she says, and you'd better believe I do what she says. And she said that in the spirit of working together, all us black kids should write you letters over the summer, so you can get to know us a bit before we start at the white school in September.

So, here I am, writing to you.

I never thought I'd write to the teacher at the white school. I don't know as I've ever thought about the white school, really, before all this integration business got started. But here I am, fixing to go there come September.

I guess I should introduce myself. My name is Kizzy Ann Stamps. I like reading most everything, but I hate history. I just don't really care what some dead folks did or said two hundred years ago.

Sorry, guess that isn't trying to work together, the way Mrs. Warren wants. But Mrs. Warren would tell you I'm trouble in her class, and I guess that's fair. I say what I think quite often—too often, she says—and I ask questions. Lots of questions. And I don't like to be bossed. Stand up for something, that's what I say.

So I'm going to stand up now and tell you the truth, even if it means you won't like me. (My brother says you won't like any of the black kids. You just have to accept us.) But I believe in telling the truth. So here it is: I don't want to change to a white school. Just so you know. I don't want to.

I guess I should say the integrated school. My folks

are all aflutter about it, and Mrs. Warren says this is an “opportunity.” When she says it, the word is in capital letters and lit up like the beer sign down at Shorty’s Pool Hall. Even though it means she is out of a job and we will all have to walk farther to school.

So I don’t want to come. Now you know.

July 3, 1963

Well, I thank you for writing back, Miss. You could have knocked me down with a feather when the mailman said he had a letter for me. He put it in my hand special like. My whole family was in awe of me getting a letter addressed to me *alone*, with that fancy script writing on the outside, my name looking like a machine wrote it in that practically perfect writing of yours! That envelope and the writing paper are so creamy and thick. . . . I haven’t ever held on to paper like that before. Mrs. Warren gave us paper to write our letters to you. I go to her house each time I need new paper and she gives me more. She told me she will give me as much as I want, but paper is not something we just

have lots of sitting around. I didn't even know it came in different *types*. I guess there are lots of things I don't know, though.

For example, I don't know as I ever expected that you really would *read* my letter—never mind asking me questions about myself. You said you wanted to know more about how I make trouble for Mrs. Warren, and I can give you a perfect example. We can go along, she and I, and I'll think we're right like two peas in a pod, and then I find out I just can't go along with her way of thinking at all. Like she is always saying education is important, and it isn't that I disagree with that—no, ma'am. I know education is important. Mrs. Warren says equal education is the “way out of poverty” and the “answer to prejudice.” So writing well and reading well are crucial. I don't disagree with that. I read and write well. I've worked hard to learn those things—sometimes I trip up and say “ain't,” but I really see what Mrs. Warren says about how sounding educated is the language of money, the language of getting ahead. Still, Mrs. Warren won't bend at all. For instance, she only considers you a good writer if you stick with *her* topics. Topics like heroes and good

solid role models, such as Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, and Rosa Parks. Not a dog.

See, she told us to write about who we most admire. Most of the kids wrote about grandmothers or mothers, uncles or dads. Brenda Stevens wrote about Rosa Parks (and Brenda Stevens doesn't even like Rosa Parks, because she had to sit in church an extra hour one time listening to a lady who had met her, and Chester Whitehouse wrote six pages on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Everybody knows Mrs. Warren thinks the sun rises and sets with Dr. King. She read his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" three times to us in one week, and then she said, "His voice rings out in my ears, in my soul, and in the future of this nation." It's no wonder Chester was teacher's pet for a flat-out month. I didn't write about any of those folks, though. I wrote about Shag.

Shag is white and black, like all border collies. She has weepy eyes. I wonder sometimes if she's sad, but I think she doesn't cry so much as her eyes just leak a little. Anyway, I hope so.

I've done some checking on border collies, because my daddy didn't really know what kind of dog Shag

was when we found her wandering near our back ten acres. I went to the library Miss Anne Spencer has, for black folks, and looked in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which has just about everything you would ever want to know. I was looking at pictures and trying to figure out about Shag, but Miss Anne Spencer knows a lot (she is a real poet, after all, got her stuff in books, you know—and she’s a librarian to boot), so when I described Shag, she said, “A border collie, most likely,” and snap, there you have it. She flipped to border collies, and sure enough, she was right. I discovered border collies are a registered breed in Scotland. People have been bringing them to the United States for a while, but not much at all in these parts. I have the only one around here, far as I know.

I feed her every day—Shag likes her scraps—but the most important thing for Shag is to work. That’s the way border collies are. She brings in the cattle for milking every day, crouching low and nipping at their heels. I think if she didn’t get to do this, she really *would* cry.

As a breed, border collies are pigheaded, and I’m guessing that’s why Shag was wandering. Lots of folks

dump their dogs in the country, and I reckon Shag wasn't good at doing what she didn't want, so she got dumped.

Daddy says she is a working dog and as long as she's working, she's happy and obeys. She *will* obey me, no matter what, so that's why my daddy says she's mine. The only thing she doesn't obey me on is sleeping in my room—I've always wanted a dog who will sleep on the hook rug next to my bed. As I tucked in on those first nights, I'd tell her, "Stay." But night after night, she'd go out and sleep beside our mule, Zero. After I fell asleep, she'd slip out of my room and go to the front door and stand there staring with her deep chocolate eyes until one of my parents would let her out. My daddy finally said, "Kizzy Ann, face it. She's just not comfortable in the house. She's a working dog, not a house pet." But she is mine, and except for that one thing, she always obeys me, always.

So, anyway, she is a hard worker on a farm that needs hard work, and a survivor, since she made it on her own after she got dumped by whoever owned her, and I wrote in my assignment that she is the being I most admire. Mrs. Warren didn't even put a grade on

my paper. She gave it back and said, “You can’t write about any dog.”

I said, “You said to write about who we most admire. And to me, that’s shag.”

That led to my final switching of the year. Mrs. Warren told me to rewrite my paper about a person, but I stuck to my guns and turned the same paper in again. So, on the last day of school, when Mrs. Warren told us that we were all going to read our last writing assignment for the class, she made it clear I wouldn’t be reading. “We shall all read the delightful pieces on the person we admire most. All, that is, except for Kizzy Ann. Now, my dear, there is no sense looking askance. You knew I wanted you to rewrite it, but you remained stubborn.”

I couldn’t help it—the words just popped out of me when she called me stubborn. “That’s not fair,” I said. “I wrote exactly what I felt, and that should count for something. It’s the truth, and I shouldn’t have to change the truth.”

The hush that spread was thick as my granny’s apple butter heaped on a biscuit. And the look from

Mrs. Warren was one that scraped that hush down to an unnatural quiet.

“A switch, if you please,” she said. When Mrs. Warren gets all ladylike in her speech, you know things are bad.

Still, I tell you I didn’t feel the switch that day. Because I knew I was right.

And you know what? There’s another particular thing I admire about Shag that I didn’t even put in the paper. Shag is the only one in the world who doesn’t sneak glances at my scar. She just looks me in the eye, dead on, and I prefer that. You’d think I was a monster the way people slide their glances around at me.

I know I haven’t told you about my scar yet. So here goes: Three years ago, when I was nine, I was helping at the Feagans. You may not be a farm girl, so maybe you don’t know how at harvesttime everybody helps. Everybody. So don’t go thinking my parents were bad or nothing, letting a nine-year-old help. I’ve helped with chores since I was way little.

I was working next to Frank Charles Feagans—it

was his family's farm—and we were using the scythes to cut some of the old cornstalks. (Mr. Feagans is a finicky farmer, not liking to just turn his cows loose in the field to take care of the cornstalks with their steady munching. I think it's because he's white—hope that doesn't offend you.) Anyway, Frank Charles couldn't stop looking at Shag—she'd just come to us—and he turned fast, following Shag with his eyes. He knocked against me and me off balance. I put my hands out and fell.

Right into the sweep of Frank Charles's scythe.

The cut went from the tip of my right eye to the corner of my smile, and I know I looked a sight because when my daddy pulled me up, he had turned ashy. Frank Charles fainted on the spot, and Shag started barking at everybody. Daddy says she was trying to get us to help me. I remember being carried faster than I'd ever believed Daddy could go across a field of broken cornstalks—we flew. I know Shag was beside us because I had no control over my hands—they were hanging limp by my daddy's legs—and I could feel Shag's delicate lick against my flesh every now and again. Step, step, step, lick, step, step, step,

lick. I suppose it hypnotized me a bit, because I really don't remember anything else till I woke up in my bed with old Doc Morris peering into my face.

He slid a finger next to my cheek, and I heard Shag growling. "Ain't hurting her," Doc Morris murmured. "Just looking for reflexes, pup." I heard Shag settle beside my bed, and when they all left, Mama and Daddy patting my feet and trying not to cry, I felt Shag jump up and lie down beside me. I went to sleep with my fingers curled tight in her fur.

July 5, 1963

Mama says it is bad manners to stop in the middle of a story, so if she knew that last letter I sent you ended like that, in the middle, she'd probably make me get a switch, but I'm not really sorry. I think the best stories are the ones that build suspense and make you wonder what happened next.

Did you wonder what happened to me next?

When I woke up, it was just getting light. I lay there, thinking back to the day before, and I was afraid

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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