

NAFISSA THOMPSON-SPIRES,

HEADS OF THE COLORED PEOPLE (2018)

BELLES LETTRES

Dr. Lucinda Johnston, PsyD
Johnston Family Therapy
1005 Knightcrest Rd, Claremont, CA 91711

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1991

Hello Monica,

I'm sure you remember me from the class field trip to the Getty in September. It has been brought to my attention by Mrs. Watson that Fatima may have started a nasty rumor about my Christinia. I hope to clear this up, as we both know how ugly these things can get. It is true that Christinia's hamster died recently, but it is absolutely not true that it died at Chrissy's hand. At no time has Chrissy ever put Hambone or any of her previous hamsters in the microwave, dryer, or dishwasher. What kind of child would make up something like that?

It sounds—and I say this respectfully, so I hope you won't be offended—like Fatima has had a very hard time getting acclimated here, and that's understandable, but I do hope you will deal with

her before any such incidents become frequent. Children who start lying young often end up with longtime patterns of dishonesty.

All best,
Dr. Lucinda Johnston, PsyD
Licensed Therapist
Welcome Wagon, Westwood Primary School
Events Coordinator, Jack and Jill, Claremont Branch

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Monica Willis, PhD
Associate Professor of Education
University of La Verne
1950 Third Street, La Verne, CA 91750

MONDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1991

Dear Lucinda,
I apologize for my late reply, but I only found your letter at the bottom of Fatima's backpack when I did my weekly cleaning.

Thank you for writing to me, though I have already spoken with Mrs. Watson, who made it very clear that she never heard Fatima say a thing about Christinia or her dead hamster(s). It was Renee Potts who claimed that Fatima started the rumor. Fatima says she only repeated what Christinia herself told her.

Many of Fatima's stories about Christinia this year and last—which I won't recount here—have been disturbing to say the least, but none as disturbing as Christinia's enjoyment of torturing rodents. Fatima has a strong imagination and writes beautiful lyric poetry—which she started reading at age four—but she does not have a

history of lying or telling gruesome stories. And unlike Christinia, she has no history of running off with other girls' shoes while their feet dangle from the monkey bars. I'm absolutely sure that Fatima wouldn't tell stories about Christinia, the hamsters, or the microwave incident if they weren't based on something Christinia had said first.

I appreciate your concerns about Fatima, and even though Christinia has made it much more difficult for her to find friends at Westwood, Fatima will acclimate soon. She's going to a sleepover at Emily's this weekend. Is Christinia going? If so, I hope you will encourage her to play nice.

Best,
Monica Willis, PhD

P.S.

It is true that liars who start young often end up with psychological and social problems of the sort that Christinia has demonstrated over the past year. How lucky for you (and for Christinia) that she has access to psychotherapy through your practice.

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Dr. Lucinda Johnston, PsyD
Johnston Family Therapy
1005 Knightcrest Rd, Claremont CA 91711

MONDAY, OCTOBER 7, 1991

Dear Monica,
I never expected so much defensiveness when I wrote my original letter. Perhaps you misread it. All I wanted to emphasize is that

I understand why a girl in Fatima's position and one with her background would make up such stories. It's hard to get attention in a new place, and Christinia has been established at Westwood for quite a while. There is probably some petty jealousy going on, but I think we can resolve this. I don't know how you did things at Fatima's old school (in Fresno, was it?), but here we try to help the children work through their problems without getting too involved.

I suppose you already know—and have known all along—that Christinia will not attend Emily's party, so there's no need for me to encourage her to "play nice." You've probably heard that history already, so I won't rehash it, but I will say that it wasn't Chrissy's fault that Emily broke her nose when she fell. Besides, it was three years ago. We've given the Kemps our sincerest apologies for Emily's unfortunate accident, and we have moved on.

Finally, and I say this respectfully, but maybe it would be wise to go through Fatima's backpack every night instead of once in a blue moon. I have heard from more than one parent that it smells like eggs.

My best,
 Dr. Lucinda Johnston
 Licensed Therapist
 Author of *Train up a Child*
 Welcome Wagon, Westwood Primary School
 Events Coordinator, Jack and Jill, Claremont Chapter

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Monica Willis, PhD
 Associate Professor of Education
 University of La Verne
 1950 Third Street, La Verne, CA 91750

OCTOBER 9, 1991

Dear Lucinda, or should I say Dr. Johnston, I'd like to resolve this as much as you would, but that won't happen if all of your letters begin and end with backbiting. I asked about Emily's party sincerely and in good conscience, though after speaking to the Kemps, I can see why they would hesitate to invite Christinia. I would ask you to consider this, however: If Fatima is the problem, why is she growing in popularity while Christinia is only growing in girth and the number of casualties associated with her name?

I'm not of the mind that the only two black children in the class should be enemies, nor do I like the attention it draws to them (or their parents) when they're already in a difficult position. I would think that a black woman of your stature and success would understand how isolating work and school environments like Westwood can be for people like us. Jordan and I hesitated to send Fatima to a PWI, but we know the benefits of a school like Westwood. I hoped Christinia and Fatima could be friends and could support each other in this space, but it's been clear since second grade that you and Christinia are not willing to make that work. You could encourage your child to be cordial, however, and less brutal. You could spend more time with her so she doesn't lash out at others. You should get the help you both need in overcoming your tendencies toward pettiness.

I'm sure Fatima would let Christinia into her growing inner

circle—even her after-school reading club—if Christinia would only apologize and behave. Jealousy can become a lifelong problem. On that note, I hate to bring this up now, but we were surprised by how poorly Christinia behaved when Fatima's poem won over hers last year. I'd like to make sure we don't end up with a repeat performance of that tantrum when the poetry competition rolls around this year.

As for the hard-boiled egg, we resolved that last spring and bought Fatima a new backpack. And I believe you knew that already.

We should talk about some concrete ways we can encourage our girls to get along. Perhaps Mrs. Watson can help, since she has mentioned Christinia's problematic behavior before, something to the effect of, "If we don't fix things now, she'll have a hard road ahead of her."

Cheers,

Dr. Monica Willis, PhD

Author of *Every Voice Counts: Helping Children of Color Succeed at Predominantly White Schools*

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OCTOBER 9, 1991

Monica,

Excuse the informal note.

Mrs. Watson told me herself at Pavilions that "it doesn't matter how brilliant the child is. No one will ask about her grades later in life, but they will want to know how well socialized she was." She made it no secret that she was referring to Fatima, not Chrissy.

And to that point, I think you're doing both yourself and

Fatima a great injustice by continually emphasizing her "brilliance" over other children. Lots of people skip grades, and skipping kindergarten isn't something to brag about. I doubt that the standards at her old school were as rigorous as those at Westwood. What exactly was she advanced at, naptime? Maybe a stint in kindergarten would have cultivated her social and problem-solving skills so she wouldn't run home and tell her mother everything. Children need strength of character and independence, after all.

If you'll recall, moreover, I was there at the recital where Fatima read her "award-winning poem," and while my doctorates—yes, plural—may not be in literature, I'm pretty sure hardly anyone would call "Butterfly Pie" a work of poetic genius. You can't rhyme "pie" with "pie" multiple times and call that poetry; you just can't, even if you have the excuse of only being in fourth grade.

We are not self-conscious about Christinia's blackness. I attended Westwood myself as a child and was very happy there, even though at the time I was the only black child in the entire K-6 division. Perhaps the kids at Fatima's old school were bad influences on her? Why did she change schools after first grade anyway? That's generally a bad sign.

Isn't your degree, by the way, an EdD?

—Lucinda

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OCTOBER 11, 1991

Lucinda,

It's hard to believe you're not a brain surgeon with your manifold doctorates and strong sense of logic. Fatima changed schools

because we moved. Was she supposed to commute from Claremont to Fresno every morning so she could attend her old school?

I'm not surprised if Fatima's subtle wordplay was lost on you, since it's clear reading problems run in the family. Fatima said she saw Christinia struggling in the Panda reading group, and Mrs. Watson hinted that the Iguanas—Fatima's and Emily's group—are reading much more advanced work than *Charlotte's Web* or *The Boxcar Children*. Fatima started on *Little Women* during her own free time and has read through a number of Judy Blume and Beverly Cleary works, even *Ellen Tebbits* and *Otis Spofford* (which I read as a much older girl). And, Fatima has a poem coming out in *Ladybug* magazine in a few months.

Not everyone is suited for literary work. I'm sure you know that from your own writing struggles and the extra effort you had to put behind your research in order for anyone to take it seriously. Isn't there still some kind of issue with your last project and the IRB, or is the issue with Dr. Patel's ex-wife? I know someone who might be able to clear things up for you, if you'd like the help.

My very best,
Monica

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OCTOBER 11, 1991

Monica,

Mrs. Watson said there is absolutely no reading group higher than the Panda group, and that the Iguanas have been paired to minimize their various social anxieties, so I have no idea where you're getting the notion that Fatima's reading is more advanced than Christinia's.

Chrissy has no social anxieties, and if she's ever struggled socially, it's because other children don't understand her. And Chrissy read that abridged version of *Little Women* just yesterday on the way home from soccer practice. The pictures took up more space than the words.

But now I see where Fatima's delusions of grandeur come from. You are, unfortunately, enabling your child's arrogance and stifling her growth even at this young age. I write about this very thing in chapter three of my first book, *Caution with Coddling*.

There is no trouble with my current research or the Institutional Review Board.

Regards,
Lucinda

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OCTOBER 11, 1991

Lucinda,

Christinia may not have notable social anxieties, but that is because she dominates the other children. There has to be some insecurity behind that, perhaps about her size. I heard (and I won't reveal the source, lest you start harassing her, too, but I can tell you it was not Fatima) that Christinia steals other kids' lunch scraps from the cafeteria and bullied that poor kid with the unfortunate ears into giving her all of his pepperoni for the next month.

I really hope that in addition to help for her lies and early signs of psychosis, you will get Christinia some help for her weight problem before she ends up—and I say this respectfully, so I hope you won't be offended in the least—like you. Children do pick these things up from their mothers.

If by your "first book," you mean your unpublished dissertation, I've heard plenty about it and the unsavory circumstances of your defense. Wasn't Dr. Patel married when he joined your committee and divorced by the end of it? Is that why you say your oldest child, Thaniel, has "good hair" and why Christinia is always bragging about having "Indian in my blood," despite those naps in her head? I thought she meant a different kind of Indian, but now things are clearer. Does Mr. Johnston know those may not be his children, or is he in on the ruse with Dr. Patel?

Take care,
Monica

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OCTOBER 12, 1991

Monica,
I'm not going to dignify most of your comments with a response. This will be my last letter, because I can see I'm not going to get anywhere with you; there's some kind of blockage there that I really think you should explore with a licensed professional, especially if you call yourself a professor. How many generations of college students will go on to harm others because of your bad pedagogy?

It's funny to me that you would try to reactivate those rumors about my strictly professional working relationship with Dr. Patel, especially since we've all heard things about Fatima's biological father. Let's see: three kids, two of them with Anglo names, and one with an Arabic one; two kids with Mr. Willis's features, one kid (Fatima) with a more "African look." Mathematically speaking,

it seems you picked up more on your travels to Africa than those seventies-style caftans you insist on wearing.

To your point about Chrissy's weight, we are working with a children's nutritionist who specializes in lymphatic disorders.

At one time I wondered if we were too harsh in recommending that you and your family wait another year before joining our Jack and Jill chapter, but I can see now that we were right. I'm afraid I can never recommend you for our club. You display a volatile combination of residual ghetto and uppity Negress, and that will be your undoing, if Fatima isn't.

Sincerely,
Dr. Lucinda M. Johnston
Licensed Therapist
Author of *Train up a Child*
Welcome Wagon, Westwood Primary School
Events Coordinator, Jack and Jill, Claremont Chapter

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OCTOBER 13, 1991

Lucinda,
I'm not even going to respond to that.

But I will say that if someone here is uppity, it's the one of us with two little brats who have run off three au pairs. Who even uses that term? If they're not French (and I'm pretty sure your cousin Shaquanna isn't) they're nannies! Nannies! And if they're your own relatives, then they're just babysitters or bums who need a hookup.

This bourginess and the way it keeps you from connecting with your kids is half of your problem; the other half, you probably can't fix without medication. Good thing you can write prescriptions. Oh wait, you're not that kind of doctor.

I've been forthright about Fatima's biological father, but I certainly don't appreciate Christinia's relentless and uneducated use of the phrase "African booty-scratcher."

And how can I be "uppity" when I've never had any help and started out as a single parent before marrying Jordan? If putting myself through school and becoming the highest-educated person in my family with no help but God's makes me uppity, then so be it. We are humble people, in spite of our education and finances, and we have more class in our excrement than you have in your whole hamster-murdering family.

And yes, there is a bit of the ghetto still left in me, enough to tell you who can finish the fight if it gets to that point. We're never too far from Oakland or the Southside.

Let's keep it real,
Monica

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OCTOBER 13, 1991

Monica,
I do believe that was a threat. The Claremont Police Department will not take this lightly.

While I don't approve of Chrissy's use of the term "African booty-scratcher," she was only stooping to Fatima's level when she used it. As they say, if the butt itches . . .

I don't know where you get this "African folklore" Fatima has been spreading around the school, but I should think that no educated person would tell stories of the Mamie Waters who will "snatch you baldheaded" if you go underwater. It took me hours to console Christinia and convince her that her delayed hair growth is unrelated to her swimming lessons or any mythical African mermaids.

And tell Fatima to stop pinning notes to the inside of Chrissy's bookbag when she's not looking. Chrissy could injure herself on a dirty safety pin, knowing you people, and end up with hepatitis A, B, or C, or worse. And tell her to stop harassing Chrissy with pitiful insults about her appearance and "dark-skinned self."

I've tried to resolve our differences by working directly and exclusively with you and Mrs. Watson, but I will have no choice but to contact Principal Lee—in addition to the police—if this persists.

—Lucinda

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OCTOBER 14, 1991

Lucinda,
Only you would suggest something so disgusting as intentionally injuring a child with a dirty safety pin, but then again, it was Christinia who put that tack on Renee Potts's chair last year and caused her to need a tetanus shot. Perverse minds think alike, apparently.

I can say with complete assurance that Fatima would never make fun of someone for being too dark, nor would she use the word "skinned" in a sentence. In fact, she came home crying last year when Christinia called her blacky, but I told her to forgive Christinia.

Jordan and I have never raised Fatima or any of our children to

be color struck, and that's part of why we would never participate in an organization such as Jack and Jill. We only applied because we thought we might find like-minded black friends here, but if you are their representative, we'll pass. The paper-bag test may be long gone, but the slave mentalities are not. And your Chrissy is baldheaded because you don't know how to do your own hair, let alone hers. Don't blame the Mami Wata for any of that.

Now I see that Christinia is blaming Fatima for many of the things she (Christinia) is doing herself. You probably haven't read that Shirley Jackson story "Charles," have you? I would imagine it's too difficult for you to process, but sometimes children—especially those who don't get enough support at home—do these things.

Lose my number and address, and stop making your kid do your dirty work,

M

OCTOBER 14, 1991

Monica,
Turn blue.
Turn blue.
Turn blue, blue, blue.

Look, I've written a poem. Perhaps I should send it to *Ladybug* magazine.

Love,
Lucinda

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OCTOBER 15, 1991

Lucinda,

You need Jesus. Do not write to me again, or I will contact my lawyer.

I've asked Mrs. Watson to check Fatima's backpack for correspondence from you, and I have made it clear that I do not want further contact from you or Christinia. You are not to speak to Fatima either.

Monica

Jack and Jill
Claremont Chapter
1402 Wedgewood Ave, Claremont, CA 91711

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Drs. Jordan and Monica Willis
730 N. Briarwood Ave
Claremont, CA 91711

OCTOBER 15, 1991

Dear Drs. Willis,

We would like to formally invite you and yours to our annual Jack and Jill Gala, October 25, 1991. Attire is black tie. Please respond using the enclosed notecard. We hope to see you there.

If you have received this invitation, it is in error.

Anonymous

OCTOBER 18, 1991

Lucinda,

I'm beginning to think you are insane. There is absolutely no way that Fatima called Christinia's grandmother (may she rest in peace) the "b" word, nor did she call her a "batch." And I'm sure she never said, "I'm glad she's dead." We don't expose Fatima to bad language. Our child is not the one who brags about killing hamsters and putting them on roller coasters to see if their eyes pop out.

It's a shame you and Christinia have so much trouble writing and reading, because these stories could rival the best of any true-crime stories out there. And that fact should scare you, because it's the ones who start out with rodents who eventually graduate to the babies and the grandparents, may they rest in peace (!). Where will Christinia be in ten years, and do you want to see her get to that point?

I'm requesting a meeting with Principal Lee, Mrs. Watson, and you and Mr. Johnston so that we can nip this crazy mess in the bud once and for all.

Monica

Drs. Jordan and Monica Willis
730 N. Briarwood Ave
Claremont, CA 91711

OCTOBER 21, 1991

CC: Michelle Watson

Dear Mrs. Johnston and Mrs. Willis:

It has come to my attention that your respective daughters, Christinia and Fatima, engaged in a brutal fistfight at school. As you know, this behavior violates not only the Westwood code of conduct, but also our core values as a school, and is punishable by expulsion.

I am sending this letter as a follow-up to the discussion I had with each of you over the phone. I would like to meet with the two of you and Mrs. Watson ASAP. My secretary will schedule.

Sincerely,

Principal Lee

Albert Lee, Principal
Westwood Primary and Secondary School
201 Highland Hills, Claremont, CA 91711

Drs. Jordan and Monica Willis
730 N. Briarwood Ave
Claremont, CA 91711

OCTOBER 25, 1991

Dear Drs. Willis:

The school's board and I thank you for your generous donation and for agreeing to serve on the Westwood Welcome Wagon. Given the

sharp improvement of your child's behavior, we can agree to rescind our threat of Fatima's expulsion from school.

The reputation of our school depends on the efforts of involved parents like yourself.

Sincerely,
Principal Lee

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NOVEMBER 3, 1991

Lucinda,
Thank you for inviting Fatima to Chrissy's party. She will be happy to attend.

And thank you for the lovely fruit basket. You are so bad! It's true—Mrs. Watson looks terrible in that color, and yet Principal Lee finds reasons to look. But I won't say anything more in writing.

Jordan and I will discuss the Jack and Jill potluck with you when we see you.

XO,
Monica