

Dear Self: A Year in the Life of a Welfare Mother

Richelene Mitchell

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“I try not to write letters to the editor...” Richelene Mitchell reminded herself through 1973. “...they shoot people these days for having as many children as me unless you’re Ethel Kennedy.”

This is the journal of a Scorpio bowler avid reader closet epileptic public-minded letter writer skeptic of relationships and welfare recipient. Richelene was acutely aware of the stereotypes and assumptions between her and future readers. Her naturally sociological bent of mind worked to get to the bottom of issues including race relations the nature of kindness and cruelty poverty dependence and the gender wars. She tried strategies of reconciling faith with harsh realities. “Is God merely the conscious logical mind that leads us to try to do good?”

This self-portrait rings with honesty; it includes doubts and an element of inward criticism. A bright thoughtful middle-aged mother of declining constitution stepped out of the middle class when a marriage went bad. The ticking bomb of dramatic irony lies in the background—the hope Richelene allows herself is heartbreaking. Readers of autobiography with foreknowledge of the writer’s fate feed on dread. They wait for the subject to recognize the likelihood of destruction. The factor which proves to be too much in this instance could be transportation troubles a health condition the scorn and judgment of strangers in stores...

Mitchell’s influences were a mix of progressives: Richard Wright Kahlil Gibran Maya Angelou the Muslim newspaper *Muhammed Speaks The Power of Positive Thinking*. Worries about the bills and the children read well today. The cultural references are distinctly 1970s: Billy Dee Williams’ suave star turn in *Lady Sings the Blues* Aretha Franklin’s sheer ability the political achievements of Shirley Chisholm aggravation at Richard Nixon. She includes anecdotes about a few decent white individuals but admits to fighting the urge toward racism. Richelene wore herself out watching the children of others while working as a semi-volunteer at a failing dry-cleaner’s business. She worried whether she’d last long enough to guide her children to better lives.

Dear Self is presented uncut as a first draft with corrections only to spelling and punctuation. A journal or sheaf of letters though salted with shimmering lines tends not to show the polish of craft. Here we share the thoughts of a woman capable of originality and repetition both. The message is of greater importance than editorial trimming and sanding. “...quiet gentle people...understand more of human nature.”

Richelene Whitaker Mitchell was born in rural Georgia and spent her teen years in South Philly before settling in New Britain Connecticut. She was more than the sum of her statuses. She faced uncertainty with grace dignity and a daily page of insight. Through adversity she sent up flares so her Self could find the way back. A mother of seven and a critical thinker capsized slowly left a record. *Dear Self* is a worthy read.

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