My family was living on my grandparents’ farm near Charleston when Grandpa told my parents we needed to move to the city so I could start school. I was young, but Grandpa said, “he c’n read,” and he told me he’d do my work till summer.

Dad drove me into the city to the school. The man there said I didn’t qualify because I was only 5 and had never been to kindergarten.

My dad said he thought I was ready. The man said, “I’m the principal; I’ll decide.” He nodded to a pretty lady who passed him a paper.

“Fill this out, little boy,” he said, winking to the lady. I didn’t think I was so little. I was big enough to shoo the angry rooster Blackbeard away to gather eggs every morning.

I wrote WIT for my name Tim, because I’m dyslexic. The man raised an eyebrow, but my dad nodded for me to start.

The first line said Write the alphabet. I wasn’t sure about write, but anybody can read *the. Alphabet* was a fun word I’d known for years. I had a very big question on my face.

Principal got a wise face and mumbled “thought not,” so I asked him, “Do I have to fit all 26 letters in that one little space?”

He pulled his head back and frowned, “just do what you remember.” So I printed them all, lower case, but I started right at the edge and went all the way across in tiny letters and got them all in one line across the page. “Do you also want me to write Big A, Big B, Big C --”

“No.” The principal cut in, puffed out his chest, and turned his head so he could see the lady without me noticing, but she just smiled with her kind eyes. “Do the second one,” he said.

This one said Write your numbers. This was another easy one, but a lot. I asked, “Mrs. Principal, may I sharpen my pencil, please?”

She chuckled, “My name is Miss Petitbon,” and handed me another pencil.

I again started at the edge and wrote 1-25 then 30 40 etc. to 100. While finishing, I said, “The rest are the same, but I don’t have room to repeat them, but I’ll tell you them if you want to know.”

The principal made a face with his eyes going very wide open while swinging his chin towards his shoulder, shaking his head ‘no’: “Number 3.”

This one said Match your colors. I looked over at a box of broken crayons near the principal. I colored a patch of blue, red, etc. under the color words, but there was no black crayon, so I just pushed down really hard with all the colors on top of each other until I made a black splotch and tore the paper a little. To make up for it, I wrote WIT in pencil.

“Hmph,” he said, “Why’d you write your name again?”

“That’s not my name; my name is ‘Tim,’” I said, wondering how he had already forgotten. “That’s another color name.”

“Welll, there’s no crayon match!” Mr. Principal then looked quickly back and forth between me and the blank place on the white paper under WIT.

“This one says Pets.” I read to the man. “Do I write the names of cows AND dogs? There’s Millie the milk cow, Tippy the black and tan coonhound and —"

“Miss Petitbon, register Timothy for First Grade.”

In August we moved from the farm to town.

On the first day of school, my teacher Miss Behlmer told us all to be quiet. She said we must never talk in school. She had white hair in a perfect ball on the back of her head.

Little Tommy Salter stood up and went to look at the chinaberry tree. Miss Behlmer arrived behind him with brown twine and tied him to his chair. After we sat still for a while, she said, “Iss nap time. Ve vill sleep now.” She pressed Tommy’s head down onto an empty shelf.

“I’m not sleepy,” I said, but then added “Ow,” when a long thin stick slapped my knuckles. Rubbing my hand, I asked, “May I please read while they’re sleeping?”

This time the stick smacked the table where my hand had been moments before. Miss Behlmer rubbed her fingers on her leg while picking up her stick off the floor. “You cannot possibly read. Iss first day of school. Your parents fail to send you to kindergarten, so I now must fix you.”

I saw no books anywhere, so I said, “I’ll read that.”

“That’s a calendar,” she said icily.

“I know; it’s got planting months and --”

“Thwack!” the stick came down across my hands, sending the calendar flying. “You vill report to Principal at once.”

“Why --?”

“Splack!” The stick made a splintering noise as it hit a chair I’d just jumped behind. The top of the stick flew over and hit Little Tommy Salter in the neck.

Miss Behlmer went to her door and called a man from the hall who took me to the principal’s office.

“Young Timothy, is it? Won’t nap?” He winced at the red welts on my knuckles. “Sit over here,” he said, handing me a book that said *Third Grade Reader*. “Miss Petitbon? Get Timmy a chocolate milk.” I stayed there figuring out new words until my dad came. I don’t know how he knew I got out early that day. We had a long talk, even though it was only 2 miles home.

The next day after Quiet Time, Miss Behlmer marched us around. There was no music, but it took so long that kids who hadn’t been on a farm became tired. “Now nap,” Miss Behlmer commanded, glaring at me. I dove onto the floor, pretending to sleep while watching her through slitted eyes. She soon dozed off, so I got a book to read. Little Tommy Salter leaned over from where he was tied, and Sheryl crawled closer as I whispered the book to them.

“SILENCE!” shrieked Miss Behlmer. I immediately pretended to be asleep, and Sheryl shriveled up several inches away. “Thwatch! Thwatch!” said the stick hitting Tommy’s wrist. He knew now not to say “Ow,” so he only got hit twice.

The teacher sneered, “Iss enough of ziss time-vasting. Ve vill vork now.” The children scrambled into their assigned seats. Tommy bucked his chair into line. I kept my eyes shut, pretending she couldn’t wake me up. She called me; she shook me; she pulled me up by my arm. My eyes stayed closed. She dragged me across the floor and dumped me outside the room. The man in the hall took me to the principal’s office where Miss Petitbon greeted me with a hug and chocolate milk.

This time on the way home, my dad taught me how to obey orders and promised he would listen to me read two books every night if I could stay out of the principal’s office.

Next week I brought a peanut butter sandwich for lunch. I sat next to 3rd grade. I was still 5. The large boy next to me snickered, “You eat crust?” I was hungry after marching, so I shrugged “yes.” He said, “tear it off.” I did. He snatched the sandwich from me and shoved the crusts back. “Here, since you like ‘em so much.” And he wadded up my sandwich and ate it.

I explained to my mom who gave me extra supper. The next day she gave me a quarter for school lunch and three cents for milk. The big boy pushed two girls out of the way and sat next to me. He grinned, “I hate mashed potatoes, but I love pie.” He ate my pie while he poured my milk onto my mashed potatoes and stirred it into a soggy mess.

When I looked shocked, he took jello off a girl’s plate, saying, “Here, you can have her jello.” As he held it in midair, a big chunk squiggled off. Tears came into her eyes, so I slipped the tray with my potato milk mess and her smushed jello over toward the big boy who was stealing pie from another child. I finger-flicked the broken jello piece off the table.

“Splat,” it landed against Miss Behlmer’s calf. She wheeled around and saw the mess on the tray in front of the big boy with jello still squiggling. My teacher Miss Behlmer leapt on him like a cat on a rat. Thwack! Thwack! The stick hit knuckles on both of his hands. FFFFFitt! another swing landed on his ear. Up ran the man from the hall who hustled the big boy off his stool and out into the hall as he wept in pain.

Sheryl hugged me. The girl smiled at me. I told Mom and got pie. The next day the big boy brought candy for the girl.