

Part 1

Good Things in Your Life Begin with You

Do all the good you can, by all the means you can,
in all the ways you can, in all the places you can,
at all the times you can, to all the people you can,
as long as you ever can.

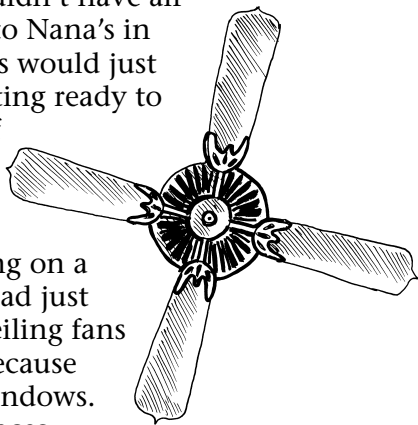
John Wesley



Narrative 1

Toads in the Backyard and School Uniforms

I was lying on the rug in my new room watching the ceiling fan go in circles. We didn't have ceiling fans in Virginia. I only remembered seeing them in cheap hotels that didn't have air conditioning when we were on the way down to Nana's in St. Petersburg. If we were still in Virginia, things would just be starting to get cold. The leaves would be getting ready to turn into bright orange and yellow splotches of color. But the trees in our new yard wouldn't lose their leaves. The leaves would stay green all year. In Virginia, we didn't have huge toads in the backyard, or have to worry about stepping on a snake when we ran through the grass. But we had just moved to Miami, Florida. It was hot. We had ceiling fans in every room. The houses were all one story because hot air rises. My new school didn't have any windows. And that was only the beginning of the differences.



Boomer, our cat, was asleep on my stomach and purring. Every now and then he twitched, probably dreaming about eating Denis' hamsters in the other room. Maybe he was aspiring to eat the guinea pig that lived in the bottom of the closet. Boomer the mighty hunter.

There was a slight tapping on my bedroom door. I nearly left my skin behind as I leapt into bed, pulling up the covers and turning out the light. It was almost 2 a.m. and we had school the next day.

"Come in," I said, acting sleepy.

I couldn't imagine who would be knocking on my door this late

on a Wednesday night. Maybe Dad had seen the light. Then Denis, my older brother, opened the door quietly.

"Relax," he whispered. "It's just me. Dodi, why are you still up?"

He couldn't sleep and neither could I.

I had heard of getting jet lag. That's when you feel tired all day, but not at night, when you travel to far off places, like India or Siberia. But we had just moved to Florida. We were in the same time zone. We had new school lag.

Denis and I would normally be devising various ways of making one another's lives impossible, but not now. We were the new kids on the block. There was safety in numbers. Not that it was unsafe. It just made you feel stronger not to be the only one.

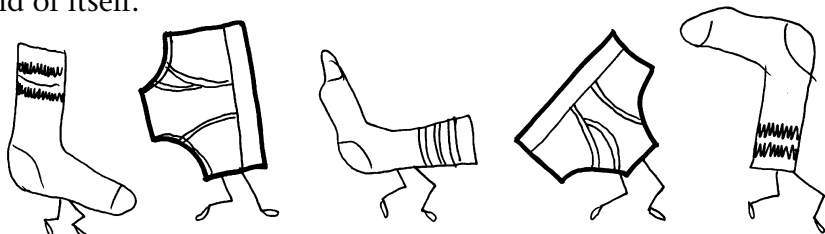
"What do you think about all the clothes?" I asked.

"It's incredible," he said, rolling his eyes. Grammy said not to roll your eyes like that because they might get stuck.

Neither of us had ever thought twice about the clothes we wore to school. Denis would hide dirty socks and underwear in the back of his closet until they were stiff enough to walk to the washing machine by themselves. He could really care less about his clothes.

We talked for a while about the whole clothing dilemma and then he sneaked back to his own room, his private zoo. He had a snake, 21 hamsters, a guinea pig, too many lizards and frogs to count (they never stayed still), a huge aquarium full of colorful fish and a poisonous toad. We also had a lop-eared rabbit, a cat, two dogs, two parakeets and a pony. But the pony lived at a stable.

Enough about the animals. I had bigger things to worry about. Although the presence of the snake in the house was upsetting in and of itself.



This was the beginning of a crisis. A clothing crisis.

This never happened to me before. This is how I felt at school: a frog in a muddy pond. The other girls were like peacocks and

they paraded all around me. I was in sixth grade and surrounded by fashion queens. Every other girl looked like she just jumped out of a magazine. Perfect hair. Perfect nails. Designer clothes. Not just designer clothes, but the right designer clothes.

What a difference from life in Arlington. I had two pairs of jeans. One with butterflies embroidered on the pocket and one with bumble bees. They teased me about the embroidery.

The girls in Miami all wore make-up. Well, a few others didn't, aside from me, of course. Most of the girls wore make-up, and jewelry and hairspray. And the cars their parents drove!

This place was all about being cool. The right clothes. The right hair. The right walk. I had been catapulted into a world of twelve-year-old girls who acted like they were headed for Hollywood stardom. I felt like nothing. Like an ugly little wart.

Laura and Lee Ann sat behind me in school. Their job was to torture me.

"Dodi, what kind of jeans are those?" Laura would say.

"Who did your hair? Is it permed? It's sooo pretty," Lee Ann would add.

"Is Dodi your real name? I've never heard that name before," Laura would say, sarcastically.

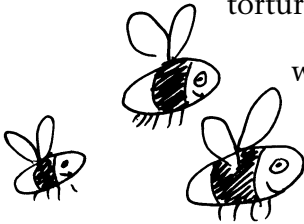
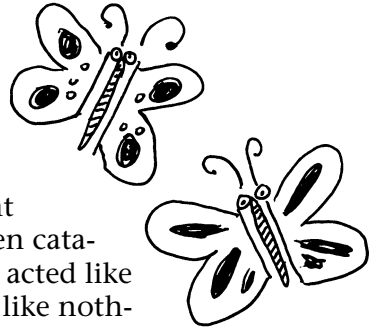
"Do you like pink flowers or blue flowers better?" Lee Ann would say and they would both giggle themselves into hysteria.

I never told them that my real name was Dorothy. Then they would ask me about my little dog. Muffin looked just like Toto. That didn't help. My hair was problematic. It was curly. Curls just went everywhere. I should have been in the Guinness Book of World Records for curly hair. Dad said it was pretty. But I felt like a rocker who had undergone electric shock therapy.

The teasing went on and on.

Mostly I ignored them.

Mom felt sorry for me. So she drove me to the clothing warehouses in the middle of nowhere. We had to be careful because the last time we took a trip together we ended up in the wrong town. Dad had a perfect sense of direction. You could stick him in



a tiny raft in the middle of the East China Sea, spin him around a few times, tell him he was near the Bering Strait, and he would find his way home. But Dad was into saving money. He wasn't into chasing after the latest fashion, especially because it looked like some form of torture invented for modern females. Like tight jeans. They were in.

We went to these warehouses because the jeans were cheaper. Mom wanted me to feel like I fit in. On a scale from one to ten, ten being caring the most about fashion, Mom was a two. She could almost care less about clothes. She always looked fantastic. Her smile could make the Grinch want to give presents back to the children in Whoville on Christmas. Mom's little blonde curls were magical. She was certifiably beautiful. I can never remember her buying anything for herself. She sewed. She was an artist. She wasn't much of a consumer. She didn't seem to mind that we had just landed in the middle of fashion magazine land. She just didn't notice things like that.

I tried on about a hundred pairs of jeans. The people who ran the place couldn't speak a word of English. But Mom managed to communicate with smiles and hand motions. I decided to go for the tight look, like Roma, Heather, Lee Ann and Laura. Lee Ann wore her jeans so tightly that she had to lie down on the bathroom floor and pull up the zipper with a pen. Otherwise, she couldn't get a good enough grip on them.

Mrs. Jones said they would all die of malnutrition. "You can't get the food into your stomach if your pants are so tight," Mrs. Jones said. She was the health teacher; she ought to have known. But I thought she was stretching the truth a little.

"Mom, I think these fit," I called. Mom came in.

Her face turned white when she looked at me.

"What? Those are three sizes too small. You look like a starvation victim." She was trying to stay calm.

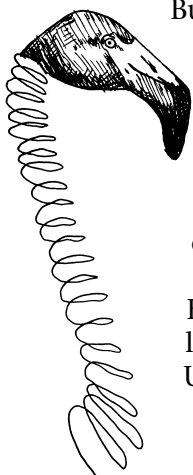
It was true. I was already a toothpick.

"But Mom, this is what all the girls have," I said in my defense, although peer pressure never seemed to sway her.

The saleswoman smiled nervously in the background. Her head bobbed up and down in agreement with me. It looked like her head was attached by a narrow metal coil. Up down, up down. Smile, smile, smile.

"Okay, let me watch you take them off," Mom said.

"What, Mom?" I had watched the girls at school wig-



gling out of tight jeans in PE. It looked like some kind of ancient ritual dance. I knew this was going to be hard to pull off.

Mom stepped into the little dressing room. I think we were their first customers ever because the saleswoman almost stepped in with her. I tried to be casual as I yanked and struggled to get the pants off.

"No way, Dodi. I'm not going to buy something that is so tight you can't take it on and off without great effort." Mom said it with a stubborn look on her face.

"But Mom, please. This is what all the girls are wearing," I begged.

"Poor them. What on earth are their mothers thinking?" she said.

We bought jeans that almost fit. They were a little tight. Mom didn't give in. She just made a tiny concession.

I was glad I walked to school. I was only questioned about the lowly status of my parents' cars on rainy days. I had no idea that our big yellow Grand Torino station wagon, or the Banana Boat, was totally uncool until we moved to Miami. Dad drove a Volkswagen. I felt like my hearing was seriously impaired as a result of driving with him. The Bug was definitely not a spy car or an undercover police car. It felt more like a time machine or a two-engine plane that was about to crash into the earth. But it became one more thing that made me different from everyone else.



We were driving back from the warehouse in the Banana Boat, with the bags in the back seat. Two pairs of jeans. Two pretty blouses. My self-image was reduced to the content of two bags.

"Dodi, you know I'm glad to buy you some new clothes," Mom started.

She looked very serious. She paused for a minute, as if she were looking to pull the perfect words out of the air.

"It's just that I like you the way you are. I'm sorry you have to go through all this." She nearly started to cry when she said it. Mom wasn't much of a crier, either.

I could tell that she wanted me to feel good about myself. Not like a frog. I didn't tell her I felt like a wart but she knew anyhow. She was good at listening when no one was talking. We drove back in a kind of quiet peacefulness. We didn't say much but I could feel Mom wanting to put her arms around me and tell me not to worry about what those girls said.

Later I tried everything on again in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom. I felt a little better with my new clothes. Actually, I didn't. I almost felt worse. I felt like I was trying to be something for someone else. Something that I didn't really care about being. I just didn't know what to feel.

That's why it makes what happened next even more unbelievable.

It was Friday, less than a week after we had tried to buy my self-esteem back at the clothing warehouses. I was in English class.

It was pouring rain that day, but we couldn't see outside due to the lack of windows in the school. We were in the weatherless building. It was for air control purposes. So it was about 1000 degrees outside and 10 degrees inside. If we wanted to be in touch with the weather, we would have to carry the rain around inside us. I was feeling drippy and chilled from the air conditioner. But English class was my favorite place to be in the whole school.

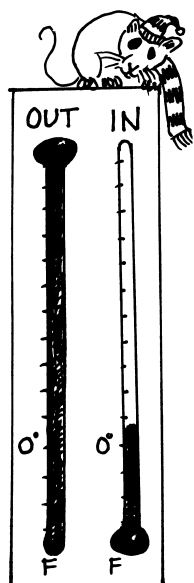
Mr. Surindowski was my English teacher. He was the best man in the entire school. Probably one of the greatest teachers to ever live.

We read a story about school kids in England. They had to wear school uniforms. After we read the story, he asked us, "If we had to wear school uniforms who, in this class, do you think would look just as attractive as if he or she was wearing expensive clothes?"

The class was silent for a long time.

We looked around at each other. Everyone in our class liked one another. No one knew what to say. After a minute or two, Jake said, "Mr. Surindowski, who do you think would look okay in a school uniform?"

Mr. Surindowski waited a moment. Then he said, "I think you might have misunderstood the question. I am not talking about every day good looks. I am talking about someone whose person-



ality shines no matter what clothes he or she wears.”

There were eighteen blank faces. We started looking around at each other again. I was trying to imagine red-headed Jake in a uniform. Then Carla. Then Victor. Next Roma. I wasn’t getting anywhere.

Then Jake asked him the same question.

Mr. Surindowski said, “Do any of you have anything to say?”

Most of us shook our heads ‘no.’ He sat back on his stool and smiled at us all. I loved his class. He didn’t have to take classes in college to learn how to care about middle schoolers, it came naturally.

Then Carla said it. I could barely believe the words were coming out of her mouth. We didn’t even know each other that well. She definitely didn’t qualify as a friend or even someone I ate lunch with.

She said, “I think it’s Dodi Fellenz.”

I felt like I had just won an Oscar. I was even more surprised when the other kids looked at me and shook their heads in agreement.

“You’re right,” said Jake.

“Yeah,” said Victor. The other kids shot looks at each other and giggled a little when Victor said that. Victor sat in the back of the room and I lately had the feeling that he was always looking at my back. I didn’t even want to glance in his direction for fear of looking interested.

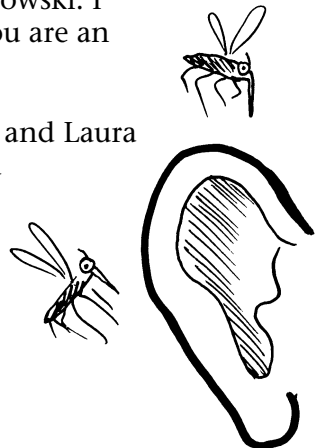
Then the bell rang. I couldn’t believe it. I was stunned. No one laughed when Carla said it. Did it really happen? Why did she pick me? Maybe I had been looking at myself wrong all along.

Suddenly I didn’t feel like a wart anymore. I felt like a first-class citizen. I felt like I finally fit in with these people.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Surindowski. I love your class. I wish I could stay there all day. You are an angel in disguise!

The reality of having to sit in front of Lee Ann and Laura again didn’t seem so unbearable now that nearly a whole class thought I would look good in a school uniform.

Lee Ann and Laura were serious about their self-appointed job of being my personal torturers. And they never stopped. They were like two mosquitoes buzzing in my ear. Soft and incessant. Annoying beyond belief.



This time it was about the pony I was riding. The pony was a dream come true for me. Honey was her name. She was perfect in every way and I adored her. I rode her and took care of her every day after school. Heather Pomerantz, who had a horse, was the one who helped arrange the whole thing.

"So, did you hear," Lee Ann said to Laura, as if I weren't there. "Dodi is renting a pony."

"Renting? Can you do that if you can't afford to buy one? Wow, sounds like fun," replied Laura.

"Heather said she cleans its stall every day after school," said Lee Ann.

"Sounds like hard work," said Laura.

"Sounds like manual labor," said Lee Ann.

"The other people pay some man to do it, don't they? Must be tough on the hands. Don't ponies poop a lot?" They broke into their pathetic little giggle.

"Dodi, we really want to know—do you prefer pink flowers or blue flowers?" Then the giggle became a convulsive fit of laughter.

Mostly I ignored them.

Somehow their gossipy comments didn't bother me so much anymore. They seemed like two pretty little heads attached to a wall, with powder on their noses, like something from Alice in Wonderland.

Yack, yack, yack.

I knew I couldn't give them the pleasure of getting a reaction out of me. So I was quiet. They had nothing better to do than to make fun of me and to go shopping. I almost started to feel sorry for them. I felt like saying, *look at you two blabbing about me all the time. I don't waste my time examining other people with a magnifying glass. I have better things to do!*

What a boring existence they had. They had no idea what it was like to race through the woods, bareback, on a beautiful pony. Or run in the mud. Or arm wrestle with your brother, even though you never won. They would never go camping or swimming in an inlet with their mom. They used so much hairspray that their moms probably had to unstick them from the bathroom walls in the morning.

Dad said Lee Ann and Laura were just jealous. He said that they were dying from *mental stagnation*. That's what happened



when people never tried to stretch their minds or think about anything new. *Brain atrophy*. I had to look up *atrophy*. It meant: decrease in size or wasting away of bodily part or tissue.

I wanted to be myself so badly I could taste it.

I walked home alone that afternoon in the warm rain without an umbrella.

I thought about all the trouble of the clothes, and how stupid it seemed to me. Everyone was trying so hard to impress everyone else.

I just wanted to be me. Even if it meant being tortured by Lee Ann and Laura. I just wanted to find out who *me* was and then be that. Maybe Carla had seen something special in me. I just wondered why I never saw it myself. Was it easier for other people to see the good things? Maybe. And how would I go about discovering who I was? I couldn't exactly go digging around in the backyard. I wouldn't find *me* under a rock or in the swimming pool. It just was not that easy. I could ask Mr. Surindowski, but that would be cheating. And he only saw glimpses. I knew myself better than he could have.

It seemed like it was all up to me. My very life was in my hands.

Thinking About It

1. Do you think people in your school judge others by the way they dress? How much stress do you think most students go through worrying about what to wear to school? Do you think that school uniforms are a good idea?
2. How does it feel to be teased? Did you ever stick up for someone who was being teased? Did anyone ever stick up for you when you were being teased? Do you think it takes courage to stick up for yourself and to stick up for other people?
3. Would you like to be less worried about what other people think of you? What do you think the writer means when she says that she wants to be herself? Do you think that people sometimes try to act a certain way so that others will like them?

4. In what ways is your “life in your hands”? If you were in the same position as the narrator, how would you handle it? How would you try to make your life better for yourself?