

Part 3

Cornerstones of Character: Things You Don't Want to Live Without

Whether you think you can or think you can't,
you're right.

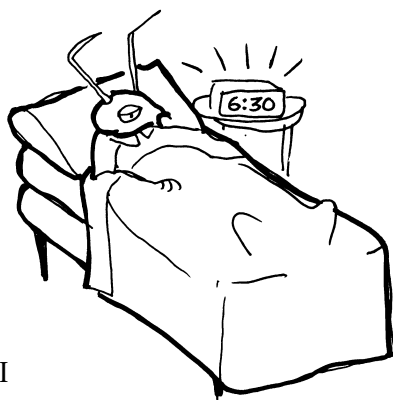
Henry Ford



Narrative 3

PE and the Chili Tragedy

PE was mandatory. And I was unfortunate enough to have it at 7:30 in the morning, when the whole earth was still wrapped in a blanket of oppressive moisture. I wished that I could convince the school authorities that having PE in the morning did terrible things to my self-esteem. The humidity ruined my hair. Hundreds of tiny curls danced around my head like poisonous snakes. I looked like Medusa. Of course, Medusa was very beautiful before she had the spell put on her by Zeus' wife. I wouldn't say I was very beautiful before PE, but I looked a lot better *before* than *after*.



Besides, I got enough exercise riding and cleaning out my pony's stall every day. I definitely didn't need any more exercise. But I still had to take PE, just like everyone else. We had to wear polyester uniforms with our names written on them in black indelible marker. Even worse, I had to change in front of all the other girls. I didn't want anyone making comments about the fact that I was overdeveloped for my age, a worse curse than the Medusa hair. On top of all that, the locker room stank, even though we were all girls. I wondered who said that girls never sweat. It was a lie.

I arrived at my locker a few minutes before the first bell of the day. I was thinking of any possible excuse to get out of putting on that uniform and running a mile. Headache, stomach problems, an approaching flu, breathing difficulties due to the thick air,

fainting spells brought on by wearing polyester. I didn't have the guts to approach a coach with my list of phony physical problems. Only a few girls milled around the locker room, weaving in and out of the rows of yellow-painted lockers. I sat on the bench, unable to motivate myself to change into my uniform. I could change in the shower with the curtain pulled, but only the real social outcasts went to that extreme. I just had to change, right there in front of everyone. There was no way out of it. So much for being the one who would look great in a uniform. I felt like some kind of a mass-produced doll.

Then Coach Martin came into the room. She was about eight feet tall and had short blonde hair and a voice that could scare a bull. She had more muscles in her right thigh than I had in my entire body. A smallish girl with long straight black hair followed her. I couldn't see the girl's face. Her eyes were staring at the floor. The sharp corners on her collar and line on her jeans showed that someone had spent a long time ironing her clothes. She had a large patch on the right knee of her jeans. That probably meant that she wasn't prissy. I can't imagine any of the other girls in Fashionville showing up to school with a patch on their jeans. My butterflies and bumble bees had already caused outrage. It looked like every single hair on her head had been brushed individually and the barrettes on the sides put in using a measuring tape for accuracy. She was so clean she could have performed surgery right then and there if she were a doctor.

She didn't have any books. It must have been her first class. She carried the loathed uniform in her arms. Coach Martin led her to the locker next to mine. Then Coach gave the girl a piece of paper with the combination on it. *Good luck with trying to get the thing open*, I thought.

"This is your locker. You can leave your things here. No one else uses this locker. Class starts in ten minutes. Diez minutos. Do you understand?" Coach said.

Coach was trying to be helpful. She spoke a little louder and slower than usual. I gathered that the girl didn't speak much English.

The girl nodded her head 'yes.'

Coach left. The lockers shook a little when she walked.

The girl sat down on the wooded bench. She put her head into her hands and began to cry, a little sad whimper.

I wasn't sure what to do. I quickly opened my backpack and found a leftover lunch napkin in the bottom. I hated to throw

unused napkins away. It made me feel guilty when I looked at the trees. Enough discarded unused napkins might mean that my great-great-grandchildren would have to wear oxygen tanks to school.

"Here," I said, and patted her gently on the shoulder.

Mom patted me gently on the shoulder once like that when I was throwing up in the toilet. It made me feel better. Of course it's a different kind of sick, but my resources were limited. She took the napkin and looked grateful. Her eyes were huge and her eyelashes so long that they seemed to stretch to her feminine little nose. Her skin was like the top of an apple pie just as it started to brown—just when it was perfect. A pang of jealousy hit me.

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Mi llamo?" She looked at me quizzically. I actually remembered that from my Spanish class. I shook my head.

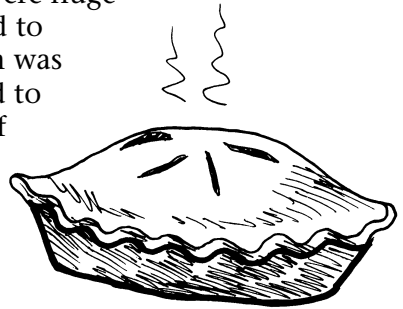
"Felicia. Y tu?" She wanted to know my name. Felicia. That was a pretty name.

"My name is Dodi." She looked uncertain. I decided to tell her my name was Dorothy instead. I doubted that she knew about *The Wizard of Oz*. She didn't look like the type to make fun of someone's name anyhow. She knew the name Dorothy. But she called me Dorotea. That must have been how they would say Dorothy in Spanish. I helped her with her locker.

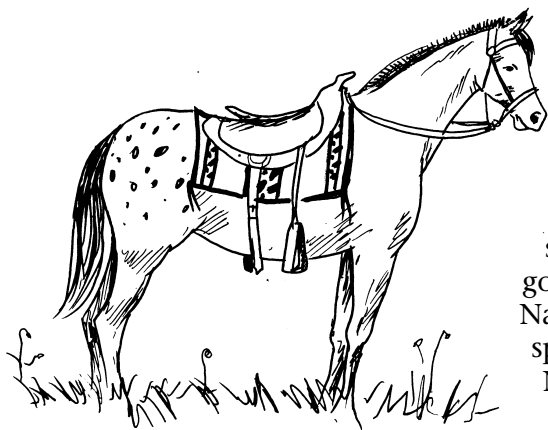
I felt like I could strip down to my toes now. If I was sure of myself, she would feel much better. If I cowered in the corner while trying to put my gym clothes on, keeping as much skin concealed as possible, it would make things harder for her. So I put on my gym clothes like it was no big deal, like I was used to being almost naked in front of dozens of strangers. And she did too. I could tell she was trying to look natural about it.

She wasn't overdeveloped like me, though. I wasn't really looking, I just happened to notice. I was actually hoping that she was. It would be like being a member of a secret club. A club not just anybody could get in to. But Felicia was flat as a pancake. So I could only agonize over my misfortune to my Aunt Claire. And she didn't care about her physical inheritance. It didn't bother her one little bit, but she was happy to listen to me anyway.

I think Coach Martin saw that Felicia and I were trying to talk to each other. When we got out to the blacktop, she told me that



Felicia was in my class. We managed to talk to each other in some funny language that was something like a pidgin mix of Spanish and English. She was Cuban. I couldn't understand why one of the Spanish-speaking girls in our class wouldn't talk to her. There were lots of them. But none of the other kids talked to her. Maybe they were jealous.



I managed to get through PE and the rest of the day because I knew I would ride Honey after school. Liz was my horse-back riding friend. Her parents were wealthy, but not snobby in the least. She owned a gorgeous Appaloosa horse named Naomi, who was white with black spots. Liz didn't have to clean Naomi's stall. A stablehand did it. I didn't care about the stall cleaning. Lee Ann and Laura

said it would ruin my flute skills. Generally, I tried to do the opposite of whatever they advised me to do.

Liz was standing at Honey's stall waiting for me to finish so we could ride.

"Dodi," she whispered, even though no one was around except the horses. That was my first hint that she was up to no good.

"Let's ride down to the Corral Restaurant and try their chili. I heard it's really good. No one will know," she said.

Liz was two years older. She went to another school. She was so much fun, too. But she was always trying to get me in trouble. I didn't need a little devil to sit on my shoulder and tempt me to go against my conscience. I had Liz.

"I don't have any money," I said. That was the best excuse I could come up with on the spot.

"I have enough for both of us," she replied. She was glowing. She always glowed when she tried to get me to do something parentally illegal.

"Liz, I don't think that's such a hot idea. Let's just go on the trail," I said. I tried to sound convincing but it came out of my mouth in a sort of whine.

"We go on that trail all the time. Booooooring. No one will know." When she spoke, I could see the excitement in her eyes.

"I'm not allowed to cross Sunset Drive and you know it," I said, with as much conviction as I could muster up. I felt like a real nerd, but that was one of the only serious rules my parents gave me regarding the barn. *Never cross Sunset Drive on the pony.* It was too dangerous.

"Your parents treat you like a little kid. When are you going to grow up and take life into your own hands?" she said, still glowing.

"Liz, if something happened. If one of the horses freaked my parents would never get over it," I moaned. They really wouldn't, and I knew it. I could just see my parents' expressions as the police told them that I was thrown from my pony on Sunset Drive. It could be very messy.

"But this isn't about your parents. It's about freedom. You know it's not a big deal. Are you going to let them spoil all your fun? Oh well, I'm going by myself then. I'll miss you," she said, then turned and walked to Naomi's stall. I really did want to go. The chances of Honey freaking were about the same as winning the lottery.

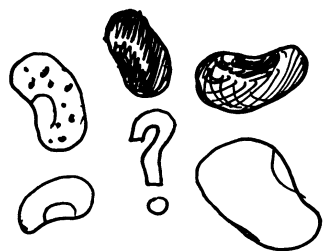
I stood there for a moment, with the last pitchfork full of manure, having a mental debate. *They'd never know. But they'd never trust me again if they found out. I'm not afraid. But they are. I'd have so much fun if I went. But they weren't trying to keep me from having fun, they just thought it was too dangerous. They probably went against their parents when they were my age. But that was a dumb excuse.*

"Okay, I'll go, but just this once," I screamed down the corridor at Liz.

"Yes!" I heard her exclaim in a half-whisper.

We crossed Sunset Drive. My heart raced; with my luck, one of my parents' friends would spot me. The traffic was so thick that the cars were stopped. Sunset looked like a used car lot the size of New Hampshire. The cars made room for us and we walked right through. The person who decided to put a major road through horse country wasn't a very talented city planner. Maybe the place was under-populated at the time.

When we got to the Corral Restaurant we tied the horses up outside. It was like the movies. People rode up and just tied their horses up while they ate. That was the most exciting part of the



whole trip. I felt like I was 25 years old as I dismounted. I wished Lee Ann and Laura could see me. They would have to chew on their just-manicured nails with envy.

The waitress was great. She treated us like real customers instead of a couple of kids. The chili was loaded with beans. Kidney beans, black beans, red beans, pinto beans and some other kind of beans. We needed a beanologist to identify all the beans. It was spicy too. I could feel it burning my throat. It was a good kind of burning though, a tough cowgirl kind of burning.

Dad picked me up at 6:00, as usual. My insides felt like jelly, except for my stomach, which felt like it was full of lead bricks. I was so sure Dad would be able to look at me and see my crime. It was as if I was wearing a black and white striped jail uniform that only I could see. Liz's dad came at the same time. His Saab was parked next to our Volkswagen Bug. Her dad owned race horses and sometimes he would take us to the track on a Saturday morning. His car was quiet but his driving was unbearable. Speed up. Slow down. Speed up. Slow down. It was like being on a cheap ride at the traveling carnival. Liz was drawing pictures of what looked like the front of the Corral Restaurant in the sand parking lot with her toes and giggling as our dads talked. I shot her a dirty look and erased it with my leather boot. All my bones were locked rigidly. My insides were jelly. My gut was burning. Then the dreaded car ride home began.

"How was school today?" Dad screamed over the buzzing engine. He was clueless.

"Fine," I screamed back.

"What?" Dad screamed.

"Fine," I screamed a little louder. I didn't want to be too loud or too talkative. He might get suspicious.

"Do you know what happened to me today?" Dad screamed.

"What?" I screamed back.

"I had to give a talk at work. They invited tons of people. I was trying to make the talk entertaining. Every time I made a joke the entire audience would die laughing. I felt great about the talk. I never had them so enthralled." He was still smiling. I was waiting for the punchline. I could feel there was more to it.

"That's great, Dad," I screamed.

"After the talk I went to the bathroom. I had a huge booger

hanging from the end of my nose,” Dad said. Then he started to laugh really hard. When he laughed the hardest he hardly made a sound. His mouth would open but only a little noise would escape.

How could he take it so well? If that happened to me in school I would die. I would die from embarrassment. Especially if they invited people from other classes! It would be just like one of my worst nightmares, the kind I had after eating too much ice cream right before sleeping.

Then he started to tell me stupid jokes. I pretended to laugh but all the time I could hear him in my mind. *There is nothing worse than being dishonest*, he said only a few weeks ago. *There is nothing worse than a liar*. He wasn’t criticizing me at the time. He was just expressing his views on dishonest people like me. Honesty wasn’t a luxury characteristic that some people had. It was a required trait if you were to be considered decent.

Mom made meatloaf with gravy, mashed potatoes, and corn on the cob with rice pudding for dessert. I thought that eating some normal food might stop the burning, churning, volcanic stomach I was suffering from. I thought if I ate lots of dinner no one would be suspicious. I just had to act normal and no one would guess that I had actually crossed Sunset Drive.

I was being as chatty as possible, and didn’t fight with Denis at all. It was all coming together—my life as a liar. I heard about it before. One lie builds on the other, and on the other and the other. It turns into a wicked, irreversible pattern until you are doing things like shoplifting and stealing money from your friends. I felt terrible.

It was time for homework. I couldn’t take it any longer. I ran to the bathroom and began to throw up. Red beans, black beans, kidney beans, pinto beans and unidentifiable beans came out. Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, corn off the cob and rice pudding. Within seconds Mom had a warm hand on my back and a cool washcloth on my forehead. She wiped my face, and held my hair back. Muffin, our innocent dog, was witness to it all. I bet she knew. Dogs have a way of knowing things.

“You poor thing. What did you have for lunch today?” Mom looked into the toilet before she flushed it. Only a mom would do that.

“Chili,” I moaned. Lie number one. Technically, it was lie number two, since the real lie was crossing Sunset Drive.

"Those school lunches are indigestible. It's better if you get it all out. There may have been something bad in it. Maybe I should call the school in the morning. I hope you don't have food poisoning. Poor thing," she said. She was serious about calling school. My life would be over. What if Mom found out that we had chicken nuggets for lunch?

"No Mom, I don't think it was the chili. My stomach was bad before that," I said.

Lie number two, or number three, depending on how you counted, was to cover up the other lies. I was advancing rapidly. I wouldn't have to argue with that little voice in my head anymore because it would take a permanent vacation. Good-bye conscience, I'll miss you when you're gone. I would become a professional liar like Liz by the time Mom and I said goodnight. By tomorrow I would be carelessly drawing pictures with my toes in the sand parking lot, worrying about absolutely nothing. It was unbelievable how quickly I could unravel. It was just hours ago that I was a normal, law-abiding teenager.

I escaped into my room and was lying on my bed when Denis came in. He didn't even knock, which really made me mad. I felt too awful to fight with him.

"You are such a liar." His face was glowing just like Liz's.

"Shut up," I groaned.

"We didn't have chili. We had chicken nuggets." He was whispering, which I did appreciate.

"Did you cross Sunset Drive and go to the Corral Restaurant?" His face was so full of enthusiasm that he was beginning to look like an alien from outer space.

I just groaned. I couldn't lie anymore. Mom felt sorry for me. Dad had trustingly confided in me about his unfortunate nose situation. And Denis would never believe even the most creative lie.

"What do you care? You get to transfer to private school next week. You'll probably be eating filet mignon while we're eating leftover tuna casserole," I said.

I was trying my best to think of something to threaten him with so he wouldn't tell Mom and Dad. Blackmail would be good. It couldn't be too hard. He had to have done something wrong within the past twenty-four hours.

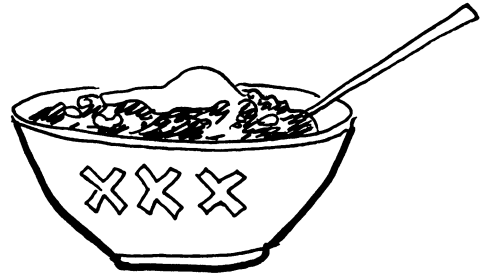
"You crossed Sunset Drive. I know it. You've been dying to go to that place, cowgirl. I'm going to tell." He was absolutely glowing with joy.

"If you nark on me and I die from chili poisoning tomorrow you're going to feel really bad," I said, hopefully.

"Bad? You are such a liar. How could I pity you? I may have problems but at least I don't lie like you do." He was gloating.

"Don't you even feel a little bit sorry for me?" I was desperately hoping for the impossible.

"Nope," he said, smiling as if he were about to board a vacation ship to the Bahamas. He left my room without shutting the door.



Somehow I managed to explain the whole story to Felicia between PE and lunch the next day. She said I should go to confession. Confession? I had never been to confession. She said if I didn't go to confession I should at least tell my parents the truth. At least I think that's what she said. We had to use her Spanish/English dictionary a lot. I just knew she understood. There was no one else I wanted to talk to. Liz would laugh. And I wasn't totally convinced that I should tell Lisa these kind of things yet. Felicia seemed to understand completely. I could see it in her big brown eyes. She just seemed to know without knowing. That's what I had to do. I had to come clean. I just couldn't stand my life as a liar. I would come clean. I just had to find the perfect moment to tell them.

Thinking About It

1. Have you ever been the "new kid" at school? If so, how did you feel? What can other students do to make someone new feel more comfortable in your school? Explain.
2. What do you think your conscience is? In what ways can listening to your conscience help you? What do you think would happen if you ignored your conscience for a long time?
3. Do you think you can pick and choose who to be honest with or should you be honest with everyone? How does it feel to be lied to? How would you feel if other people stopped trusting you because they caught you lying? Explain.

