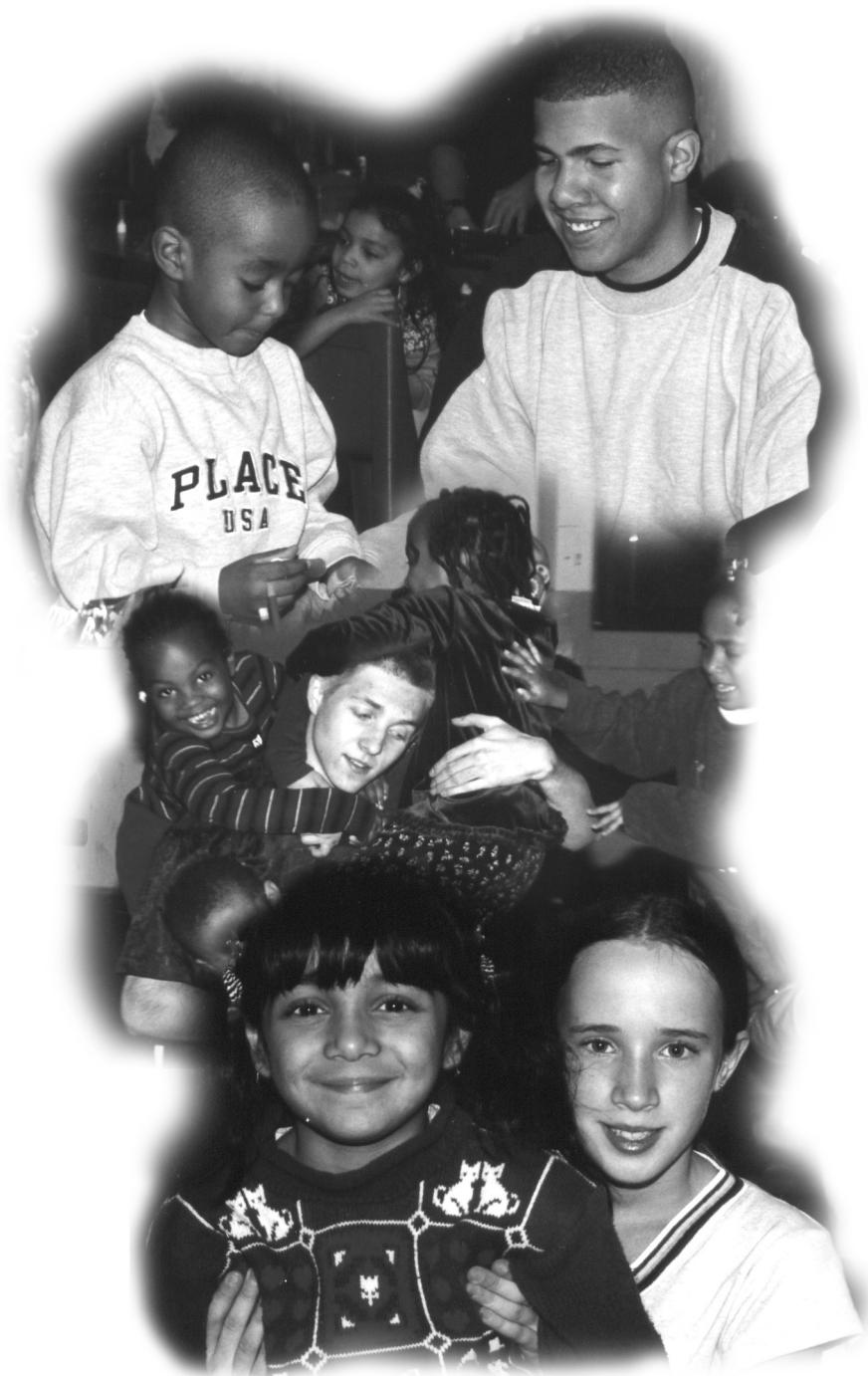


Part 4

Fine Tuning: More Tools for the Adventurous

Everybody can be great....because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.

Martin Luther King, Jr.



Narrative 4

The Chocolate Milk Incident

Four weeks had passed and I hadn't found the guts to confess to my parents yet. Felicia said that I had better do it soon. She said that if I got hit by a car or something, and died without confessing, it would be very bad for me.

It was exactly four weeks to the day since I crossed Sunset Drive with Liz when it happened. It seemed like every other day at first. I nearly missed the morning bus because I was trying to blow dry my hair straight. Then the miracle happened. Before that, I thought miracles were reserved for the middle of the night, or at least dusk. Definitely not an hour after the sun had risen.

The miracle was this: we didn't have to dress out and run a mile and play dodge-the-red-ants-softball. Instead, we stayed in the locker room and watched a movie about personal safety and not getting into cars with strangers. Some of the girls looked so tough I couldn't imagine that any stranger would want them in their cars in the first place.

Our coaches had never cancelled outside activities before. But the rain was beating the earth without mercy. It was the kind of rain that looked like a wall and kept you from seeing three inches past your nose. Umbrellas were



useless. Raincoats were a formality. And my hair was at its all-time curliest. But the PE miracle wasn't even the most important event of the school day.

Felicia and I sat together in PE and in Algebra, and sometimes lunch, if our classes met in the hallway. Otherwise it was hard to find her. The week before, she had brought me the most beautiful embroidered picture ever. It had birds and fish and people on it; it looked like a farm scene. The colors were bright and cheerful. Felicia made it herself. She said she didn't have a frame. She had to look up the word frame. I told her that Mom was an artist and did her own framing.

Nearly a month had passed since Felicia was indoctrinated into the world of American morning fitness. Her clothes were still ironed every day. She had to take special language classes for most of her subjects. She tried out all of her newest English words on me because I never laughed. Other kids laughed at the Hispanic kids with accents. I was just glad it wasn't the other way around—me trying to get by speaking Spanish in a Cuban school. It was hard enough moving from northern Virginia. They still didn't understand that we lived only 10 minutes from Washington, DC. They only understood what they wanted to understand; to them anyone from Virginia was a hillbilly.

Things were going pretty smoothly up until lunch. That's when it happened. I was standing in the lunch line, trying to figure out what the red stuff was in the corner of my tray. I didn't even notice that Felicia was a few people in front of me. Then I heard the cashier say in her loud voice, "You need 50 more cents. 50 cents."

She held up five fingers in front of Felicia's face. How embarrassing.



I saw Felicia fumbling through her pockets nervously. I began to go through my jean pockets for some change too. Then he said it. I can't believe he said it. It was Robert. The big-mouthed sports star. He thought that his very presence at the school put it on the map. He was so tall that I could see his nose hairs when he talked. And he was two people in front of me.

"Hey, stupid. You need more money. Dinero. Get it? MONEY," Robert said. Those ugly words just rolled off his lips like kisses. He

brushed his straight blonde hair out of his eyes.

My body began to jerk in little jerky movements because I wanted to hit him. I wanted to scream at him in front of all of his friends. I wanted to make him regret talking like that to one of the kindest girls I had met the whole year.

"Those people are so stupid. They don't understand anything," he said.

Those ugly words were the frosting on the cake of his stupidity. His friends all began to laugh. Felicia was looking at him. She understood every word. I just knew it.

"Hey, Robert," I called to him. My voice didn't even quiver.

He turned around to look at me and I threw my chocolate milk all over his face.

He immediately lunged at me and bent down in my face, snarling. "No one touches me little girl! No one!" His face was red with white splotches. Milk was dripping down his hair and his ears. His face looked like a time-bomb about to blow. I saw his hand coming at me from the left, fast. Too fast to think. I ducked and rammed my knee between his legs, really hard. That's what Denis told me to do. Denis told me that if I was ever attacked by a man I should knee him between the legs with all of my strength. I had lots of practice dodging fast-flying objects too, so it wasn't such a miracle that Robert missed.

Robert bent over in pain and then fell to the ground. It all happened so fast. It only took moments. Everything felt like it was in slow motion. Victor had run to me. He was standing next to me. He looked at me, a little shocked. Maybe he was disappointed that he didn't get to protect me. Maybe he was relieved. Robert had a reputation for picking on anyone who stood in his way. He specialized in picking fights with the Hispanic kids. Victor wasn't the type to settle things with his fists. Victor had more brains than that. Robert needed a pack mule to carry all of his ignorance around the school for him.

Felicia was still standing in line. I left Robert on the ground and walked to the cash register to give her the 50 cents. I could hear whispers and saw Lee Ann and Laura standing in line behind me. This was going to be all over the school within three minutes. What a nightmare.

I had never been in an assistant principal's office before. We didn't even have an assistant principal in Arlington. *Florida International University*, that's where the degree on the wall was from. It

read, *Gerald Emanuel Dukes has completed satisfactorily the requirements of this institution for the degree of Master of Educational Management.* The framed degree had a huge gold seal on the bottom corner. It looked very serious, but not nearly as

serious as Mr. Dukes when he walked into the room. I instinctively stood up when he walked in. My knees began to shake before he even sat down. Robert was nothing compared to this guy.

"Sit down, Dorothy." He could slice tomatoes with that voice.

Some of the teachers would call the students Miss or Mister, right before they punished them. *Mister Donalds, if you think that is so funny you can come see me during lunch and tell me all about it. Or Miss Kutrip, if you talk one more time I am going to make you sit in the front of the class for the rest of the year.* Mr. Dukes didn't bother with the Miss and Mister stuff. And I could see that I hadn't earned the status of being called by my last name.

Mr. Dukes looked at me through round little glasses. His skin was dark and flawless. His eyes were shrewd, but when I looked into them, I found a kindness there I hadn't expected.

"Dorothy Fellenz, I am surprised to see you in my office. I realize that you have recently transferred here and that your brother Denis has left us for a private school. You wouldn't happen to be hoping that by throwing milk all over a boy three times your size that you might get to join your older brother at his new school, would you?"

I had not even thought about it. My heart leapt. Private school!

"No, Mr. Dukes. It didn't cross my mind," I told him, sincerely. I wasn't sure exactly how to speak to a man who had the invisible title of Supreme Ruler of the School floating around his head. I was trying to be as polite as possible without groveling. I had to stand my ground.

"Since this is your first offense, Miss Fellenz, I will ask you to tell me what happened." His voice was even and unagitated. He was leaning forward in his chair. A huge wooden desk separated us. His nameplate was directly in front of me. *Mr. Dukes.* I don't think he needed a nameplate. Everyone knew who he was. His fingers interlocked and he fixed his eyes directly into mine.

"Robert is a bully. I'm sure that you know that, it's not secret



information. He insulted a new girl. Her name is Felicia Fernandez. He was making fun of her in front of everyone in the lunch line for being Hispanic. She happens to be my friend," I said, but talking so quickly that it sounded like a foreign language.

"So, you threw milk all over him?" Mr. Dukes asked. He wasn't talking to me like I was a two-year-old, he was just confirming the facts.

"Yes, I threw milk all over him. But it wasn't premeditated. It was a crime of passion," I answered. *What a stupid thing to say*, I thought. I saw it on TV once. If you do something like kill your lover because you are upset, you will get less time in prison than if it's all planned in advance.

"Nonetheless, you initiated the aggression."

"Yes, that's true. But he really started the whole thing with his verbal aggression," I said. *Verbal aggression?* It sounded good, and it fit the bill, but I wasn't even sure why I said it.

"Why did you do what you did?" Mr. Dukes asked.

"Mr. Dukes, I did it because it's wrong. It's wrong to say those things to people. It's wrong to treat people badly because they speak a different language or seem different somehow. Someone had to do something. I didn't mean to be violent. It just came out." My palms were sweating as I spoke.

"Do you think that there was another way to handle your feelings of anger?" he asked. He was leaning further forward than before. His words were so well spoken that I felt like he was reading from a script. He would have been great in a Western.

"I guess I could have told someone, but what could anyone do?" My heart pounded as I spoke.

"Dorothy, if you ever see a student mistreating someone you should report it. We will definitely take action. You have to trust us. There is a lot that the administration can and will do to curtail such inappropriate treatment." I could tell by the way he spoke those words that he wasn't angry with me. I don't know why, but he wasn't. He was actually talking to me like a real human being. He wasn't even giving me a lecture on my temper. My Irish temper.

"Do you agree with me, Mr. Dukes, that Robert was wrong?" I asked reflexively. I was a bit surprised at him and at myself. Aside from the predictable physical reactions, sweating and trembling a little, I wasn't as terrified as I thought I'd be.

"I do. But nonetheless, you were wrong too. I expect that the next time you see a situation like this, you will bring it to me first

so I can deal with it the right way. By letting your anger take over, you get yourself in trouble and take a big risk of being hurt."

"Yes, Mr. Dukes, I'll really try not to take justice into my own hands. I mean, I'll try not to be violent," I said.

"Dorothy, you should be a lawyer."

"That's what my Dad says." I had stopped sweating. My heart was still pounding, though.

Mr. Dukes stood up and opened the door. He handed me a little yellow slip of paper. It said I had after-school detention for only three days. Amazing. I was sure I'd be suspended. I wondered what he'd do to Robert.

The big room outside of his office was full of people working. There was a line of kids sitting on a bench waiting to see him. The woman from the cash register of the cafeteria was there too. She actually smiled at me. I wondered if she was a witness. As I walked away, he said in a stern voice, "And I don't want to see you in my office again, young lady. Do you understand?" I just shook my head obediently. I think he said it for the other people and not for me.

Lee Ann and Laura were at their posts in Health class when I came back from the office. I opened the classroom door and handed Mrs. Jones my pass from the office. The room seemed as if all of the air was suddenly sucked out and the students were trying not to breathe. My tennis shoes squeaked as I walked to my desk. I sat down and took my notebook out. Mrs. Jones, being very socially skilled, got the class talking about their hearts and lungs again.

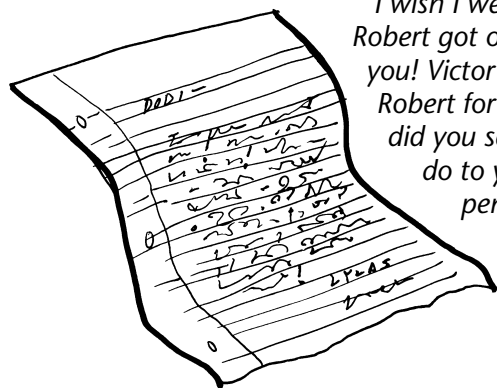
Lisa was sitting a few rows to my left. She passed me a note.

Dodi—

I wish I were there! Everyone's talking about it. Robert got out of school suspension for trying to hit you! Victor told Julie that he was ready to take on Robert for you. Don't you even think he's cute? What did you say to Mr. Dukes? What are they going to do to you? This is the coolest thing that's happened since the hurricane!

LYLAS

Lisa



I assaulted a boy and Lisa thought it was cool. My life as I

knew it was rapidly coming to an end. And Lisa thought it was cool. She watched soap operas after school. I think her idea of reality was a little affected by them. By tomorrow morning, every tough girl in PE was going to want to beat me up to secure a place on the totem pole of violent girls. I was now one of them. I had crossed to the other side. I wondered if they would put it on my permanent record. I would be walking across the stage to receive my high school diploma and the announcer would say, *Ladies and gentlemen please watch your small children. Although Dorothy Fellenz looks harmless, this young woman has a history of violent outbursts.*

Class was nearly over when the talking wallflowers started up. Last week, Laura got a lunch detention for her talkativeness. She was a little more careful these days.

"Lee Ann, can you believe what we saw in lunch?" asked Laura.

"I wonder if Robert will try to sue Dodi for damages when he can't have children 10 years from now," said Lee Ann.

"I think he'll track her down before then," answered Laura.

"Maybe he'll fall in love with her now, just like Victor. Some guys like tough girls," said Lee Ann.

"Yeah, some guys like to be beat up." They broke into their stupid giggling.

"Dodi," Laura had packed up her books in her latest bag and turned to torture me. "What made you do it?"

"I don't know, Laura, I just didn't like what they had for lunch."

Mom once said something like don't throw pearls to swine. I didn't know at the time that swine were actually pigs. But the point was that you don't give people things they don't appreciate. Laura could never appreciate the reason I threw milk all over Robert, even if I tried really hard to explain it to her.



Halfway through the last class of the day, a note from the office came for me. I thought that Mr. Dukes had changed his mind. I shook at the thought of being cast into the dungeon of in-school detention. Mr. Lowe read the note and handed it to me. It said, *Dorothy Fellenz, do not ride the bus home. Your mother is coming*

to pick you up. I wasn't sure if I was relieved or not. I never dreaded seeing Mom, even if it meant that she would be my substitute teacher. She was like an uncertified counselor. Her friends called at all hours asking her advice on this and that. I was a bit uneasy, though. I had never been in trouble in school before. I had no idea how she would react. Trouble from Denis was one thing, but from me?

Denis was, unfortunately, in the car. His school released a whole hour earlier than ours. He was sitting on the hood. Mom had gone inside to check her schedule. The rain had stopped.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," I said back, hoping that would be the end of the conversation.

"You know if you keep it up they're going to put you in a girls' detention center." His voice was totally serious, as if he was privy to some secret information.

I gasped. For a fraction of a second I actually believed him.

"They don't even know that you crossed Sunset Drive a few weeks ago. Maybe I should tell them tonight. So, what else are you up to? Grand larceny? Money laundering? Contributing to the delinquency of minors?" He was so proud of himself. He felt some kind of kinship to me now that I was deteriorating.

"Denis, I am a minor," I said.

"How do I know you're not lying about your age?" He slipped into the front seat, knowing I'd be in no mood to fight with him over it.

I was lying on the green fuzzy rug in my room watching the ceiling fan go around. Muffin was curled up between my shoulder and my neck. Mom and Dad weren't even mad. They were disappointed in me. That's even worse. Dad said that boy could have really hurt me if he hadn't missed. Mom said that she thought I could have used better judgment no matter how mad I was. I knew one thing. I couldn't carry around my guilt anymore. I had to come clean. I felt like a liar. And it wasn't getting any better. I realized that this wasn't a good time to tell them about crossing Sunset Drive, but I knew I had to do it.

I decided to practice on Muffin. She had that dog's sense. I'm sure she knew about my lying.

"Muffin, I'm going to pretend that you are them, okay? Just sit there and pay attention." She looked at me as if she were trying to catch the gist of my words.

"Mom, Dad, I have something to say."

Muffin yawned.

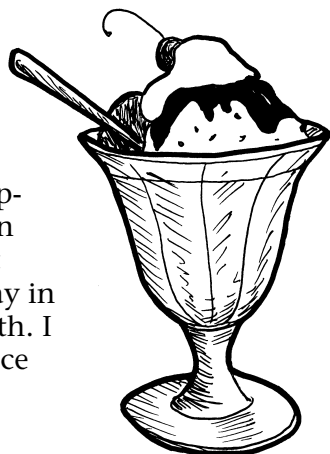
"I rode across Sunset Drive with Liz and went to the Corral Restaurant. I got sick on their chili that night when I was throwing up. It wasn't the school's lunch. I'm sorry. I won't do it again. I realize that you trust me. I realize that Honey costs a lot of money. I know you are probably even more disappointed in me than you are about the chocolate milk thing. I don't expect to get off free. Please just forgive me."

I sounded so sincere that I almost made myself cry. Muffin looked unimpressed. She started to fall asleep halfway through it. Now I just had to get up the courage to tell them in person.

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine my life in 10 years. I wanted to look back with a sense of purpose. I really wanted to believe that all of these things could help make me a great person. Whatever a great person was. I didn't know about a generally great person, but in the specific case of myself I had a few ideas. I knew I had to be honest. I knew I had to control myself and use my anger in a better way. It wasn't wrong to be angry. Robert acted like a jerk, that was undeniable. But I had to do better. Be more intelligent about the way I handled things. I knew I wanted to be the kind of person other people respected. I knew that the real me wasn't the knee-the-boy-where-it-hurts type of person. I knew that if someone insulted Mom, she would have found some really great way of dealing with it. I knew also that I couldn't let people like Lee Ann and Laura get to me. They had no idea who I really was. Maybe they would never know. I couldn't go around trying to impress other people. I had to cling to what I felt deep inside was right. And then just live that.



I came clean that very day, although it was a bit hard for my parents to take it all at once. Just like I had practiced with Muffin, I told them the truth. Denis actually looked disappointed. He wouldn't have anything to threaten me with now. I felt so much better that I didn't mind too much that my punishment was to stay in the confines of the stable riding ring for a month. I slept really well that night, even though I had ice cream for dessert.



Thinking About It

1. How does it feel when someone sitting near you at school puts down another person? Does it make you mad? Do you laugh? Would you feel differently if it were you? How do you think you should deal with people when they say and do mean things?
2. If you were in the narrator's situation, what would you do? What is the best way to handle difficult situations like that? Violence may have worked on the surface, but what long-term problems could there be with this approach to problem solving? Can you sometimes act more strongly and courageously by not being violent? Explain.
3. Why do you think people sometimes treat people who seem different on the surface with less respect? How can people learn to be more tolerant of those from other backgrounds, countries or with different opinions?