

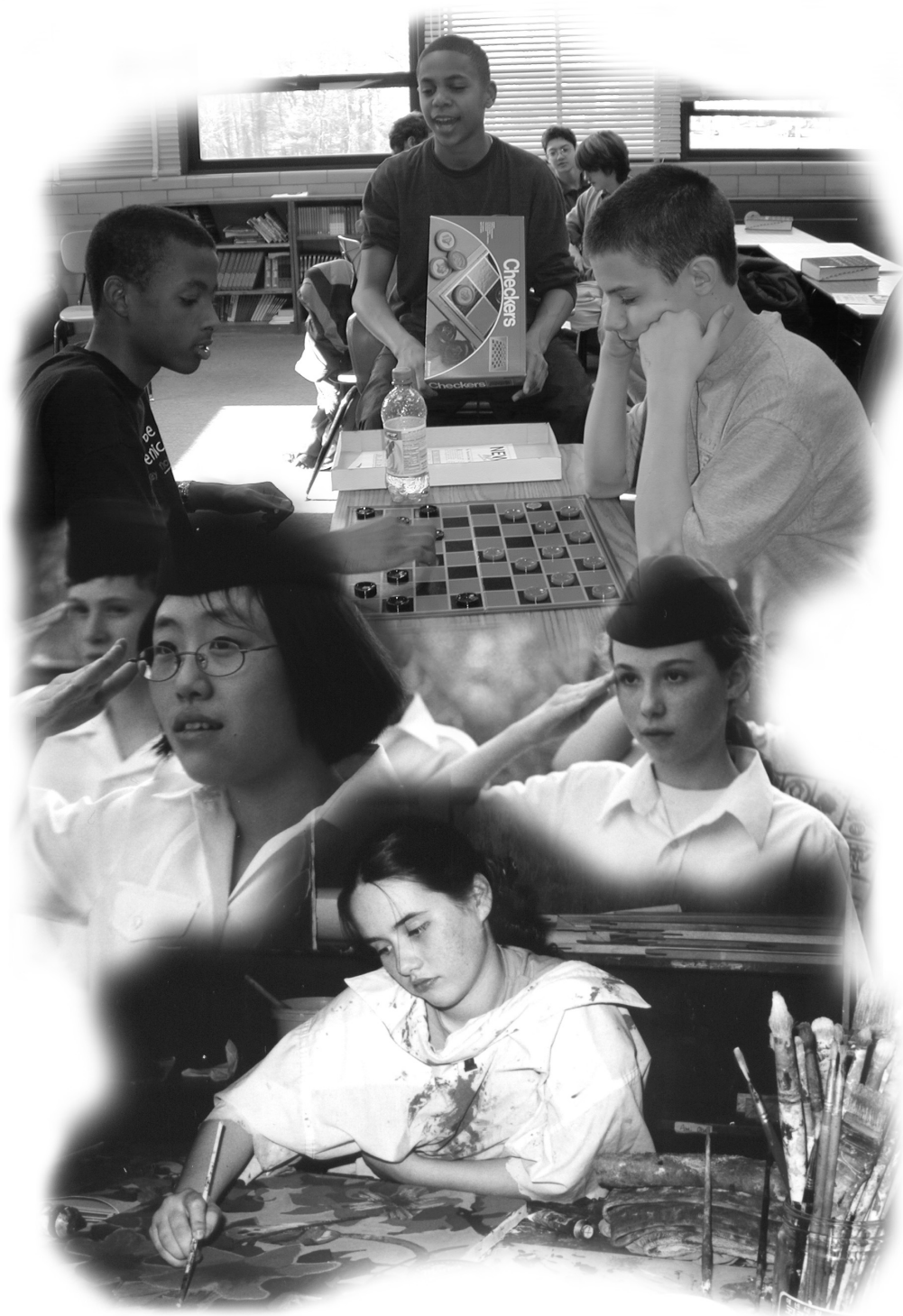
## Part 5

# **The Bigger Picture: Yes, You Really Matter**

Life isn't about keeping score. It's not about how many people call you and it's not about who you've dated, are dating or haven't dated at all. It isn't about who you've kissed, what sport you play, or which guy or girl likes you. It's not about your shoes or your hair or the color of your skin or where you live or go to school. In fact, it's not about grades, money, clothes, or colleges that accepted or unaccepted you. Life isn't about if you have lots of friends, or if you are alone, and it's not about how accepted or unaccepted you are. Life just isn't about that.

But life is about who you love and who you hurt. It's about how you feel about yourself. It's about trust, happiness and compassion. It's about sticking up for your friends and replacing inner hate with love. Life is about avoiding jealousy, overcoming ignorance and building confidence. It's about what you say and what you mean. It's about seeing people for who they are and not what they have. Most of all, it is about choosing to use your life to touch someone else's in a way that could never have been achieved otherwise. These choices are what life is about.

Katie Leicht, 17





## Narrative 5

# Why I Changed My Name

I wonder if anyone ever forgets the most embarrassing moments of their life. I suppose if you forget something that is incredibly embarrassing, then it is not as embarrassing as you might think it is. But I will never, as long as I live, be able to forget what happened to me in Family Life class. Family Life was just a nice way of saying Sex Education. I think it was a crime for our Family Life class to be taught in mixed company. And our class was mixed—boys and girls. That’s a formula for humiliation in and of itself!

The class was nearly over. Mr. Lowe was taking secret questions from the class. At the end of every class, we were allowed to write our most secret questions about sex and human physiology on a piece of paper and pass it to Mr. Lowe. He would mix them all up and then read the questions. After reading the questions, he would give some sort of answer. I never asked him anything; I could ask my Mom.

We were all sitting on the floor around him. I sat as far back in the crowd as possible. I would have volunteered to go to the cafeteria and wash the dirty dishes with my hair if that were an option. Anything to get out of that class.

Mr. Lowe was nearly done with reading out the questions. The clock was ticking. Then he read it, the last question for the day.

“What bra size does Dodi Fellenz wear?” he read.

The whole class burst out laughing, including Mr. Lowe. All of my worst fears were confirmed. Everyone knew I was overdeveloped. I didn’t even wear a bra. I wore white cotton undershirts, with little pink and blue flowers on them. I couldn’t believe Mr.



Lowe actually read that question out loud. What made him do it was beyond me. I sat there with my knees pulled up to my chest and didn't say a word. The whole class was looking at me and laughing. I didn't have one friend in that class, which made it infinitely worse. But Lee Ann and Laura were there. They were always there. I suddenly realized why they asked me if I liked pink flowers or blue flowers better. I wished Denis was there. He would have done something outrageous that would have landed him in in-school suspension and gotten their attention off of me.

The bell rang. I acted calm and collected but I was really mad. I ran to the bathroom and went into the stall. I leaned against the wall until I heard the late bell ring. I didn't care if I got a tardy. We had just finished homeroom. Why did they teach Sex Ed in homeroom? It didn't even matter. I just didn't care. I didn't care about anything. I felt like calling Mom. I wished she were there subbing. I felt like screaming. I felt like running away and never coming back. I felt like telling Mr. Lowe that he should work at the animal shelter as the head putter-to-sleeper. It would have been a lot less destructive than being a junior high school teacher. I felt like screaming at him, *I'm a kid and I know better than to read some dumb question like that in front of the whole class!* I wished that I had English in the afternoon. I would have liked to be in that class again. I would have liked to sit next Victor, who had a big crush on me. I would have liked to be around people who thought I would look good in a school uniform.

The day went painfully slowly. I didn't tell anyone. No one. Not even Felicia. I went to the stable to take care of Honey and ride. I decided not to clean her stall. It wasn't very dirty. I was just too mad and too upset. It was only the third day of freedom from my month-long restriction. Liz asked if I wanted to go on a trail ride with her. We were riding bareback through the trees next to the stream when I finally felt like telling someone about it.

"Liz, something really bad happened to me at school today," I said.

"Really? Worse than that milk thing?" she asked.

"Much," I answered.

"Tell me already!" She wasn't known for her great patience.

"Some kid in Sex Ed wrote a question to the teacher and asked what bra size do I wear. The teacher read it in front of the whole class and everyone laughed at me." I almost started to cry.

"Are you serious? That's it? You're upset about that?" She was

seriously not impressed.

"What do you mean, *that's it?*" I was getting mad again.

"I don't know what planet you're from but you're lucky to have what you have! Some stupid jealous girl with a flat chest wrote that question. Get over it. You're too immature to appreciate it now. When you're my age, you'll be glad. Grow up, Dodi!" Liz smiled and stuck out her big chest. Then she cantered off.

When we were nearer to the barn we decided to race. We were going to race back to the barn. We had the horses stand side by side on a long strip of grass in front of a hunter-jumper stable. Liz and I were laughing so hard I could barely sit up. We were laughing at nothing. Laughing at all the people who say mean things. Laughing at all the kids who just loved to laugh at other people. Laughing to feel better. Laughing to have fun. Just laughing because we wanted to laugh. The horses were waiting for their cue to race. They pranced around excitedly.

Then Liz managed to sit up straight. She said, "On your mark! Get set! Go!"

I wasn't ready. I was still laughing.

Naomi, Liz and Honey took off. I fell right off Honey's bare back and crashed onto the ground. I don't know how long I was lying there. I blacked out. I came to as someone was gently shaking my shoulder and talking to me.

"Hey, are you okay? Can you hear me? You've got to get up. We've got to go after your horse. Please, get up." It was a young man's voice. I opened my eyes slowly, as if in a dream. The sun shone so brightly it was like being in a tunnel of light. I could see his head over my face, but I couldn't make out any of his features. He was just a shadowy blob in front of the brilliant sun. My eyes closed again.

"That's it. You got it. Come on, beautiful. Wake up. You can do it. Wake up." A strong hand was on my back, and I managed to sit up.

"Are you okay?" he asked. I could see his face now. And what a face. Had he really called me beautiful or was I dreaming? Maybe Liz was right after all. Then I remembered what happened.

"Where's Honey? Where's my pony?" I asked him.

"She ran. I think your friend went after her. I just saw you fall. I brought my truck. Let's go get her."

He helped me to my feet. My legs were surprisingly wobbly. Then I realized that Honey was running towards Sunset Drive. It

was at least 12 blocks away, and our stable was only a few blocks away, but what if she made it to Sunset Drive? What if Honey ran out onto Sunset Drive!

The stranger helped me into his truck and then took off flying down the road. I could tell we were thinking the same thing—*let's get that pony before she's in real trouble*. I found out that his name was Elliot. He told me in the truck as we were dashing after my pony.

Then we saw them. Liz was standing in front of the stable with both horses by the reins and I was relieved.

"There she is! That's her! Thank you so much," I said. Elliot turned into the long driveway and I hopped out. I felt completely fine. Dad always said I was hard-headed.

"Are you sure that you're okay? You were out for a little while." His eyes were greenish-brown and full of concern.

"She'll be fine," Liz said, walking up to lean on Elliot's truck door. "Hi, I'm Liz, I don't think we met before." If it weren't for the horses Liz would have climbed in the front seat with him.

"Hi, Liz. Take care of your friend, okay? She fell pretty hard. See you two later." Elliot looked me in the eyes and smiled before he drove away. Liz had to back off the truck door out of necessity.

When Elliot was gone Liz looked at me.

"Dodi, that is one of the best-looking guys I have ever seen in my whole life. Good going! What did he say to you in the truck?" Her eyes were filled with that excited look.

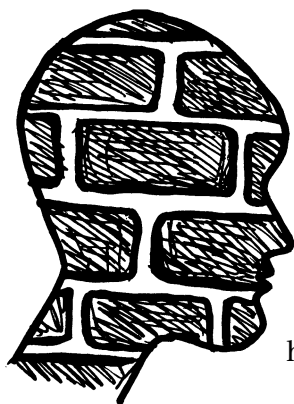
"Liz, I just fell off my pony and was unconscious and you're worried about what Elliot said to me in the truck?" I was a little annoyed at her nearsightedness.

"Elliot? What a great name. Well, what did he say?" she asked.

"He said I was beautiful." He didn't say it in the truck, and he probably just said it to get me to wake up, but he did say it. At least I think he said it, if I wasn't imagining it.

"Wow," Liz said. She was impressed.

I thought about telling Mom about what happened in Sex Ed. She was hemming the light pink dress she made me for Felicia's





big sister's Quince Año birthday party. In Spanish *quince* means fifteen and *año* means year. It was her fifteenth birthday party and I was invited. The party was the next evening. Luckily Mom got the scoop from Estrella, her Cuban friend. Estrella told Mom that a Quince Año party is a really big deal and that I should dress like I was going to a royal ball. I hated standing still while she did the hem; it made my stomach woozy. I think Denis was jealous that he couldn't go with me. He had been to Neil Hornick's Bar Mitzvah, though, and I wasn't invited. Neil wore men's cologne that made me sneeze, so I didn't really care anyhow.

"You look like a birthday cake," Denis said.

"You smell like a birthday cake that's been left on the back porch for a year," I said. It was a stupid comeback, but it was all I could think of at the moment.

Mom looked at me as if I had lost some brain cells. I probably did when I fell off of Honey. Somehow Mom always seemed to expect me to be so mature and self-controlled. I guess it was because of all the heavy-duty talks we had together.

"Mom, how did you and Dad meet again?" I asked.

"Oh brother, I'm leaving," Denis said. He couldn't handle these kinds of talks. He always changed the channel when Barbara Walters made the person she was interviewing cry.

"I was a flight attendant and he was on vacation from the seminary..." Of course I remembered that my Dad was going to be a Catholic priest, but after he met my Mom he decided to take a permanent vacation from the seminary.

"... Aunt Andre lived in the same apartment building as I did and he was babysitting. He stopped me in the hallway and asked me if I could help him change a diaper." She started laughing.

"That was a bad sign, Mom," I said, half-kidding.

"Anyhow, we got married several months after that." She looked up at me and pushed me a little so I would turn.

I wondered what Elliot was like. How old was he? Did he really think I was beautiful? He probably just said that because he thought it might bring me back to life. It did. I wondered if he was as kind as he seemed. He was gentle, but he was strong all at once. I wondered if he made fun of people at school. He didn't seem like



the type. Did he go on trail rides? Maybe I would see him again. I wondered if he would recognize me if I saw him somewhere around. I would recognize him. He was so handsome. But it wasn't just his handsomeness that was wonderful. It was more than that.

"Okay, let me sew it up now." Mom was done with the hem. "Are you sure that your white shoes are comfortable enough to wear to the party tomorrow?"

"Sure, Mom, they're fine." They really were fine. I barely wore them but they were comfortable.

"I bet they'll have dancing. That would be fun, to dance," she said.

Felicia Fernandez's house was lit up with hundreds of little tiny white lights in long strings. Dad and Mom dropped me off out front. Music was already filling the air as I arrived. The humid breeze was clean and full of life. The moon was as bright as a night sun. I looked up into the evening sky and wondered if there was any intelligent life up there. A path was lit along the driveway. My dress was perfect. It had little tiny sleeves and a boxy neck, with a row of pearly buttons down the back. A full skirt ruffled around my knees. I wore my Mom's pearl earrings and necklace. I kept feeling my neck to make sure they hadn't fallen off. I even had Mom's long white gloves on. They fit perfectly. Mom had pinned my hair up and Dad said I looked like Jackie Kennedy. Denis just made stupid jokes about the car turning into a pumpkin and my parents into mice. He couldn't handle it. He wasn't used to seeing me all dressed up.

I carried my Mom's little white purse under my arm even though I didn't have anything to put in it. It just made me look mature. In my hands I held the gift for Felicia's sister, Anna Maria. The front door was open and I could catch a glimpse of dozens of guests moving around inside the house. The house was so alive and festive. I felt a little awkward walking into their house, but no one would have heard my knocking even if I tried. If they didn't hear the roar of my Dad's Bug, they certainly wouldn't hear a few knocks.

All kinds of people were there. Old people, young people, people my parents' age, little kids, and lots of people my age. I was relieved that Mom had adorned me in her pearls and long gloves. Some of the women were wearing ball gowns. I was gently pushing my way through the crowd looking for Felicia when I saw

him. Elliot was there, only a few feet away. I blinked my eyes a few times to make sure I wasn't imagining it. Maybe I had hit my head harder than I thought. Maybe my contact lenses were wrinkled. But it really was him. It was the same Elliot who had saved me from sure death only days before. I froze like a scared squirrel before it runs. I listened. He was speaking Spanish with an older man. I couldn't believe it. I turned quickly before he saw me. My heart was racing and I was afraid that someone would notice that it beat so wildly my pearls bounced around on my neck. I thought I had escaped through the crowd when I heard someone behind me.

"Wait, wait, just a minute." It was Elliot's voice. He must have seen me. He was following me now. I wanted to run, but for no particularly good reason. He caught my elbow. I had to turn around. I was cornered.

"Oh, hi," I said, I sounded so stupid. Nothing else came out though.

"Hi, I'm Elliot, we met before." He was looking at me with those eyes again.

"Thank you for your help," I said, formally.

"I'm sorry but I don't even know your name," he said.

I couldn't think. I just looked at him. I was bewitched. I stood there mute amidst all of the happy chatter of other guests. I stared at him as I tried to say my name. I forgot my name. How could anyone forget their own name?

Then my relief came from across the room, like a raft for a drowning person.

"Dorotea! You're here! I'm glad! I waiting for you!" It was Felicia. I was so happy to see her that I nearly popped a seam in the underarm of my dress when I hugged her.

"You met my cousin Elliot? He lives here all his life. He in high school." Felicia looked like a doll. Her hair was up over her neck and her silky blue dress fit her perfectly. How could Robert the Bully have ever made fun of her? It was unimaginable. She was perfect.

"So you're Dorothy. Are you the one who stood up to that bully in the lunch line?" Elliot asked.

I could feel my face turning red as the blood rushed to it. How embarrassing. Why did these things always happen to me? Now Elliot would think that I was a violent mess. I wonder if he somehow knew about the scene in Sex Ed as well. I should have just

handed him my personal diary and told him to enjoy reading it. That would have been less embarrassing than standing there as he mentioned all of my crimes and passions.

Elliot and Felicia began to confirm things in Spanish. I heard him say *caballo*. *Caballo* means horse. He was probably telling Felicia how I fell off Honey. They chatted for a few minutes. I couldn't understand much. It looked favorable for me, though. Elliot somehow looked impressed, although I cannot imagine why. I was trying not to stare at him as they talked. I looked around the room, and down at the floor. I had no idea what to look at. Where does a person cast their eyes in a moment like that? I knew I shouldn't stare. I didn't want Elliot to think I was like Liz.

After that, Felicia apologized for speaking in Spanish and then whisked me around the house to meet all of her other relatives. She had told them all about me. Both of Felicia's parents and her grandmother gave me big hugs when she introduced us. I wish her grandmother was my homeroom teacher. I felt my nervousness fall off me like a thin silk scarf. I felt so at home with them.

I hoped that night would go on forever. I felt beautiful. I felt appreciated. Somehow I was a hero to them for sticking up for Felicia. I wanted to speak Spanish like everyone else. I wanted to be an adopted member of the family. They had so much passion and love. Felicia's grandmother couldn't speak a word of English but she kept hugging me and giving me new and wonderful foods to sample. Elliot even asked me to dance with him. That was my first dance ever with an almost-man. Elliot taught me how to say a few words in Spanish. He said I could learn if I tried. He said I had an ear for it. It all seemed like a good dream. Like a very good dream.

The party was getting even bigger when Felicia asked me to take a walk with her. We walked down to the lake. It was only a few blocks away. We sat on the end of the dock and dangled our toes in the warm water.

"How can we remember things just as they are?" I asked her. She thought for a long time before she answered.

"Everything change in life, but that is not bad. It can be good." Felicia was looking across the lake.



"How can we remember what it's like now so that when we have children we'll understand them?" I asked her. I had often thought about that. I wondered how much Dad and Mom really remembered about being my age.

"When I have children I tell them not to worry about what other people say," she said. She kicked some water into the distance.

"When I have children I'll tell them not to worry about wearing the latest clothes. It doesn't matter what you wear," I said, feeling very mature.

"Me too. When I have children I tell them to be true," Felicia said.

"Do you mean to be themselves?" I asked.

"Yes. And be honest. Honest is very important," she added.

"When I have children I'm going to tell them to eat dinner at your grandmother's house!" I said, with the taste of her grandmother's quesadillas still lingering on my lips.

"Mi Abuela?" she asked.

"Yep, your Abuela. She's wonderful," I said.

"I have another Abuela. She live in Cuba. We go to Cuba together some time." I could see Felicia's smile in the light of the moon. Moonlight glowed over the lake and made the night feel safe.

"Felicia, do you think there's intelligent life up there?" I asked, pointing to the sky.

"Dorotea, you ask so many question!" We broke into little giggles, but it wasn't like Lee Ann and Laura's giggles. Our giggles were just for fun. There was no one else at the other end of them.

I lay in bed that night when I got home. I left my windows wide open and turned the fan on high. Then I decided that I would change my name to Dorothy, forever. I liked the way it sounded. Dorothy. Dorotea. Dodi sounded like a little girl. But Dorothy sounded graceful. Lying there, I imagined that I could speak Spanish and that Felicia and I could visit her grandmother in Cuba. We would eat fried bananas and black beans. Not like the beans at Corral Restaurant, though. We would grow up and never forget what it was like to be young. We would tell our children so many things. But most of all we would tell them that real life happens when you least expect it.

## Thinking About It

1. Have you ever been really embarrassed in front of a group of people? What do you think is the best way to handle such situations? Explain.
2. What are some of the positive changes that come with growing up and maturing? What are some of the difficulties? If you had to give advice to someone younger than you about growing up, what would you tell that person?
3. If you had to write a letter to your future children and tell them about your current life, what would you tell them? What would you want them to know about you that you think you may forget? Do you think it is important for parents to remember what it was like when they were younger, or do you think that life is so different now that it doesn't matter?