I suspect that you and I will come back to this matter many times. For now I simply want to say I'm very, very glad you're teaching here in Boston, because that means that I can visit sometimes in your class without needing to make plans long in advance. Thank you for saying it's okay if I stop by one day without much prior warning, which makes things a whole lot easier for me. As you know, you're teaching in the neighborhood where I began to teach, so I definitely will *not* need to ask you for directions!

I promise to visit as soon as I can. Meanwhile, I hope the next few weeks are not too intimidating for you. You said you like your principal and that she's been kind to you. That's one big victory to start with. I'm sure there will be many more during the weeks ahead. In spite of the butterflies you said are making "many, many loop-the-loops" within your stomach almost every morning as you head for school, try hard to enjoy this first month with your children if you can.

It will someday be a precious memory.

CHAPTER TWO

Establishing the Chemistry

First Days in the Classroom

Dear Francesca,

You asked me how I felt the first day that I ever taught within a public school.

The truthful answer is that I was terrified, even more than you were, I suspect, because I'd had no preparation as a teacher. I had gone to Harvard College, where I was a literature major, then had studied briefly as a Rhodes Scholar in England and had lived in Paris, where I'd studied writing in the company of older writers who were living there.

When I came back to the United States in 1964 and decided I would like to teach in public school, I knew nothing about teaching and had never had a class in education. But my lack of qualifications didn't seem to matter to officials in the Boston Public Schools,

who were so desperate to hire almost anyone who would agree to teach in one of Boston's poorest neighborhoods that my application was approved without much questioning.

I found myself, within three weeks, assigned to teach a fourth grade class in Roxbury, the section of the city where the black community of Boston was confined to live, a pattern of confinement, as you've noted, that exists unaltered to the present day.

My school was in a ghostly looking, badly overcrowded, and physically decrepit building where my students couldn't even be provided with a classroom of their own. We had to share an undivided auditorium with 35 other children in another fourth grade class, and with a choral group, and sewing class (fifth grade girls, all black, were taken out of academic classes for an hour every day to learn to sew on old machines like those my grandmothers had used), and with a group rehearsing almost all fall for a Christmas play that somehow never was produced.

One windy afternoon that fall, a rotted frame of windows in our make-shift class collapsed. I was standing close enough to catch the frame before the glass could shatter on the children sitting just beneath it.

Some of the children seemed to have accepted these conditions or, at least, did not appear to feel they had the right to question them. Others did not suffer these indignities so passively but seemed to simmer with hostility toward many of the teachers and the principal. When the anger of these kids erupted, they

were taken to the basement of the school, where whippings were administered by an older teacher who employed a rattan whip which he first dipped in vinegar in order to intensify the pain that it inflicted on a child's outstretched hands. The year before, one of the students in my class landed in the hospital after one of several whippings he'd received. His right forefinger had been permanently distorted as a consequence.

In the spring, the principal assigned me to another fourth grade class that had a classroom of its own but was in an even worse condition than the class in which I had begun, because the children in that room had had a string of substitute teachers almost the entire year. In the course of the preceding months, twelve different teachers had appeared and disappeared.

One of the most unhappy of these teachers, an emotionally unstable person who had no experience in teaching and an oddly frenzied look within his eyes, seemed to be a kindly man, but he could not control the pent-up anger of the children. One very cold day he made the bad mistake of stepping outside on the platform of the fire escape to clap the chalk erasers. One of the children slammed the door shut while he was outside. He banged on the door and shouted warnings at the children, but they wouldn't let him in. A teacher, alerted by the noise, who came into the room at last, said that he was red in the face and stamping his feet—"like Rumpelstiltskin!" in her words—until she opened the door to rescue him.

That was his last day at the school. Seven additional substitute teachers came and went during the next ten days. At that point, the principal told me this would be my class for the remainder of the year.

As you can imagine, I began my first day with those children with the deepest trepidation. I knew how angry and distrustful they'd become—rightfully so, in view of all the damage that the school had done to them by now. But I also knew it was essential for me to suppress the self-doubts I was feeling and do something, anything I could contrive, to give the kids the confidence that a new beginning had been made.

It wasn't easy at the start. I literally had to shout the children down during the first few days in order to be heard. I think they were shocked by this, because I'd worked with some of them in small groups earlier that year, and they'd never heard me raise my voice like that before.

Once the class calmed down a bit, I sat on my desk and made a promise to the children: I told them that they would not be abandoned. I told them I was there to stay. I don't know why it is that they believed me. They had no reason to accept such promises from yet another teacher. I do know that, from that point on, I did my damnedest to exploit every bit of personal theatricality I had at my disposal in order to infuse that room with energy and, as best I could, with the exhilaration that might bring some smiles to the very sullen faces that had come to be their adaptation to conditions that most children, rich or poor, in any school or district would have found unbearable.

Francesca, I don't want you to imagine that I was immediately successful. There are too many stories about "super-teachers" who walk into hopeless situations and work instant miracles. Those stories make good movies but don't often happen in real life; and I know that, in my own case anyway, I did not work any miracles that spring. Some of the kids remained resistant to me for a long, long time, and there were two or three who never really opened up to me until the last weeks of the year. But I did discover—and I still don't understand the chemistry that made this happen—that most of the children seemed to trust me, and one reason for this, I believe, is that they could see that I did not condemn them for the chaos and confusion they'd been through, because I told them flatly that they had been treated in a way that I thought unforgivable.

Then, too, because I've always had a tendency to say exactly what I think to children, but to do it in a way that isn't too discouraging and gloomy, trying always to extract some kind of humor or sense of absurdity out of a situation that appears like an impossible calamity, I think most of the children actually got to like me, which, as in the case of almost any first-year teacher, is the kind of unexpected blessing that we pray for.

In the Boston schools in those days, there was a

prescribed curriculum, not unlike those lists of standards, lesson plans, and day-by-day instructions that are given to the teachers in most inner-city schools today. Obedience to rules and orders was a constant emphasis in all of these materials. Teachers were provided with a list of notable quotations which we were to post on bulletin boards, or read aloud, or have our students memorize: "He who would command others must first learn to obey. . . . The first law that ever God gave to man was a law of obedience. . . . True obedience is true liberty. . . . Every day in every way it is our duty to obey. . . . Obedience sums up our entire duty."

The phonics text I was supposed to use was a basal reader in which there were no black characters. There were a couple of illustrations in the book in which the faces of the characters were lightly tanned, which may have been a timid nod to racial sensibilities, but the stories in the book had no connection to the lives of anyone who was not white and middle class. The antiquated social studies textbook I was given by a woman who was called "the master teacher" for the fourth grade classes in the school, an overtly racist publication, portrayed the people of Africa as "savage and uncivilized. . . . Their skins are of so dark a brown color that they almost look black. Their noses are large and flat. Their lips are thick. Their eyes are black and shining. . . . Their hair is so curly that it seems like wool. They are Negroes and they belong to the black race." Of the children of Switzerland, by comparison, the textbook said, "These chil-

dren are handsome. Their eyes are blue. Their hair is golden yellow. Their white skins are clear, and their cheeks are as red as ripe, red apples."

The first thing I did was to rip down from the walls and blackboards all of these materials—"obedience" quotations and the rest—and to stash the social studies textbooks in a box and seal it shut and stuff it in the closet. Then, drawing mostly on my own delights and memories, I tacked up prints of paintings by Joan Miró and Paul Klee and brought in some records of French children's songs, and some calming music by Schuman, Ravel, and Brahms.

Again, drawing on my own experience from college days and from the years I'd spent in Europe, I introduced a few familiar poems of Robert Frost, some early lyrical poems of William Butler Yeats, and some beautiful posters of the streets of Paris and its skyline, and a map of Paris too, which became of special interest to the children when I told them I had lived there and showed them the street on which I'd lived.

I ultimately ditched a set of horrible lesson plans in social studies I'd been given and did a unit about Paris, which included measuring distances, calculating costs of buying food at small cafés, and other elements of daily life within a city I knew well enough to make it something of a geographical adventure for the children.

As I said, I can't pretend that all of this was magically successful. I certainly would not propose that any of these amateurish efforts on my part ought to

be considered "innovative models" for another generation of beginning teachers. I simply wanted to begin by teaching things I knew and loved and felt that I could talk about with genuine excitement, since I thought—and this turned out to be the case—that my own enthusiasm might well prove to be contagious.

The children, to be honest, never took to Miró, but one of the paintings of Paul Klee, which is called "Bird Garden," was an instant favorite and it caused a pile-up of bodies every time the children had a chance to file past it on the way to recess or when they were lining up before dismissal. The art instructor at the school told me that she thought a painter like Paul Klee was too sophisticated for the children of this neighborhood. I didn't argue with her, but I think the children in my classroom proved her expectations to be incorrect.

I won't go into any greater detail now about the various changes that I made to try to bring some optimism about learning to those 35 fourth graders whose achievement levels had been knocked flat by the time I came into their room. (Only seven were reading and writing at grade level when I came into the class. Nearly a third were still at second grade level. I had to figure out a way to deal with this as an immediate emergency.) The point for now is not to give a breakdown of the strategies I tried but to respond to the familiar questions—"What do you *do*? How do you break through the lethargy you find?"—that teachers ask me when they come into a classroom where the

spirits of the children seem to have been bludgeoned into dull passivity by previous months or years of instability.

Most teachers, fortunately, do not come into situations quite as awful as the one that I encountered, but many have described to me conditions that are only slightly less horrendous. They also tell me—and this is the case not only with those teachers who have entered education on a "fast-track" program that sends them into urban schools with only a few weeks of preparation, but also with those teachers who've attended schools of education—that they have been given almost no advice at all on strategies for breaking through that first and frozen moment of encounter with a class that has already undergone the kind of pedagogic battering my students had experienced before I was assigned to them.

"Start out tough and stick to the prescribed curriculum," new teachers are too frequently advised. This, in my belief, is the worst possible advice. Establishing a chemistry of trust between the children and ourselves is a great deal more important than to charge into the next three chapters of the social studies text or packaged reading system we have been provided: the same one that was used without success by previous instructors and to which the children are anesthetized by now. Entrap them first in fascination. Entrap them in a sense of merriment and hopeful expectations. Entrap them in "Bird Gardens."

Even if teachers are obliged to use those scripted

lessons that are commonly believed to be essential instruments of intellectual control for students in the inner-city schools, I still would urge them, if they're given any choice at all, not to start with these materials until they've built a sense of trust and of good-natured camaraderie between the children and themselves. This may require leveling with the kids, even in some rather subtle ways, about the teacher's own opinion of these mandated materials. It may also call for some discussion of the rules and regulations in the school with which the teacher needs the children to comply in order to protect her, and the class, from undue scrutiny.

One of the first things that I told the children in my class was that, if they wanted me to have the freedom to keep on with certain things they seemed to like, they would have to do a really good job in the one specific area I knew was of particular importance to the principal. As you might have guessed, Francesca, this had no connection to the lessons that I taught or, indeed, to anything that took place once I closed the classroom door. It had to do with keeping perfect order when we left the room to file downstairs to the bathrooms or to recess.

The children got the point of this without my needing to explain it further. They already knew what mattered most within the school and proved themselves to be adept at what amounted to a kind of conspiracy between us. When we had to go downstairs or file to another room for whatever purpose, they be-

haved like little soldiers, walking quietly in line, staying on the right side of the stairway, stopping when I told them to, and scarcely whispering a word.

We were soon rewarded by a visit from the principal. "Mr. Kozol," she announced as she stood there in the doorway, "I have a compliment to give your class. The entire school is talking about how these children have been filing in the stairways." She said that this was evidence of how "mature" and "cultured" they'd become. "You can be very proud of them," she said.

One of the children gave me a big "V" for victory the minute that she left the room. For the next six weeks I didn't have a single visit from the principal or anybody else in the administration.

I guess that what I learned from this was that if a teacher knows that he or she is likely to dissent from certain of the pedagogic practices established in a school, the best defense is to be very good at certain *other* practices that matter greatly to the school authorities. If a class that's been unruly for a long, long time suddenly grows calm and well behaved and, superficially at least, obedient to rules that are important to the school, the teacher becomes valuable—and, after a run of teachers who have quit, almost indispensable—because the need to reestablish order in that classroom comes to be the highest possible priority.

I don't want to end this letter on a note that seems unfairly to impugn the motives or priorities of principals in general. In your case, I know you feel that you've been fortunate to have a good insightful

principal who shares a number of your views on the prescribed curriculum and who also has a bit of mischief in her personality and seems to enjoy and to appreciate that quality in you.

When I walked into your class last week for the first time, you were sitting in that old black rocking-chair surrounded by your students, who were gathered on the reading rug, some of them with knees scrunched up in front of them, others lying on their stomachs leaning on their elbows. You said that most of them at that point couldn't read or write more than about a dozen words, but you were slowly turning the pages of a word-and-picture book you told me you had loved since you were a child, and you were reading the story to them in that special voice you have which seems to make each sentence sound like something irresistibly delectable. Even the tiny boy, Arturo, whom you referred to as your "little bear," who came into your classroom, as you put it, knowing "almost nothing about anything," was leaning on his elbows looking up at you with a kind of dreamy adoration.

I know how hard you're working with him now to bring him into the big world of letters, sounds, and numbers; but even by that morning, only four weeks after school began, you had already won him over somehow to the very nice idea that he would be surrounded this year by a veil of tenderness and beauty. He obviously felt safe with you and was in the early throes of a child's first love for his teacher.

I saw you give a few quick "looks" to one of your

whisperers and squirmers who was finding it extremely hard to pay attention. But you never let your voice turn cold, and your eyes and those of that restless child met each other in that very candid way that seems to say, "Okay, we understand each other. Now back to the story!"

The children had known you only for a month, but the chemistry had already set in. No curriculum, no rules, no lists of "standards," no externally established regimens, however good or wise they may appear to some, can substitute for this. That bond of trust and tenderness comes first. Without that, everything is merely dutiful—and, generally, deadening. It is not for dutiful aridity that people who love children become teachers.