

PROLOGUE: CATCHER IN THE RYE

“What really knocks me out is a book that, when you’re all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it.” -- J.D. Salinger

I wish I could call old Salinger up, I really do, but not to congratulate him or anything like that. No, I would say, “To tell you the truth, Jerome,” —wait. No. I would be more likely to call him Mr. Salinger, since my mother taught me to speak with politeness, even when delivering criticism.

So, I guess I would say, “No offense Mr. Salinger, but reading The Catcher in the Rye was hell for me.”

And if he didn’t hang up on me right then and there, I might feel brave enough to continue.

“Absolutely everyone told me Catcher was the quintessential read for high schoolers, so I was expecting a sort of survival guide, something to help get me through the dark times. Instead, I got Holden Caulfield.”

“What was wrong with Holden?” he would ask. Come on, you knew he’d ask.

“If you really want to know. Boy, did he depress me!” I’d tell him. *“I don’t mean he was a bad guy—he wasn’t. But you don’t have to be a bad guy to depress somebody—you can be a good guy and do it.* Though I wouldn’t put Holden in the good guy category either. I mean, the kid was a mess. He basically said everything was pointless and girls were all stupid. None of which set well with a self-conscious teenage girl like me.”

To which, I am sure, Salinger would call me out, “My dear, doesn’t quoting from the book you claim to hate undercut your point?”

And I would have to give him that one.

I didn’t actually hate the book though. It just really got under my skin. So much so that I kept picking it up every couple of years. I’ve probably read the damn thing nearly a dozen times since high school. Even memorized some lines. So yeah, if pressed, I would have to admit that it is a pretty good read.

But back in high school, it was a totally different story. Catcher really got my goat. (That’s a corny old expression my Papa used to say to describe something that I let bother me. As if someone’s stupidity, rudeness, or insensitivity was somehow my fault and I should just ignore it. Well, easier said than done.)

Okay. So, if I’m totally honest, I’m not actually brave enough to have a conversation with a famous author like Salinger. I’m actually shy. Like really shy. As a kid, I hid behind my parent’s legs whenever I saw a schoolmate or teacher at a store. When I got older, Mama pushed me to go talk to an artist after a play or concert we attended, and I remember stomach acid gurgling into my throat as I choked out, “good show,” before walking away to hunt for an oxygen mask and/or a toilet.

It’s easy to write myself as someone with guts, a free-spirit who says whatever is on her mind without worrying if it hurts someone else’s feelings, but really, I hate it when people get all upset. Doesn’t matter what they’re upset about. Doesn’t even matter if it had anything to do with me. It just makes me feel crumby and I end up going back and forth about whether to dig a hole and act like an ostrich or to break-out in some sort of distraction, like singing: “Always look on the bright side of life.” Because even though that kind of happy only happens in musicals, life

would be much better in full make-up and costume, with everyone Bob Fosse-ing down the street in sequined bowlers and white-gloved jazz hands. After all, issues of all types get resolved in just a few bars when you sing.

God, I wanted to live in one of those movie musicals every day of my life when I was a younger. Some days drama, others fantasy, but mostly I longed for a classic 1940s romantic comedy, complete with the singing and dancing.

I can remember falling in love, sometimes thirty or forty times a day. Take green, for example. I was in love with green in all of its forms: pine-scent green, rooted in a mixture of outdoor promises and holiday memories; wet squishy grass green belonging to childhood toes; tart lime Jell-O green, which still makes my tongue smile; lush country garden green that desert dwellers like me conjured from pages of *Sunset Magazine*, which my parents subscribed to; and the “you are my dear, my darling one, my smiling and beguiling one; I kiss the ground you walk upon, my darling Irish girl” green, which would float into my ears from a foreign land that I quietly claimed as my heart’s home, even though those hand-me-down genes were old and faded. I fell in love with music, with stories, with people real and imagined.

My motto was, “Life will be fulfilled as long as I love and continue to be loved. Because love is real; love makes things real.”

Corny, right? I’m sure Holden would have said so. He hated actors and called them all phony; even said his own brother was “prostituting himself out there in Hollywood.”

Hell, I probably was corny, but in a naïvely optimistic way, so it was totally authentic. (*I don’t exactly know what I mean by that, but I mean it.*)

You know, speaking of authenticity, I like this devil-may-care alter ego I’ve stumbled upon here. It rings true, maybe even more true than reality. So, let’s play it out and see where it leads us...

When pressed about Catcher, I’d tell Salinger, “Back then, the last thing I wanted was to analyze another pessimistic teenage boy’s version of ‘life sucks, let me tell you why.’ I already knew it sucked. By the time I was a junior, at least that much was clear.”

He’d jump in with, “So, is it that you couldn’t identify with Holden? Or that you identified with him a little too much?”

Geez. Score another for Salinger.

I mean, sure, like Holden, I didn’t need help to get all moody and upset in high school. I remember feeling powerless over my life and where it was headed.

If you imagine high school as the cracked pin-ball machine rusting on our back porch, I would have been the little shiny ball suddenly slingshot into an oddly flashy game; bouncing around from one class to the next trying to win points; falling all too often and way too fast into the drain (of love) only to return to the shoot; then—spring-pow—it happened all over again. I was constantly flipping between the person I wanted to be and the one thought I should be. I can’t tell you how many of my tokens that old machine gobbled up before I finally yelled, “TILT!”

It’s been decades since all of that emotional instability, yet I still get an angsty taste in my mouth whenever I think back to high school.

Still, there’s no way in hell I would let this wily old man suggest Holden and I were simpatico. So, instead, I’d answer: “I vibed more with Phoebe, Holden’s little sister—whom you didn’t write nearly enough about, by the way. Holden described her as this ‘roller-skate skinny’ girl with ‘sort of red hair’ who was ‘very emotional;’ Plus, she was clearly a precocious,

creative, mature little girl—now that's someone I could relate to. Yes, sir, me and Phoebe had a lot in common. Especially how we could assess the situation and figure out what other people *should* be doing.

“Old Phoebs and I had Holden figured out way before he ever did. I mean, come on, Holden changed his mind at the flip of a page without ever gaining any understanding about himself or the world around him.”

I can imagine sitting there for a full minute, listening to Salinger breath out irritated CO₂.

See, I shouldn't have said anything about it in the first place. That's the trouble with truth; it hits below the belt. Now I'd have to try to explain myself, so he would understand it's nothing personal. I mean. I wasn't trying to wound the old man.

“The truth of the matter is,” I'd concede, “It wasn't really Holden's fault. By the time I got to him, the other male dominated books from honors English like Lord of the Flies and The Red Badge of Courage had ruined me.”

It wasn't like I was weird or anything—sure, I was different. I was always different—but on this particular subject, I was not alone. The majority of girls in my class groaned about Dickens, Camus, Dostoyevsky, Ellison, Fitzgerald.... These are great writers of course, but that wasn't the point. Our issue was that the required reading list should have been titled, “The Men who Monopolized our Adolescence.”

On the days we covered these books in class, I tried desperately to get out of English. Never ditched though. With teachers for parents, I had to come up with creative excuses like how I suddenly needed to visit my counselor with questions about scholarships, or finish a test from the period before, or get a pass to help my drama teacher paint wallpaper on a set. On the whole, I'd say I successfully missed one day a week, which was the only way I coped with that male monopoly game.

“Get this. In four years, I only read one book by a female. And it was an *optional* assignment!” I said indignantly.

His interest piqued, Salinger would ask, “What book was that?”

“The Woman Warrior by Maxine Hong Kingston.”

“Hmph. You didn't read Austin? No Bronte? No Joyce Carol Oates?”

“Not in school. I read them on my own though. I discovered them on my mother's bookshelf or in the public library. I was on the hunt for *some* sort of representation of women as living, complex characters—”

“Only one book...in *honors* English?” he'd ask incredulously. “I hope you and your girlfriends went on strike, boycotting the required reading list and demanding equal representation for women in the classroom.”

“Come on, J.D., everyone knows honor students don't follow their principles, they follow their grades. Get the 'A' and get the 'F' out of there; that was our motto.”

“That's pitiful,” he'd scold, sounding very much like my father.

“Teachers stuffed our heads with symbols and metaphors—the imagery of Santiago as a Christ figure in The Old Man and the Sea; Camus' absurdist version of the universe ala The Stranger; and the motif of misogyny in Hamlet. It was all in service to the college-level test at the end of the year. We never simply read a book like The Catcher in the Rye. We never got the chance to just hang out and get to know Holden on his own terms. No. We had to decode the symbolism behind every detail.”

“*You can't stop a teacher when they want to do something. They just do.*” Salinger would hiss.

“You weren’t really trying to prepare us for Holden’s transition into becoming an adult by illustrating the cyclical aspect of change with a few ducks on a half-frozen pond in Central Park, were you J.D.?”

He paused before answering, long enough I started to wonder if we got disconnected. But then he’d reveal, “Holden first came to me in a short story. However, it was never published because he had pre-war jitters and suddenly Pearl Harbor was bombed and the world refused to hear such thoughts. It wasn’t until I was in the Army and all of those jitters got solidified into reality that I started writing what eventually became The Catcher in the Rye.”

“Jeez, that explains a lot. Where was that info in CliffsNotes?”

“For Christsakes. Why does everyone want there to be one and only one answer to something? Why do you want someone else to spoon-feed you what that answer is? *People are always ruining things for you.* This is why I don’t publish anymore,” he’d fume. “Instead, *I’ll read my books and I’ll drink coffee and I’ll listen to music, and I’ll bolt the door.*”

“Can’t say I blame you,” I’d say and we would chuckle at the absurdity of it all.

“Well,” he might offer, “at least the books you read by women authors weren’t subjected to the sort of surgical dissection required in your honors English. Maybe their seclusion kept them sacred.”

“Maybe.” I hadn’t thought of it that way before and, for a minute, his words would help me feel kind of glad it worked out the way it did.

Then I would get another flash of frustration, “Still, it would have been nice to delve into a more familiar world. Who knows, I might even have gotten something more than an ‘A’ out of that test.”

“So, you’re saying that Holden’s not all bad then?” Salinger would ask out of nowhere, all lit up like I was calling from Publisher’s Clearing House or something...calling to tell a Mr. Jerome David Salinger, *you, sir, are the next sweepstakes winner!*

Poor guy can’t let it go. Probably won’t be happy until he’s got me to agree to go out on a date with Holden or something.

“No. He’s not *all* bad.” I suppose I can cede that point now. “A little misguided, a little myopic maybe, but if you want to know the truth—I can’t believe I’m saying this—the kid got a lot of it right.”

“Ha!” he’d say, triumphant.

And with that final punctuation, we would enter into a gentleman’s agreement to leave Holden be as we continued to chat about...well...everything else.

We’d delve into the unbridled bravery of early writers, the benefits of practicing Buddhism, or the thrilling terror of acting.

(Did you know Salinger worked for a bit on a cruise ship as an activity director and performer?)

Plus, somewhere between his cantankerousness and his charming vulnerability, I would have tried to get some writerly advice from this literary giant—on the sly of course. Not like he could blame me since he did the same when he met up with Ernest Hemingway during the war.

“J.D. there’s something that’s been on my mind all week.” I’d say, all innocent, just to get him started. “I read somewhere that Catcher was ‘sort of’ autobiographical. ‘Sort of’ is an intriguing modifier, don’t you think? I mean, how can something be sort of true?”

And if I was lucky, he might say something like this: “Listen, Skippy, you know better than to stare directly at the sun, right? Same with truth. You have to create a character that

resembles you, but is by no means identical; sort of a funhouse image of yourself, so you can look at the truth for hours without getting lost in reality.”

“A funhouse image? But who likes looking at themselves all squat and distorted? That isn’t truth. Even plain old bathroom mirrors don’t reveal much in the way of reality.” I’d argue, “Truth is more like the bergamot scent under your nails after peeling an orange. It’s how someone else’s tongue tastes in your mouth after they have sucked on a breath-mint. It’s the way memories get super-glued to certain songs...”

“Your senses can certainly lead you to a moment of truth. But truth is slippery. The more you try to grab hold of it, the harder it is to grasp.”

I’d nod. “Words do have a way of both obscuring and revealing the truth, sometimes even at the same time.”

“Exactly, just look at me,” Salinger would say, “*I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life. It’s awful. If I’m on my way to the store to buy a magazine, even, and somebody asks me where I’m going, I’m liable to say I’m going to the opera. It’s terrible.* And yet, that is probably the most honest thing I could have said in that moment. For I got myself all dressed up as if I was headed somewhere important, all prim and proper, just to purchase a magazine that I would inevitably take back to read at home where I could sit in blissful solitude.”

“Better than listening to an aria I bet.”

“You bettcha,” he’d say, smiling through the phone.

I will note that Salinger used to be quite sociable with local high school students. He even agreed to do a rare interview with one of them for the school’s page of *The Daily Eagle*, so this little tête-à-tête is feasible. The shy neophyte writer, barricaded in her room, scouring books to find her own story, finally reaches out to an infamous old recluse, and they recognize a kindred spark.

People always think something’s all true, but life is more complex and surprising than that. You can call me a liar if it makes you feel more comfortable.

But we talked truth, Salinger and I.

We talked alienation and loss of innocence, only not in that phony Honors English/trying to impress for my MFA thesis way, but in more of a *life sucks* way, because let’s be honest, sometimes it does.

“Whenever you get on the horn,” he said, using the same corny expressions my Papa did, “I feel like I’m listening to a Cole Porter musical. It’s your skippy, *the-cow-jumped-over-the-moon* voice. Gives me a real pick-me-up. I needed that today.”

I guess I did too. For some reason, talking to him always transported me back in time. We’d talk for hours. Really talk. The words would come easily, like they did when I used to talk with Papa after school, back when he waited all day for me to come home and tell him about my day, what the teacher did, what I learned, what gossip I had about my friends.

“Back then, my Papa would listen with those big ears that could hold an overly simplified synopsis of The Outsiders alongside the soap operatic tales of ‘...and then his shoe-lace touched mine while we were standing in the lunch-line and when he bent to tie his shoe the hairs on his arm brushed my leg. Thank God, Mom gave me the okay to start shaving last week. I would have died if his little hairs got tangled in mine.’ Papa would just sit and listen as I spilled an entire day’s worth of juvenile emotions into a little puddle on the floor. Then he’d pick me up,

with arms that were surprisingly strong for how scrawny they were, and whisper, ‘Egbok—everything’s going to be okay.’”

“What happened?” Salinger asked, zeroing in on the warble in my voice.

“Boys happened—I mean really happened—and it was like I started speaking in tongues or something. I stopped making sense. Suddenly my father, the scientist, looked at me like I was an experiment gone wrong.”

“Ah, I call that the alien stage,” he explained. “We all go through it. Adults act as if they never experienced it. Like they’ve caught a rare case of amnesia that affects only years 13 to 20. But as much as we would like to bury the trauma of our teenage years, it comes back to haunt us in the form of our own children.”

“My parents insisted I take honors classes and countless extra-curriculars so I would be challenged AND so I’d be too busy to bother with dating. Somehow, I managed to get A’s while still studying to get those B(oy)’s, exhausting though it was.”

Then came that dreaded beat—a mere matter of seconds—where I held my breath while debating whether or not to share the raw truth. But we had gone this far together so...

“After that, girls happened,” I said, letting it settle in for a moment before racing forward.

“None of us ever saw that coming, J.D. I was, as my best-friend noted, the poster-child of femininity: full of chitter about boys, always donning make-up, curls, or pink frilly dresses; the whole deal. Turns out, I was so into all things feminine that I tipped the scale into loving women in general. And that discovery jarred our world.”

“That’s the thing about girls,” Salinger said wryly. *“Every time they do something pretty, even if they’re not much to look at, or even if they’re sort of stupid, you fall in love with them, and then you never know where the hell you are. Girls. Jesus Christ. They can drive you crazy. They really can.”*

“Okay, Holden.”

He laughed gently. I felt grateful for his grace and total acceptance.

“Listen, Skippy,” he said, “Going to high school can be like sticking a perfectly natural stone into a rock tumbler and letting it roll for years. There is a pressure, a constant wearing down of differences, a smoothing over of individuality, but hey, you managed to hold onto your complexity. That’s big.”

“Yeah, sure.” I laughed, “Yippee for complexity.”

“None of that. Sarcasm doesn’t suit you. Promise me you’ll keep falling in love with the world, with all shades of green, with sounds from an oboe, with the overwhelming salt in a mouthful of ocean, with characters like me—both real and imagined.”

He said all the right things, all the things to make it seem like everything would be okay, like, “Remember: love is real; love is complex; but love is worth it.”

It sounds like a Hallmark card, I know, but when he said it, it made me want to pick up the phone and dial for real.

The really crumby thing, however, is that old Salinger has been dead for like a decade. He wasn’t when I started writing this book, but he is now. And damn it; progress has not progressed enough. There is no iPhone app that can reach into the afterworld—assuming there is one—to connect us with the ghosts of our past. Believe me, if it did, I would be dialing Papa every day, talking about how much the world has shifted without him.

So, since I won’t ever be able to actually call him up, I’ve decided I’m going to give writing him a try. I might just be dreaming the impossible dream, drinking the Cervantes Kool-

Aid and all, but I'm going to try to write something Old Salinger would have gotten a kick out of reading, make him laugh until two in the morning, maybe even piss him off a little.

There's even a quote from Holden on my wall near my desk that reads: *"Many, many men have been just as troubled morally and spiritually as you are right now. Happily, some of them kept records of their troubles. You'll learn from them—if you want to. Just as someday, if you have something to offer, someone will learn something from you. It's a beautiful reciprocal arrangement. And it isn't education. It's history. It's poetry."*

Thanks J.D., for the inspiration.

In his name, I shall attempt to be as truthful as I can without being held to the narrows of realism. That is what it felt like to be in high school: a small thing bursting out of the seams of reality.

Hell, maybe with a bit of literary magic, I'll even be able to reach back in time to when I really could pick up the phone and hear a familiar voice saying, "Skippy, I've been drinking nothing but truth, straight up, and I'm feeling a little drunk. So, here I am, raising a glass. To you and your truth."

And I would raise a shot of silver Patron and say with a smile, "Thanks Papa. To truth!"

An important (maybe) side-note: I hope times have changed since I was in high school. But I doubt it. I don't actually expect this particular book to be dissected in study groups at school. To tell you the truth, it is more likely to be on the banned book list than a suggested reading list. (Spoiler alert: there's some sexual content and LGBTQIA+ characters and themes.) I'm okay with it because my book would be in good company on the banned shelf. I say read them all!

Still, in case some soon-to-be-retired teacher gets a hold of this book and wants justification about assigning it for homework, I'll note that many literary classics are incorporated into this single story. Each chapter is modeled after books regularly found on educational suggested reading lists. I even included some quotes from the book—in italics, so you don't think I am trying to take credit for being that smart or poetic or anything. And yes, women authors are included, (though not nearly enough.)

If you're into it, maybe you'll recognize a few titles and draw some parallels with the original books. If not—I say, trying on Holden's cool disaffection—I don't care. Simply read the book. And, if you don't like it, don't call me. Go write your own goddamn book.