



Ho Lin

Reflections on Three Stories by J.D. Salinger

*"I thought I was going nuts, but that's nothing new."
-- J.D. Salinger, in "Letter to John Woodman"*

If J.D. Salinger, the very definition of "curmudgeon," were alive today, he would no doubt have greeted the news that three of his unpublished stories had been "leaked" over the Internet with a few choice invectives. Essentially private stories meant to "die a natural death" in obscurity, now spewed all over Creation (aka, the Internet) and pored over on laptops instead of honest-to-goodness paper? Phony and crumby, indeed. For those of us who empathize with an author's divine right to keep certain things locked away, because of, well, whatever reason one has, it's not surprising that many have approached these stories with guilty trepidation, as if breaking open a forbidden sarcophagus – doubly so for those of us who became acquainted with Holden Caulfield in high school and still hold some affection for Mr. Salinger.

On the other hand, as *Catcher in the Rye* recedes further into our cultural past, now is as good a time as any to pay tribute to Salinger and his peculiarly American vision of prep schools, depressive crack-ups, and wisecracking crusaders. Striving during the 40s to make it big by getting published in *The New Yorker*, Salinger inaugurated a style that still persists in that magazine's fiction section to this day: winsome, jaded, plain-spoken, sniping away at the indignities of everyday living even as ominous undercurrents always threaten to surface. When we think of Salinger's protagonists we think of precocious motor-mouths and sages, poised on the knife edge between youth and mortality, too smart for their own good and too sincere to be happy. *Catcher* may be slightly less shocking in these more shameless times, but it still carries a charge. Artfully artless in its presentation,

immediate in its can-you-believe-this cynicism, it heralds the spiritual collapse of the 60s and onwards, its tree of descendants including branches as disparate as John Updike, Bret Easton Ellis, Wes Anderson and *Mad Men*. And yet, Salinger's stories seem very much of their time, focused on particular classes of people in particular milieus, sealed into their worlds and yet incomplete. It was perhaps natural that he gave up the writing game at an early age; forging ahead of his characters, he came out on the other side of adulthood and found it wanting. What was left for the catcher in the rye after his misadventures but the dull sting of life and the greater world beyond, and the slow decline?

All three of the recently leaked stories date from the mid-1940s (as detailed in [this comprehensive Daily Beast article](#)), before *Catcher* and renown and infamy, and all three anticipate the post-war boom and accompanying malaise. The clear centerpiece is "The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls," a chronicle of a tragic summer day in the life of the Caulfield family. It's a prelude of sorts to *Catcher in the Rye*, and from the very first odd, ungainly line ("His shoes turned up.") Salinger's voice is unmistakable. We are in the land of "Cape Cod air" and pontificating kids, the tale told from the perspective of Vincent, the oldest Caulfield sibling (an early version of Hollywood hack sell-out D.B. Caulfield in *Catcher*) as he reminisces about redheaded youngest brother Kenneth (Allie in *Catcher*), a frail baseball and literature fiend given to copying poems onto his mitt and offering Vincent unsolicited advice about marriage (many of these details are transitioned over to *Catcher*). Salinger's eye for quirky details and knack for back-and-forth chatter is very much present, and we catch whiffs of what will eventually fill out the Salinger oeuvre: talented but inattentive show-biz parents (setting the stage for the Glass family), an urgent need to safeguard a sibling's innocence, and yes, even a smidgen of that well-documented misogyny, as Kenneth suggests a future mate for Vincent: "She's not so smart or anything but that's good." As an added bonus, Holden Caulfield, like a ghost, shows up midway through the narrative via a letter written to Kenneth from summer camp, otherwise known as "Camp Goodrest for slob." It's difficult to hold back a smile upon reading the first few lines of the letter: "This place stinks. I never saw so many rats." Even in larval stage, our boy Holden emerges fully formed.

Speaking of ghosts, "Bowling Balls" is all about them: the ghosts of Salinger's literary forebears, as Kenneth eagerly engages Vincent in talk about Fitzgerald and Hemingway and Henry James; the ghost of an unfaithful husband in a short story Vincent is writing, which ends with a bowling ball smashing through a window; and finally, the ghost of Kenneth himself. "If I were to die or something, you know what I would do?" he says. "I'd stick around. I'd stick around for a while." What lingers beyond the sparkling dialogue and the evocations of time and place is the timelessness of loss. Rare is the author who can bring the hijinks to a halt with a simple, unadorned line, and when Vincent breaks out of his reverie for a moment to write "I'm doing fine," we know he is anything but. By the end of the tale, as he reflects, "Maybe setting all this down will get [Kenneth] out of here... He shouldn't be sticking around these days," we have arrived at Salinger's classic stomping grounds of premature mortality and regret. "I guess he'll have to learn to make compromises," Vincent says of Holden at one point, and already at this early stage Salinger knows full well the awful cost of such compromises, for what is letting go of memories of a lost brother but a compromise?

“The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls” has its flaws: the import of those metaphorical bowling balls is a little fuzzy compared to a catcher in the rye, or Seymour’s Fat Lady in *Franny and Zooey*. And yes, the repartee gets a bit precious, as it often threatens to do in Salinger’s work. (Or perhaps it’s because we’re observing this story through the lens of a cynical new century and we can only absorb so many “Aw gee”s until they cease to register as anything but parody.) But in its concision and its neat pirouettes between nostalgia and devastation, “Bowling Balls” deserves recognition as a great story period, and not just a curio from Salinger’s archives.

If “Bowling Balls” is an open wound, the other two released stories are more subterranean in their approach. “Birthday Boy” is full of ellipses – ostensibly a short scene between a boy in the hospital and his steadfast girlfriend Ethel, who visits him on his birthday, it suggests a world of trauma just out of reach, camouflaged under typical Salinger smart-aleck behavior taken to an extreme. “Hey look at me,” the girlfriend says. “Oh for Chrissake,” the boy grouses in return. Conversation is restricted to wants and needs – a dirty kiss, a cigarette and finally, a forbidden drink – when it’s not getting derailed with inane small talk. Even literature offers no succor in such a setting; the girlfriend has brought a book to read, and as soon as she recites the first words – “‘Tower Apartments, as quickly as possible,’ instructed Stephen Dwight in his authoritative, resonant voice” – our hearts, as well as the boy’s, sink. It all climaxes, inevitably, in a torrent of obscenities and threats (“If you come back here I’ll kill you”), and even the reassurances of a down-home doctor given to statements such as “Whoa, there, Bessie” can’t do much to soften the blow of the story’s final line: “The elevator descended with a draft, chilling Ethel in all the damp spots.” Pointedly, any references to the characters’ history are wiped clean; for a moment we’re told the boy is from Chicago, but no he isn’t, because the girl just made up that fact. It’s left to us to extrapolate from nothing, apart from the fact that the boy is not allowed to touch alcohol. A battle-scarred veteran? A crack-up out of a Fitzgerald novel? Likewise, is the final confrontation between boy and girl a catharsis, or a conclusion? We don’t know, and never will, although we could interpret this as a precursor to “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” wherein the troubled vet just out of hospital makes the fatal mistake of getting married to that chatty-kathy girlfriend. “Birthday Boy” is a sketch, but its avoidance of easy answers lingers, like an unfinished thought.

Finally there’s “Paula,” a Frankenstein monster of a narrative, split in half, with the story seen from two points of view. It’s one of the more unusual things Salinger ever wrote -- think O. Henry, except that the “surprise twist” is easily anticipated, and thus dreaded. The story is simple enough: Mrs. Hinchler tells her husband she’s pregnant, retires to her bedroom for the duration of her pregnancy and refuses to leave for months on end, begging Mr. Fincher to make up stories about why she’s sequestered, and eventually she gives birth, or so Mr. Fincher is told. Naturally not all is what it seems to be. Told with a sense of mounting unease amid domestic stolidity that is rare in Salinger, the story is initially observed from the beleaguered Mr. Hinchler’s point of view, the façade of happy post-war life crumbling around him. He is all too willing to contribute to the rot as he covers for his wife: “He learned in time that he felt surer of himself when he chucked out his lies, rather than when he delivered them gravely.” And then, just to drive the point home like a knife,

the narrative burden flips over to the Hinchers' gossipy next-door neighbors – one can imagine the reclusive Salinger beholding a gossipy neighbor as something akin to demons from the ninth Circle of Hell – who relate the tragic conclusion of the story to their friends over a bowl of assorted nuts. The last word belongs to Salinger himself; the two final paragraphs (which some have claimed are simply notes to himself) describe the ultimate fates of Mr. and Mrs. Hincer, the very banality of the summation an icy jab: “Paula returned to Otisville and several months later resumed her work as a librarian. She’s still there today doing a brilliant job of it.”

It’s that sort of clenched understatement that distinguishes “Paula” from similar stories of domestic disintegration, and it’s clear that we need that kind of understatement more than ever, especially in the wake of the recent *Salinger* documentary, which revels in the salaciousness of the author’s life without saying much. Salinger would most likely give the filmmakers – and those who have adopted *Catcher in the Rye* as a sort of religious totem for living – a disgusted shake of the head, and some plain talk along the lines of “Get the hell out of here.” It remains to be seen whether these three released stories will be a final testament to Salinger’s career or the start of a resurgence (it’s been rumored that more of his unpublished work will see the light of day in the next few years), but what strikes one about them is their modesty in affect, their need for containment, the belief that there are things intimate enough to be inexpressible. It’s small wonder that Salinger refused to ever have his work filmed, for precious few directors of his era would have had the spiritual facility to dig beneath those bustling surfaces (it’s no surprise that the Iranians, who have the knack for the ineffable in their cinema, have produced the only adaptation of *Franny and Zooey* to date (Dariush Mehrjui’s *Pari*)). Low-key as these stories may be, they may say just as much about who we are now as they do about how we were back then, and the holes that dig at our hearts. Yet a sliver of hope runs through it all, as the ever-precocious Kenneth Caulfield, hovering over the proceedings as he promised he would, attests: “But if you’re just making stuff up, why don’t you make up something that’s good. See?”

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