

CAUGHT IN THE RYE

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Well, I suppose you're anxious as hell about all this madman stuff that's happened to me since I started applying myself and all; and how I overcame all these great obstacles in my life. Well I really don't feel like it to tell you the truth—telling you that is, and even if I did feel like it I wouldn't tell you. I don't think that it's all that interesting anyway. All that happened is that D.B.—he's my brother and all, told all kinds of people in this artsy-craftsy sort of college what a hot shot guy I am and how I am really creative and how all I needed to do was apply myself. Well naturally they let me in since old D.B. is such a well-known prostitute out there in Hollywood. I did alright there really. Everyone tried to be so sincere and let you develop yourself. Honest to God, sometimes I felt like puking but there were some really interesting things that I was taking so somehow I got through. Old D.B. told me that there were all kinds of creative writing and drama courses that I could take that would interest me. Now I'm an English teacher.

I came back to New York to teach in this really phony sort of school where everybody's parents were loaded as hell. Some of the kids were nice though and I thought I could have a lot of fun teaching.

I live in this really ritzy neighbourhood in New York called Sutton Place. One of my neighbours is this hot shot Hollywood actor named Bart Carson—you've probably heard of him. It's funny how people like that try to put one over on you. I mean, the first time I saw him was by the garbage chute after one of those late night talk shows; they're all taped you know: they don't really do them live. Anyway he was there at the chute just finishing putting some garbage down the hole and I walked up to him and said oh hi Burt. I know it was a stupid thing to say but when you see someone on television a lot you get to think that you know them. He sort of turned around as I said that and seemed to look embarrassed as hell. I guess he didn't want anyone to know he had any garbage or something. I can just see him saving all his old cans and old kleenex until all hours of the night just to sneak out and get caught by someone who comes up to him and says hi Burt. I did invite him over for a drink though, but he has never shown up. I guess I should have made a definite date or something. It's not really his fault.

You wouldn't believe some of the teachers that are at Lewis College—that's where I teach. It's actually C. Day Lewis Junior College and Prep School but everybody calls it Lewis College. Anyway, the Head Master is this old guy, Michael Rigby Nickol. All the kids call him Plug. I don't know how old he is but he teaches ancient history and I think he does it because he was there. He really looks as if he is going to die any minute. He's all hunched over and never knows what day it is or what class he is teaching. I hope that I ever get that way someone will take me out and shoot me at lunch time or something and get it over with. I mean it's really bad when everybody makes fun of you just because you happen to have been born a hundred years ago or something.

This other teacher there—Dale Craig—is about twenty-four and just got his MA. He really kills me. He drives this little sports car and tries to dress like he's some sort of playboy or something. He even subscribes to Playboy and I think he goes to their club in town. I know he reads Playboy 'cause he is always saying, "and did you see the hilarious joke in Playboy this month". That's his idea of a real funny one. Naturally the joke that he finally tells isn't the least funny. People who subscribe to Playboy really kill me anyway; they're always the same type. They seem to live for their cars and stereos. Anyway old Dale will walk in on Monday morning and pretend that he was hung over and in bed all weekend—if you know what I mean. Of course he's very subtle. He'll ask one person in the staff room what he did on the weekend. They'll get about two words out and he'll interrupt and practically scream at the top of his lungs all the wonderful things he did over the entire weekend, and he never looks at the person he's supposed to be talking to. He'll start looking around the room as if he were giving a speech for everyone's benefit. He really kills me.

There's this other guy, about thirty-five I guess, who is from England. I guess he's really

home-sick or something 'cause he's quite the booze hound now. He's always saying to me, "Holden old man," that's my name by the way, Holden Caulfield. Anyway he'd say "Holden old man, we must go off to the pub sometime for a pint". He's a nice enough guy, but I mean anybody who starts off a conversation with Holden old man has got to be a little strange. He always looks as though he just got out of bed and put the only clothes he could find on. He wears those really stupid skinny ties and those suits with the skinny lapels. He tries to be friendly but he is in such bad shape that it is uncomfortable to talk to him. Whenever he has his English literature class he really gets in bad shape. He starts to shake and all. He has no control over them you know. All the kids say that his classroom walls are the most educated walls in the whole school. He stands up there in the front of the room and looks high above everyone's head.

There's one other teacher that I think you'll get a kick out of. All the kids call him "Midda Downdend". His name is Townsend but he has a cleft palate and of course has a speech impediment. He'll make all these announcements at the assemblies that we have here every Monday morning and the home room teachers will have to translate. To make things worse he is deaf. Really, he has to lip read. He is very good at it and all but a lot of the kids have caught on. When he comes into a classroom a student will say, "Oh Mister Townsend, Mister Townsend," and then turn his head down to his book and go "oba dob ba do." Naturally old Midda Downdend will think that the student is referring to something in the book and will wonder why the whole class is roaring with laughter.

Most of the students here at Lewis are quite good, really, but it seems that now they are growing up so quickly. I remember just a couple of years ago when I came to the school how...well the kids seemed to be so keen on learning something and you could really talk to them. If they had a problem or something they would come to

me—it might be a personal problem or something about school. It made no difference. Now though, they seem to be so secretive about what they're doing. A few boys were even caught trying to sell drugs in the school. They were in grade seven and eight; I can't imagine that happening a few years ago. Nobody ever says anything in class anymore. You try to get them to talk and they won't. They clam up. They used to be keen and want to participate in discussions, but not anymore.

I used to have some kids over to my house every Wednesday night to watch the hockey games or study or something and just about the end of last year they stopped coming. We used to have quite a good time you know. Those people really had a lot on their minds at times and I think it was good for us to get it out in the open. I remember old Phoebe—she's my little sister, and I used to do that sort of thing all the time. We still do sometimes but not too often anymore 'cause you know she has a boyfriend and all. I'd tell her things that I wouldn't even tell my parents. They always get paranoid at such little things.

It's funny, but sometimes I think I'm really crazy—honest to God I must be. I'm a terrific liar you know and I always say things just to see people's reaction. I remember one time old Plug asked me what I was going to do in my class and just for fun I said that we were going on a field trip to Central Park to visit the ducks in their igloo. It was winter at the time so I told old Plug that that's where they stay when it gets cold outside. He nearly had a fit 'cause he didn't understand why I would do that. I finally had to tell him that we were going to study the first half of "Fern Hill" by Dylan Thomas. When he asked why only the first half, I told him that it's such a good poem that I didn't want to go too fast. He still didn't understand, but I guess he thought that that was better than going to the Park. Sometimes I go walking down the hall talking to myself trying to look like I'm thinking and

if a teacher says hi to me I tell him what time it is or something, and then apologize and say I was planning my lesson and didn't hear what he had said. They all think I'm nuts, but that's the way I like it. You know nobody ever takes you seriously if they think you're nuts. That way they don't really expect much of you and you don't really have to have any opinions.

You know—you know I really wish sometimes that I never had told anybody anything. That way they couldn't put me down as being this type of person or that type of person. Once people know anything about you they seem to lose interest in anything that you have to say. People are really strange. You'll be talking along just fine with them and maybe invite them over for a drink or something—it's the thing to do you know—and they'll make up some phony reason why they can't. You can tell. They'll say they have to go and get some sleep or something. That'll be at eleven o'clock or something. God, what kind of a life can you lead if you are so worried about getting an extra couple of minutes sleep? I remember one day. It was a Friday and I tried to get a party going at my home, well my apartment, you know. Well I asked everybody at school and you'd think I had just asked them to go to Bolivia for the weekend. They all said that on such short-notice they couldn't make it. I don't get that. I mean all it was was something to do for a few hours. I sort of got depressed after that and couldn't wait to get back home. Just before I went home I did something that I have never done before. I went to the washroom and wrote on the wall. I don't know what made me do it but there is always something on the walls in the washroom. Anyway I was in there and there was this "fuck you" written on the wall. That really bothers me if you know what I mean. The janitors are always having to paint the walls in there. So I saw this right up there on the wall and decided to write something on the wall underneath it. I went home after that. When I was home I wrote a sort of poem I guess. I suppose I did it to compensate.

You know I wish I really hadn't started all this. There's no way to go back now. Don't ever tell anybody anything about yourself—you know you always remember things that you wish you hadn't done. It gets you depressed...

EPILOGUE

I'm Jack Stone, the head of the English department here and I got to know Holden as well as anyone could. He was a strange sort of a person, but very good inside. He tried so hard to be friends and did a lot for the pupils of C. Day Lewis. I don't know what the turning point was. I suppose that could be discussed forever and you couldn't come to a conclusion. Personally I think it was the trouble he had with one of the parents. He used to have students over to his apartment you know and one of the parents

started causing a fuss about favoritism and some of the things that went on there. I know that it was all untrue but Holden took it rather badly.

I was with him that day you know. We had arranged a trip to The Village to see some of the galleries and the old brown-stones down there. Holden always seemed to get depressed when we drove through The Village. He would ramble on about drugs and how The Village used to be a centre of

culture or something.

We were on the bus with some ten or fifteen students and Holden began looking at this woman sitting opposite him. She was really an old hag but he kept staring at her. He started talking about his brother. Believe me we had all heard about Ali. We got to our stop and he rushed off the bus. He seemed to be perspiring and I think he said "I just wish they'd get it over with," or something. He seemed to be alright so I didn't say anything.

Then a strange thing happened. The old woman got off the bus and fell on the sidewalk. She was o.k. but all the kids started to laugh and crowd around her. Holden pushed his way through and started shouting "children...children get away...don't look down." Then he stepped off the sidewalk into the traffic and he turned back to me just before he hit the pavement and had that look on his face. You know the one. Like he was just about to invite you over for a drink or something.