On Becoming J. D. Salinger

As I'd neared the end of a vagabond year in Europe, I thought I might become a writer. With the war in Vietnam and planes being shot down in the jungles there, I was glad I had not become a Navy pilot. I'd considered flying jets a better alternative to ship duty until my bad behavior at the U.S. Naval Academy meant not having to choose either one. My Annapolis summer cruise on a destroyer had been abominable sweat time in the engine room and queasy moments on deck.

It was the same problem on a small student ship leaving Southampton, England, for New York. It pitched and rolled like the destroyer, making the dinner plate slide away if you didn't hang on to it. I was discouraged that I'd chosen to spend nine days plunging up and down in the ocean instead of flying back fast. But the ship was cheaper than flying.

At twenty-seven, I felt old among the young backpackers intent on clinging to summer romance. I stayed by myself mostly and thought about the Europeans I'd met.

I wasn't sure why I felt depressed on this lurching ship. Maybe it was because I had not achieved enlightenment after experiencing so many different cultures. Maybe because I was unsure how to stop being a mechanical engineer and begin something new.

On the night before the ship docked, I tossed and turned. In the morning I ate breakfast quickly and scrambled up on deck. The water was smoother. I saw the Statue of Liberty in the distance. I choked up. As Lady Liberty loomed larger, I couldn't restrain the tears. Crying about being home felt stupid. I hadn't wept when I stood before Michelangelo's statue of David, even though that had been an emotional moment.

I was dry-eyed and laughing when I saw my two sisters waving at me from the dock.

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Shortly after finding an engineering job at a Honeywell manufacturing plant located in old brick buildings along the Merrimack River in Lawrence, Massachusetts, I found a modern apartment in Stoneham with another Honeywell engineer named Frank. Then I fell in love with Mrs. Horawitz because her brain had all the knowledge about writing I wanted to possess. I had enrolled in her "Writing and Publishing" course, which was held in a Harvard University classroom one evening each week. Mrs. Horawitz was middle-aged and pear-shaped and candid about how few people ever made a living at writing. She said she'd started writing when her psychiatric practice became too depressing, seeing only the problems of humanity, seeing only the worst of life. Her husband was a doctor who provided the family support. She could afford to write short stories for women's magazines. She said writing was fun, but the pay was lousy.

I didn't care about the obstacles. She knew all about point of view, building a story toward a climax, and that John O'Hara's stories were models for good dialogue. She had

us read an O'Hara book called *Assembly*. She said an almost perfectly constructed novel was Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, and she advised the class to read it. What I didn't like about her class were assignments to write about mundane events, like describing a waiter or waitress in a restaurant.

I wanted to write about washing the back of a lonely Danish girl I'd met in the south of France. I wanted to write about the Bavarian mother who had captured me during the Fasching Festival, and the Australian Casanova-pilot I'd visited in London, and the Croatian Robin Hood in Dubrovnik, and the rude German virgin, and the sexy Norwegian journalist who lived on a fiord, and the two Oxford University hitchhiker women who'd driven with me through Greece. They all had compelling stories.

But Mrs. Horawitz wanted the class to describe people we'd never met. When I asked her how you could know what went on in the minds of people you'd never met, she said the key to writing fiction was being able to use your imagination. A fictional character might blend the physical characteristics of an anonymous person with the emotional characteristics of an intimate acquaintance.

I thought about people who would make good fictional characters. I could write I was once in love with Christie Lawford. If she had let her auburn hair grow long instead of keeping it short to satisfy her mother, Christie would have been even more alluring. Love stories about women with long flowing hair were always bestsellers.

When Mrs. Horawitz returned my writing, she said she thought I would become a writer. She asked what country I came from. I said I came from the United States, I was born in New Jersey. She said she thought I had an accent. I had no accent. What could Mrs. Horawitz be hearing? Maybe she was Jewish and heard ghost accents from those with German surnames. She was friendlier with me after she knew I was born in New Jersey. She said I should visit her on Cape Cod next summer, show her my writing, meet her daughter. Maybe Mrs. Horawitz was a matchmaker.

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It was March, I'd just turned twenty-eight, and I was still going out Friday nights with Dave and Frank. Same singles joint, raucous music, the anonymous crowd. And the same plan — take two cars, just in case one of us got lucky. I was standing alone, drinking a beer, watching the crowd, deciding when to go home. An auburn-haired woman pushed through the crowd. Christie Lawford stood directly in front of me. It had been over two years since we broke up. Each of us had expected the other to be married already.

After a few minutes of animated discussion, it was clear that we were both excited about meeting again. She said, "Do you want to get out of here?"

Christie and I rushed out together laughing, as if somehow it was destined that we have another chance at a relationship.

I followed Christie's red Ford Mustang to her Cambridge apartment. There we laughed about our lips turning purple from Italian wine and French kisses. The laughter

between us was like wearing an old comfortable coat that gives you a relaxed feeling. Christie said, “I’d like to stay at your apartment for the weekend. I had a fight with one of my roommates tonight, and I’d just as soon be away when she returns.”

I agreed.

Christie wrote her roommate a note saying she was going away for the weekend and hoped Amy would be more civilized when she returned.

In my car I asked what happened with her roommate.

Christie said, “I moved out of our bedroom because Amy was masturbating at night. Loud enough to wake up the dead. I told her to masturbate in private and stop wearing her see-through nightgown in front of my dates. She was incensed, as if I’d done something wrong. She called me a lot of names. I seem to have bad luck with roommates. Last year Mary Mahoney threw her purse at me for dating a man she’d discarded.”

At my apartment, Christie looked around and then headed for my bedroom. The new mattress and box spring were one of my few purchases since returning from Europe. I’d bought it at a warehouse sale and roped it to the top of the beat-up VW Beatle that I’d shipped back from Marseilles to New York when my road trip ended.

In bed we laughed more about finding one another again. I thought maybe old lovers shouldn’t capitulate to passion the first night, perhaps procrastinate to prove that the conversation was more important. How perverse was that?

We held each other and talked. Christie said she’d cried most of the year after our breakup. When she’d gone home to visit her parents, her mother had said that of all Christie’s “beaus,” I was the one she’d liked best. When Christie reminded her mother that her constant nagging about her dating Harvard boys seemed contradictory, Mrs. Lawford had insisted her only objection had been my immaturity.

“But then Mama said, ‘Wasn’t he rather short for you, dear?’” Christie caressed the back of my neck and said, “If Mama only knew.”

We giggled, which led to more giggles that we had to suppress at the sound of Frank and Dave clomping in from the nightclub scene. I said, “I can tell by the way Dave’s stumbling he’s going to be on our couch tonight.”

We kissed and fell asleep.

At dawn, our passion emerged from its restraint. Christie’s small oh’s rose to a full-bore yell. At the breakfast table, she and I apologized for any noise that may have woken anyone prematurely. Frank said, “At first I thought someone was having a nightmare.” Dave was wearing dark sunglasses and making fried eggs and cackling at what must have been going on in his imagination.

After breakfast Christie and I visited a nearby zoo, where I photographed her feeding peanuts to four otters that swam in a concrete pool. One otter climbed from the water, balanced on the edge of the pool, and begged from an audience separated by a dry moat

and rail. This otter spread its webbed paws six inches apart to form a target. If a tossed peanut was on target, the webbed paws slapped together. If the toss was off, the otter let the nut sail into the pool with other debris and looked for a person with better aim.

It was a gray March day. Christie wore my frayed and well-traveled leather jacket over the previous night's dress, which looked a little funny with the short jacket. On low-heeled shoes she leaned far over the rail, hand outstretched, and whistled to the most persistent otter. She tossed twice and missed. Her third peanut headed for the strike zone. When the otter smacked its paws together, Christie shouted, "That one looks just like Amy!"

I lowered the camera. I said, "How's that?"

Christie said, "It's the beady eyes and tiny ears."

We held hands and laughed at a baby elephant that sucked peanuts from children's hands and made them giggle. I saw creases around Christie's eyes. Maybe the creases meant she'd seen enough of other's shortcomings to know mine weren't that bad.

As if reading my thoughts, Christie said, "You've changed."

I said, "So have you. Maybe we just needed time to grow up."

Christie said, "But you've *really* changed. Maybe it was Europe."

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Our new romance had changes too. Christie didn't push marriage on me. She said, "I may never get married."

I didn't think she meant it but was glad she wasn't pressuring me to get married before I established myself as a writer. I noticed too that she was growing her hair long, giving up the occasional cigarette, and keeping her mother away. And as her hair became longer, I thought Christie began to resemble the Mediterranean fantasy — especially the large eyes, full mouth, and voluptuous figure. The trick in real life was to find the soul that embodied the fantasy.

I thought about why I'd fallen in love with Christie in the first place. It was not so much about her beauty or that initial head-pounding sexual experience in which, on the morning after I met her parents at an inn by the ocean, she'd come to my stuffy top-floor room in the inn's old building and hopped into my bed. I thought it was earlier, our second date, when we'd removed our shoes and walked with the sand of Nahant Beach squeezing up between our toes and talked about our painful childhoods.

Christie's relationship with her roommate was doomed when Amy paraded in front of me in a see-through nightgown that tended to draw a person's line of sight lower than the beady eyes and tiny ears. Christie and a girl friend found a modern apartment near Frank and me.

Before our lease expired at the end of summer, Frank spotted a newspaper ad for a dirt-cheap house rental on Montvale Avenue. It turned out to be a run-down Victorian

facsimile on a tree-covered knoll near Interstate Route 93. The owner said he intended to demolish it eventually so that an office building could be constructed on this site. The house had two floors, eight rooms, four chimneys, seven fireplaces and two staircases. Dave signed on immediately. Frank had no trouble finding another Honeywell bachelor to round out our foursome.

Christie inspected the house and said it was once an elegant home. Hardwood floors and fireplaces in every room except the kitchen. Even the four bedrooms. Christie said having working fireplaces in the winter was romantic.

I was just content to be where my share of the rent was so low and where I had a sunny bedroom with a small writing table. With the low rent, I could quit Honeywell and let my savings sustain me for at least a year.

That October I gave my notice at work. My year there had seemed long and onerous. I was particularly happy severing my relationship with a new supervisor who had been pushing me for deadline dates ever since he arrived. When he'd asked how long it would take for me to solve a problem with some stupid electro-mechanical assembly, I'd said I didn't know. He'd said, "Figure it out soon. I'm going to the top, and I don't care whose back I have to climb over to get there."

Suddenly I was sitting in my room at my writing table while my housemates drove off to work each day. Each short story I wrote sounded stupid. I spent more time at the bedroom window staring down the hill at a real estate office on the other side of Montvale Avenue. I began thinking if this experiment were to fail, I shouldn't fail by spinning my wheels on short stories. I should write a novel. If I failed, at least I'd fail trying something big.

My grandfather had given me his old IBM Selectric typewriter. I loved turning it on and hearing the hum of it. I loved the clack of the keys. The hard part was rolling a blank piece of paper into it and staring at the paper. Looking at a white piece of paper for a long time led to a catatonic state.

What should I write about? What should I name my protagonist? What point of view should I use?

I got up and paced the floor until I stopped in front of my bedroom window. I didn't know what good it did to stare outside. There weren't any answers in the trees or down the hill at the real estate office. I thought about what Christie's mother had said when Christie told her about my plans to become a novelist. Christie had imitated her mother's thin voice: "If he intends to be a writer, he most certainly will need to get a master's in English literature." Then Christie had laughed and said, "I told her Steinbeck and Hemingway never had a master's." I thought maybe I'd write about a snotty woman with a hermit crab hanging from each ear — *The Old Woman and the Sea*.

On top of my bureau were six novels that Christie had lent me for inspiration — some Steinbeck, Hemingway, and a book by J.D. Salinger. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Even as I began reading *Catcher,* I knew something was wrong. This book was written from the first person point of view, using teen slang. Was slang legal in a novel? It was just the

voice of this kid Holden Caulfield — what was happening in Holden's head. It was a simple style, not as complicated as *The Caine Mutiny*.

I put an old envelope in *Catcher* to mark my place. I went back to my typewriter and turned it on again. I decided my protagonist was Charlie. I began writing.

Last week they threw me out of Annapolis. Made me resign. The whole thing made me sick, because the Naval Academy had been an opportunity to make something out of myself, a chance to see the world — places like Barcelona. Now that it's all over, I don't know exactly what I'm going to do.

The nightmare began about nine months ago...

I was still clacking the keys when my housemates returned. I wanted to say I'd had an epiphany but stifled the thought. They'd be bored. Industrial engineers talked about sports, not epiphanies. Christie would probably be the only one to understand it.

The next morning I woke up early. Compelling ideas crackled in my head. I thought I was feeling what Michelangelo must have felt hundreds of years ago — that there was some inexplicable force guiding me. Maybe it was what some felt on drugs — a high that could take a person to unpredictable places. It was a magic exhilaration I'd never felt before. I began writing about moments of anxiety my two roommates and I had experienced just before the upperclassmen would begin hazing us.

My wives and I were sitting around our room a couple hours before the first supper, trying to act calm. But sometimes you can't help being nervous. Ted, who was trying to play it real cool, was advising Bo and me that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, F.D.R."

Some Youngsters, third classmen, in the room across the hall, were laughing and shouting about all the crazy things they did on their first summer cruise, like getting drunk in every Mediterranean port from Athens to Barcelona and finding millions of sexy European women.

Finally it was time. And once the shit started hitting the fan, I was too harassed to worry about anything else.

It had been seven years since Annapolis, and I wondered if I could remember all the details. I walked to the window and stared out, trying to remember. I was startled at my recollection of pain and fear, like valuables stored in a bank vault for a long time and now being examined again. I returned to the typewriter. I was creating a unique world — my own world of thoughts and words.

Wouldn't it be funny? Holden Caulfield goes to Annapolis. If Holden felt despair at prep school, just wait until he arrived at a place where insane upperclassmen were breathing fire right in his face.

I hoped I wasn't making the fantasy mistake — that is, confusing fantasy with reality. Falling in love with the fantasy of being a writer meant that, sooner or later, the mustard was going to hit the fan and plaster my life with Grey Poupon.

But my heart told me this love of words was no mistake, that I'd found the road that was meant for me. Words could describe a civilization — either the one you knew, or one from your imagination. I wondered whether my Annapolis exposé about the inhumanity of plebe hazing might cause trouble.

But I remembered what an infamous philosopher once said, "Life *is* trouble, only death is not." I began typing again and slid into a reverie of troublesome memories.

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Five years later *Annapolis Misfit* was published by Crown Publishers, but that's another story. Years later, after becoming fascinated by Frank McCourt's voice in his memoir *Angela's Ashes*, I began reading other memoirs — any with a captive voice. It is probably Anne Lamott's nonfiction that I blame for making me think writing about my family would not send me to Hell. It was her personal stories and self-deprecating voice that made me conclude she was probably the best writing teacher in my experience. At least with respect to the memoir.

With respect to writing and finding a voice, I think Lamott's book *Bird by Bird* stands as the one that allowed me to write with a certain abandon, causing my mother to read my manuscript about our dysfunctional family and request that I refrain from exposing our secrets until after her passage ("Don't publish it until after I kick the bucket"). Two years later she'd forgotten I'd written the memoir ("What memoir?" she said, when I mentioned letting my sister read it). Her mantra had always been that "we should forget the past," as if you could bury it in a deep hole, and perhaps she had. I couldn't. I think the most important thing Anne Lamott said to me was this:

"We write to expose the unexposed. If there is one door in the castle you have been told not to go through, you must. Otherwise, you'll just be rearranging furniture in rooms you've already been in. Most human being's are dedicated to keeping that one door shut. But the writer's job is to see what's behind it, to see the bleak unspeakable stuff, and to turn the unspeakable into words — not just into any words but if we can, into rhythm and blues. You can't do this without discovering your own true voice, and you can't find your true voice and peer behind the door and report honestly and clearly to us if your parents are reading over your shoulder. They are probably the ones who told you not to open that door in the first place. You can tell if they're there because a small voice will say, 'Oh, whoops, don't say that, that's a secret,' or 'That's a bad word,' or 'Don't tell anyone you jack off. They'll all start doing it.' So you have to breathe or pray or do therapy to send them away. Write as if your parents are dead."

Because my father had died years ago, I figured the culprit of my memoir would pose no problem now. But my mother was alive and opposed to my exposing the family secrets. Because I lived nearby, I had taken responsibility for Mom during the twelve years after my stepfather died. During that time I'd shepherded her to doctor's appointments, taken her grocery shopping, and observed a woman whose interests gradually diminished to reading large print novels, eating shrimp scampi microwave dinners and frozen chocolate éclairs, and catching the latest gossip at editorial meetings of the town newsletter. She was one hundred when she died at her house on a cold December morning.

"I don't know where the idea originated that memoir writing is cathartic," says Koren Zailckas, author of the best-selling memoir *Smashed*, "For me, it's always felt like playing my own neurosurgeon, sans anesthesia. As a memoirist, you have to crack your head open and examine every uncomfortable thing in there… Ultimately, I think a memoir leaves its author with more terror than comfort, more questions than closure."

If Mrs. Horawitz had made this clear, I might have refrained from cracking my head open and exposing my family these years later. But she had wanted to teach the great American novel. She never mentioned the memoir and its discomfort level.

Occasionally I read about J. D. Salinger, who had left New York and become reclusive in a small New Hampshire town that was only sixty miles from my home. I thought I understood his desire to be left alone. Even before my mother died, I was more at peace in my writing studio than anywhere else.

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Some names have been changed for privacy consideration