

When I first met Holden Caulfield, I didn't know I was dying. He's way more cool than me, but I like how he tells what it's like to be him. Straight out. Real. And even though his story's lots more exciting, I'm going to tell you mine anyway. It may be the last thing I do.

So how'd I hook up with Holden? The Catcher In The Rye is required reading for 10th grade, along with a long list of other books, mostly ones I never heard of. The Essex County library has four copies of Catcher. Worn edges, faded covers. Obviously lots more people than me have read it. The front's what grabbed me. Plain maroon with little yellow letters, like it was no great shakes. And the way Holden writes, you can almost hear him thinking. It's wild how clearly the dude's voice sounds in my head.

You have to excuse my skipping around. I don't have a lot of practice at this kind of thing and I'm short on time. According to the doctors.

Daniel Solstice Landon, that's me, soon to be dust. My name's from the Bible, though my parents would never credit that. They're into the great cosmos, not God. That's where the Solstice comes from, straight out of my parents' hippie phase, a phase they're still stuck in. Another thing they don't admit. My opinion is they picked Daniel because they liked the idea of the little guy, the underdog. To tell the truth I found out what my name really means from a girl I wanted to date last year but was too chicken to ask. Cassie Jones. She said Daniel translates as 'Judged by God.' Tough standard.

Being sick puts you right out there. Kind of like being the lead in the Middle School play when every little sixth-grade teenybopper stares at you in the caf and fights over the stool you used at lunch or insists on chewing the same kind of gum you do. Where we live in Virginia they still teach sixth through ninth in one school. According to Mom, educational theory says teenagers don't settle down until 10th grade so it's better to keep the raging hormones all together. My take, they're trying to wear you down. Four years with sixth graders hanging around you would wear anyone down. It's definitely killed the teachers.

Last winter, before we knew about the leukemia, I played Captain Von Trapp in *The Sound of Music*. At the time I didn't mind the attention so much. It was kind of flattering, even if the sixth grade groupies tracked my every move. At least someone liked me. And I was lucky. I only had one song all by myself, I was the good guy, and I got to kiss Marissa Bennett. Counting practice and performances, twenty-two times. My big brother Joe said to enjoy it, most ninth graders don't kiss anyone no matter what they tell you.

Aside from the kisses, being in the limelight is more complicated than you think. The whole time I was kissing Marissa I didn't realize that someday I would wish people didn't know everything in the world about me. When you're sick, everyone talks about you behind your back. They pass off all the gory details like they'd share M & M's, but don't kid yourself, it's not the same as wanting to know you. They won't even talk to you.

That's partly why I admire Holden. Everyone knows he's been kicked out of that high end prep school. The teachers, the headmaster, even his roommate, Stradlater, and the guys in the dorm, they all have an opinion on why he shouldn't have let it happen. And they're all hot to tell him what they think. Good old Holden just acts like he doesn't care. Okay, sure, he blows them off partly because it's not any of their goddamn business. They're not people he respects. But mostly, I guess, because he's already figured out where you go to high school doesn't matter in the long run.

No matter how much I try to convince myself just to suck it up that everyone knows about me and The Disease, having leukemia is different. Dying IS the long run. So it matters. There's just nothing I can do about it.

"Daniel, front and center." That's my dad calling.

It's long past end-of-the-year report cards and I haven't broken any rules this week, so I don't have a clue why he's in his regimental father mode.

You gotta like my dad. He's bearded, sandaled, right out of *Love Bug*. Even when he's seriously off base, he's okay and you feel a little sorry for him. He lost six or seven of his 'best buddies' in Viet Nam. His entire life since then has been a shrine to the loss. Although he avoided the draft because of a childhood injury to his ear drum, he announces regularly that he would have gone to Canada but for the 4-F. He tells it to anyone who'll listen. *Hard of hearing before my time*, he always says, as if it were hysterically clever.

Fathers, at least the fathers of my friends, are big into jokes. Like they're cartoon versions of what a father should be. Even though they tell the same horrible shaggy dogs over and over, no one ever calls them on it because it's what fathers do. It's supposed to be endearing. The joke thing must occur like Immaculate Conception as soon as a man has his first kid. It doesn't bother them that no one else thinks the jokes are funny. It doesn't bother them that the wives all say, *Oh, Red, not that one again*.

Yeah, unbelievable, huh? Dad's nickname is Red. For his hair, not his temper. And, if he were being one hundred percent honest, for his politics.

Mack and I and Leonard Yowell, whose father is a state senator and probably wears a three piece suit to bed, all cringe in unison at the jokes our fathers tell. Even though their dads are straight and mine's a hold-over hippie, the jokes are all lame.

The military lingo's gotta be a father thing too. Leonard's dad is forever saying things like "battle stations" or "at ease." It so fits Senator Yowell, he's a star-studded Nam hero. But when my dad talks like that, it always surprises me because he lobbies so hard against war. Any kind of war. Local school boards, immigration Gestapo tactics, Palestine, Afghanistan, even sibling rivalry. He's a certifiable pacifist. But as far as being an all right, sincere kind of person, he is.

He's also a vegetarian. And recycling is his favorite pastime. We never use paper plates even though it's a big pain to wash things now that we're living on a houseboat. Hot water's sketchy and not enough water is typical. There's more good about him than bad though. He'll watch any movie I want, and he refuses to wear a tie. Not at all like Antolini, that touchy feely teacher of Holden's, with the silk bathrobe and the itchy hands. Holden could have stayed on Dad's sleep sofa without a second thought.

If you want to know the truth, until I got sick my life was boring. Truly and completely boring. You wouldn't have kept on reading. School and summer, summer and school, mostly hot and more hot in our part of Virginia. Holden's cab rides around New York City sound exciting compared to my life. Even my little brother's soccer schedule is more exciting. Seriously, I'm not into contact sports myself, but Nick's definitely the star of the team, a brilliant sweeper already at thirteen, just too nice to admit it. A zillion times a game he stops the other team cold. Like anyone can see how much his team relies on him and how he lives to be that indispensable guy.

My older brother's a first year at UVA. With more girlfriends than anyone I know. As Holden would say, he's Joe College to the umpteenth degree, too cool to hang with me much anymore.

The thing is he's a real Joe, short for Joseph Ides Landon. My parents stuck him too, only Ides isn't half as bad as Solstice. Plus, it's way easier for people to believe Ides could be a real name, so he's never embarrassed like I am. He's not forced to make up some song and dance about Solstice being a family holdover from the old country, another freebie from Cassie Jones, who probably doesn't even remember me or my stumbling discussion of the Harvest Dance that never quite made it to the level of an invitation.

Just to round it out, in case you're into names like Mom obviously was, Nick aka Nicholas means 'Victory of the People,' Mom's basic life philosophy. I'm not sure why the third time around she chickened out on the middle name and opted for the only Virginia ancestor in the family, Marshall. But it fits Nick. Nicholas Marshall Landon sounds like a politician, huh? He's definitely the one who'll change the world. He's got the name for it. And the energy.

When Dad calls me, I'm in my bunk—right above Nick's—in the front cabin of our houseboat. The houseboat is too cool. It's like everyday and retro at the same time. My parents bought it two months ago at a government auction. It was a knee-jerk reaction, a week, maybe less, after the doctors told them I had The Disease. Joe dubbed the boat *Nirvana*. Because my parents pretended they got the joke, they didn't object to it.

They probably took it as a reference to Buddha. Whatever, it stuck. It's the first big thing they've ever owned. According to them, cars, evil polluters, but necessary in the unfortunate state of the world, don't count.

Way back when they were madly in love BK (before kids), they quit college to make hammocks. They lived on their own personal commune, as Mom calls it. When they get seriously maudlin about their youth, they tell stories about the great parties they had there and how they were all one with the earth before Joe came along. Before they had to leave to finish school and get real jobs. Somehow, despite those jobs, there was never enough money to buy a house.

They don't talk much about that part of it. Their version: ownership is kowtowing to capitalism. Supposedly being a tenant is more like being connected to the universe.

Doesn't it just drive you wild when people make up stuff like that to justify their own situation? I don't mind it so much with my parents because they don't force their views on everyone like some parents who take the soda cans away from their kids' friends because the sugar will rot their teeth. That's embarrassing. Plus, what makes them think one less can of soda is going to save the kid or teach him to change what he drinks?

Anyway, since the commune, my parents have rented a series of houses. Some I can't even remember. The one before the houseboat had faulty wiring, a good excuse for no television. And we were forever having to read by candlelight. My parents loved that. Back to nature. I warned you.

The Disease changed their attitude about ownership. It changed their attitude about a lot of things. The houseboat—they're convinced—keeps the germs at bay. No biggie. It's different.

I've read Holden's book a bunch of times—I even skimmed the Cliff notes—trying to figure out whether I have it right. I like how he goes wherever he damn pleases. The city, the hotel, he makes up his mind and just goes. That's too awesome.

Next week I'll be in tenth grade—big move to Essex County High and all—and I've never been near a city bigger than Richmond. Because my parents embrace the back-to-nature thing in a huge way, cities are not places they take us if they can help it.

When Holden considers running away, he's already in New York City, the city to top all cities. But something stops him from actually running. What is that? It can't be fear. The guy has no fear. He talks with strange women and walks right up to the frigging hotel front desk. Amazing. Like I could ever just pick a city, plunk down my money, and go there all by myself? Order the taxi driver around and invite some stranger to dance in a bar?

I keep asking myself why does he do that stuff? Maybe because he wants to be the kind of person who can. Or maybe he's fumbling around, trying to work through being forced to leave Pencey before he goes home. His sister Phoebe's waiting for him and he doesn't want to let her down or have her think he lied to her. Especially since part of why he's so hung up on home is his dead brother. No matter what it is, he's definitely fed up with the phonies, and that's why he works so hard to get straight who he is, really. With his parents and with himself.

Although he doesn't say it right out, he has to know he screwed up. It's gotta be pretty obvious even to him. If he'd done his work, written the stupid papers, he wouldn't have been expelled. The grownup thing to do is to accept responsibility. Do it right the next time. Jeez, I sound like my father.

But you know Holden understands all that because he doesn't argue with the powers-that-be at school. In a way his leaving so quietly is an admission. Not an admission that it's his fault, but more that he didn't fit in right from the start. Which brings me back to why didn't he do the work? It's not like he didn't know what would happen. It happened to him at the other schools before Pencey. So there has to be something else, something more. The business of trying to figure out where you belong.

Down deep I think old HC knows something I need to know. I haven't mentioned this to anyone. It's a little weird when Catcher is required reading for next year and I finished it before it was even assigned. Joe says that's okay, it's one of a kind and better than anything they've given him to read in college so far. He even said we could talk about it when he comes home for Christmas vacation, like he really seriously cares about my take on it.

The greatest thing about Holden is he says what he thinks, no BS. Like I wish I could talk. But I can't think fast enough. I'm too busy worrying whether the other person will think I'm being stupid or phony. Holden makes it look so damn easy. He shrugs off the insults, takes it all in when I would be ready to explode. He even listens politely to the adults trying to give him advice. Like the old professor who feels sorry for him. And Antolini, the younger guy, the English teacher, who's convinced his precious protégé's headed for trouble. Sure, Holden caves a little to avoid hurting their feelings, but he refuses to get sucked into their games. And he doesn't let them talk him out of how he feels. The whole world would be easier to take if people were like Holden and admitted what they didn't understand up front.

As much as The Disease makes me think about things I never thought about before, it isn't all that clear to me why I do stuff and react like I do. Every time I think I know what I want or how I feel, something changes before I can get a handle on it. Most of the things I say and do are mysteries to me. Holden deals with stuff like this, but he gets it, really gets it. I need him.

You would think with five people in my family I'd have someone to talk to. Unfortunately it doesn't work that way. Joe's not here most of the time. Nick only knows full speed ahead. He doesn't sit down long enough to listen. Plus . . . what my brothers think and feel is not what I think and feel. They have their own crusades. People always do.

It's funny because everyone outside your family always figures your family really understands you. Like it's in the genes you share or the fact that you all breathe the same air inside your house. But if you wait for your family to stop their regular routine and ask what's bothering you, you may never get a chance to talk about it.

Grandma Sumner used to say, *listen up, gypsies*, like we were a traveling horde, instead of just three boys. No matter that we were her only three grandchildren. I never minded it because I liked the feeling of us three moving together. Like, you know, the old world stories of big clumps of gypsies in those weird painted caravans with the dinner pot hanging from the back, odd parrots and goats and so many kids you can't tell who belongs where. Although it may look like chaos, they all move in the same direction, to the same tune. And they cover for each other. Like they know it's a conspiracy, us guys against the rest of the world.

When I was little, I thought it would be like that all the time, that Joe and Nick would come with me wherever I went. Just because. Without my having to ask them. It just kills me now that I'll be gone and they'll be doing stuff we should be doing together. Or at least they'll be talking about it together after the fact. You know from the way Holden doesn't talk about his brother Allie that he misses not having his brother to talk with about things. It should be the three of us Landon boys sharing inside jokes and ribbing Joe about his lectures on how the real world is, and getting pumped with Nick, that pure high of his about being alive.

When Grandma called us gypsies, I could see myself saying it to a string of my own kids, my team, once Joe and Nick were off doing their own thing. It would be a way to make the everyday junk seem like an adventure. I can hear my friend Mack Petriano diss'ing me, *Mary Poppins, welcome home*. It isn't that, honestly. I'm not that much of a wuss. Especially lately, I get it that no one can really understand what another person feels. But it's the idea that chores or school or life don't have to drag you down if you stick together. That's what clicks with me. Or did. Too late to lose sleep over it now.

Even though Dad stole Grandma's saying and twists it around in his lectures about communication as the solution to world peace by emphasizing the 'listen' and not the 'gypsies,' I don't argue with him. The truth is, the middle kid never gets much air time. When Joe's here, he controls every conversation. I guess you'd expect that. As the oldest it's easy to get sucked up into Mom and Dad's trial and error, Parenting 101. Joe's the first at everything and he has to break all the barriers for Nick and me. So he probably thinks he's earned the right to talk first.

Lucky Nick cruises right through things. Just because someone tells him he can't do something, he doesn't let that faze him. He waits until they aren't paying attention and then does exactly what he wants to do. He and Phoebe Caulfield.

So, in a way, The Disease levels the playing field. Now they have to listen to me. Holden's working on the same thing. Trying to get someone to take him seriously. For totally different reasons, of course. And I'm not sure he knows that's why he acts the way he does or even if he isn't wondering what's the point of it all. But he and I think a lot alike. We're practically the same age. And even though, like me, he doesn't have a clue what he's going to do next, there's one huge difference. He has his whole life ahead of him to figure it out.

It's hard not to hate him for that. And Nick and Joe. They get to live. Maybe go around the world, sleep with a few girls before they find the right one, invent a new kind of car, run a business, or whatever. They have time to fix mistakes they made when they didn't know better.

I'm stuck with whatever I've done so far and maybe ten or twelve months more. It's like my name, the highest Limbo pole ever. Sometimes I think I shouldn't even waste time sleeping. There's not enough time to do all the things I planned on doing before I got sick.

Twenty-five, thirty years ago when my parents were teenagers, buying plastic 45s and hoping someone brought weed to the sleepover, only little kids had leukemia. You've seen those bald heads on posters. Everyone has. Cute, smiley kids with no hair. But never the same kid from year to year. There's a reason for that.

By the time leukemia found me, the hospitals were full of cancer patients, all ages. A teenager with leukemia was nothing special. *AML* or *acute myeloid leukemia*, my mother forever corrects me as if the official name makes it easier to accept I'm going to be dead in a year.

Hard to figure when formality's not her strong suit, but she insists on that precise medical term with other people too. In some weird way it's a kind of protection. No son of hers could be laid low by something as mundane as cancer.