***On Losing Salinger***

***By Rebecca Bridge***

When I was sixteen, I let my dad hypnotize me. Obviously, I was desperate. I’d lost a stack of library books that he’d checked out for me on his card (I’d long before had my own library privileges suspended due to, well, losing books) and the library was threatening him with an almost five hundred dollar fine to replace them. Which meant that he was threatening me with it. Tucked in with that stack of expensive, out-of-print books about Native American tribes (a subject I’d become obsessed with since learning that we had some Kickapoo in our bloodlines), was a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. My family had spent the bulk of that Sunday tearing through our house in search of the misplaced library stash. This was no easy feat. We were a household of six pack rats and readers. If a tornado had come through (which they did, and frequently), we could have rebuilt a life-size diorama of our home to live in from just the books housed in it.  And, scattered about in-between all of the hardbacks and paperbacks, were the other untidy elements of our lives. Looking for something specific in our home was like looking for the proverbial book in the book stack (wait, never mind), it was as if someone had thrown us into the Library of Congress to search for a specific title without aid of the Dewey Decimal system. During the hunt we’d found other things we’d long misplaced: a collection of film not yet developed, unopened mail, unmatched socks, hordes of my mom’s cigarette lighters and half-finished packs, lost homework, unsigned permission slips, other library books that we’d long since given up finding and bought from the library. But no Native Americans and no J.D. Salinger. They had just mystically disappeared in that way that important things tend to.

We found ourselves lost on a mountain in Vermont; somewhere near, we hoped, the border with New Hampshire. I had just graduated from college and was on a road trip around the East Coast with two friends. We were lost and I was lost in every single sense of the word, just lost and then lost once again in my lostness. My mom had died of cancer, and I had moved back to my dad’s town to, well, I guess so that we could sit quietly and feel sorry for ourselves together. I had very little idea of what I might do with my future other than that I was considering applying for MFA programs, but I didn’t have any writing to submit, and nothing was coming. I had broken up with my boyfriend. My friends weren’t faring much better trying to figure their lives out (in fact, one of them was the boyfriend I’d broken up with). It was something of a pleasant feeling, just then, being able to say *We’re lost!* and to not mean in our lives. To have it simply suggest that we couldn’t pinpoint our location on a map.

We kept on driving around the countryside until a strange little rest stop appeared like a miracle on the side of the road. Inside there was the standard convenience store fare, aisles of junk food, an automotive section, kitschy souvenirs emblazoned with the Green Mountains’ insignia, and an old, old man sitting in a high stool by the door. He looked like a retired lumberjack and I’m not entirely sure what his job was, or even if he had one, but I think he was akin to one of those Wal-Mart greeters.

“How do you get to Cornish?” I asked him. Our road trip was a bit overambitious, three thousand miles in a week, Midwest to Manhattan to Maine to Quebec to Niagara Falls and then home again, but even still, since we were in the general neighborhood, I’d managed to coerce my friends into making what should have been a quick detour to Salinger’s hometown of Cornish, New Hampshire. Except now we were lost, and they were losing steam about the whole thing. But I had it all plotted out! We were going to run into him at the local diner and I was going to say, “I, too, am a hermit. You can ask anyone and they’ll tell you, since I’ve been forced to do the bulk of my hermitting publicly.” He was going to find me hilarious. He was going to immediately fall in love with me. He’d realize that he needed me to be his muse, his lover (the 60-year age difference mattered little to me), and, if I were particularly lucky, his proofreader. First, he was going to love me and then he was going to spill. Spill everything, all of the words he’d been hoarding in his years of isolation, and just to me. They would be our secret together. It was a pretty good plan.

The man looked at us for a long second like he was judging which way a tree was going to fall.

“Stalking Salinger then, are you? Well, it’s not how you get to Cornish that matters,” he said, “It’s that you look out for the moose while you’re searching.”

We all felt chagrined for a moment, caught being as cliché as every other Salinger fan to ever pass through the area, which must have been a fair amount if a stranger could recognize us on sight. But wait, what? Moose? I cut eyes towards my friends and bit my cheeks hard to keep from giggling.

“Oh, yeah? There are moose up here?” my friend asked, “Think we’ll see one before we find Cornish? Is it far?”

“Oh, you don’t want to see one. Let me tell you. You hit one of those suckers and you’re dead. Not just maimed, but dead. Dead. There’s three of you and that’s lucky. That means you can have a moosewatcher on each side of the car. And that’s ‘perative,” he said and then just kept on saying. I excused myself to use the restroom and left my poor friends to try to write down directions to Cornish amidst the healthy doses of conventional moose wisdom he was spouting. I gathered up some snacks for us, all kinds of junk food.

“It’s going to be dark soon,” I said to my friends as a way to disengage them from the moose man, “We should head out.”

“It’s even more ‘perative to have moosewatchers in the dark. That’s when moose are like shadows,” he said as we were heading out the door. He stood up and followed us.

“Thanks again!” we yelled over our shoulders to him as we were getting into the car. He was still barking out moose warnings as we drove off, waving.

As the sun began to set, we were still driving around on the back roads, on our way to I-91 and then Cornish. The man at the rest stop hadn’t given good directions, but he had succeeded in terrifying us. In the hours since leaving, we’d kept talking about him and we’d convince ourselves that he must be some kind of moose psychic. There had been other travelers in and out of that store while we were there. And not once had he proffered up any warnings for them. And so, the ride had become a silent and nerve-wracking event. We were terrified. As I drove, my friends stared out their windows on the lookout for any signs of movement. Every silhouette and dark spot could have been a moose. If one of us turned our attention from moosewatching for even a moment, the other two would snap, “Eyes on the moose!” We had been having fun, but that had changed, and we were instead having moose. Moose.

Up ahead on the road, I saw something. Actually, not something, nothing. There was a big black absence. I screamed, “Moose!” even though I wasn’t certain I was seeing anything and slammed down on the brakes. The car fishtailed on the gravel and slid a bit before halting. Halting just inches from not one, but two moose. A giant mama and her giant calf. We had all started to cry. To laugh hysterically. To say moose, moose, moose over and over again as if one of us still hadn’t noticed them. *We could have died!* we cried. *We could have died!* I grabbed the camera and rolled down the window to try to snap a photo. The mama started to move round to my side of the car and so I hastily rolled it back up. We were boxed in by them, and there was nothing to do except wait. Wait and ogle at the giants as they ogled us back. They seemed like the biggest things we’d ever seen. Eventually, they appeared to tire of the staring contest and they moosed their way back into the moose-shadow forest. We switched drivers. I sat in the back and kept moosewatch on one side. We made it to I-91, but when we came to the exit for Cornish, my friend kept right on driving. *I’m not getting on to those back roads again*, my friend said, and I understood. I stared off in the direction of Cornish.

“Alright then,” I said, watching the exit disappear behind us, “Press on to Canada.”

All of us kids had long been my father’s guinea pigs. He was a psychologist, and we had sat through innumerable IQ tests, been prodded and mentally poked, had deciphered inkblots and riddles, and had answered every question he’d asked. But this was different. My father’d said, *I could hypnotize you*. I’d said, *No way, no how, not ever, sir!* without a moment’s hesitation. I’d seen the sideshow acts where a soccer mom was pulled up on stage, put under, and was suddenly much too happy to open her closet and show off all of her skeletons. Stood in front of an audience and acted like a chicken, a trollop, a fool. And I was a kid who had just read The Catcher in the Rye. I didn’t trust anyone with anything, let alone my dad (my dad!) rummaging around in my head looking for secrets. I didn’t want him using his psychologist powers to delve around and find out, well, what? That I wasn’t a virgin? That I’d experimented with the kinds of things kids experimented with? That the beer bottles in the recycling bin hadn’t only been put there by my sister? I don’t think I was as much afraid of *what* he might find out as I was of the fact that he *could* find out. What is adolescence if not the discovery that there is an us and a them? And everyone else, but especially adults and even more especially parents, will always be the them. Adolescence is finding out that we’re all alone, a discovery that is both enlivening and terrifying.

Yet he’d said, *We’re out of options* and we were, save for me just paying the fine off myself. Five hundred dollars was and still is, fifteen years later, a lot of money. My dad assured me that he was only capable of deep relaxation and suggestion. He would help me relax and then he would simply suggest that I remember where I’d left the books. What could be simpler?

I took American Literature my sophomore year during fifth period, just after lunch, which was a propitious time for it. My friend was taking the same class taught by the same teacher but in a different section that met right before our break. We would get together at the Little Caesar’s just off campus, and she’d slip me the answers to the daily reading quiz. I’d found a way to never have to do the reading and, as a consequence, I rarely did. I had my reasons. It was by principle, you’ll see.

It’s not to say that I found fault in the Hawthorne or Melville or Twain we were reading, because I didn’t. In fact, I’d already read *Moby-Dick*. I’d perused most of my dad’s two volumes of *Collected Mark Twain* and he’d read the rest of it to me as bedtime stories. I’d read *The Scarlet Letter* years before for fun. And I’d loved all of them. But I was putting my foot down (albeit not really in a way which allowed anyone to hear the stomp of it) and taking a stand. A stand which I wasn’t actually quite prepared to allow to affect my grade, hence the cheating.

The first day of American Literature I had been stunned when I looked over the syllabus. The thing looked like a Who’s Who of very dead white men. I mean, Twain was the least-recently-deceased of anyone we’d be reading that semester, and even he’d been in the ground for a solid eighty-five years. How could that be? Where were the Modernists, not to mention the post-modernists? These were people I had heard of but not yet read: Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, McCullers, O’Conner, Harper Lee. Where was Salinger? I’d been under the impression that every high school English teacher assigned *The Catcher in the Rye* and so I’d purposely held off reading it for just that reason. I was the kind of person who didn’t like to do things twice. Wait, that’s a lie. I was a lazy bastard and so I was relying on these people to be assigned reading before I got around to reading them. But I had been promised Salinger! I raised my hand. Mrs. C., the dear, batty old thing with the just-right permanent and a smile that never quite really mustered itself into anything truly resembling a smile, but almost just maybe, called on me.

“Why aren’t we reading *The Catcher in the Rye*?” I asked.

“Why would we?” she responded. Was it possible she didn’t know that an unwritten rule existed that stated all high schoolers were to be assigned the text and then were to immediately identify with Holden’s malaise and anguish? Could she have just forgotten this? I wanted my phoniness! I wanted my angst!

“Everybody reads it in American Literature. It’s like a thing. That people do. It’s a coming-of-age thing. Like that people do,” I responded.

“Well obviously not everyone because we are definitely not reading it. Really, *Huckleberry Finn* (which she pronounced Hawk-awl-bear-ray) is much more of a coming-of-age story. You’ll see,” she replied, and I sensed a bit of disgust in her words. Not at me, mind you, but at the thought that *that* book, that Salinger, could possibly have any value for us.

“Okay, but why? Can’t we read both of them?” I implored. Yes, the reaction of my fellow students was audible and decidedly not happy with me. Still, I was determined to press on.

“Because. That’s why.” Ah, and there it was. The unimpeachable *because* and that was that.

All I could do by way of protest was to turn myself into a cheater. And a reader of slick back fiction. Instead, I would spend my evenings plowing through books that had little impact on my education. In lieu of *The Scarlet Letter*, I would read the latest Grisham. Instead of “Bartleby the Scribner”, I’d study the newest Koontz or Crichton. Huge stacks of bestselling historical romances (my mom’s favorite) took the place of *Huckleberry Finn*. I very rarely enjoyed any of those pulp books and these days I can recall little of their plots. A giant moth that, what? An evil brother from another planet who? A prince disguised as a commoner and then? But without a library card, I didn’t have many options. Reading was my family. The six of us couldn’t make it through dinner without explosions and tears, without someone leaving a plate of food half finished. Yet we could sit pleasantly together in the living room for hours, silently reading.

Once my God-given, American right to a library card was revoked (and deservedly) my options for things to read became as narrow as a frog’s hair split four ways. At first, I culled our bookshelves (and closets and attic and toilet backs) for reading materials. I tore through the small collection of fancy-backed Classics my dad had amassed on the bookshelves in the family room for our guests to peruse. I sped through his mysteries and detective novels (Agatha, you’re the woman and Kipling, what what). Then my older brother’s sci-fi and fantasy (I still love Piers Anthony even though, my god, sir, you’re a misogynistic bastard! But Mr. Asimov, now, well, you were something else entirely), my older sister’s sexed up historical novels (hello), and my mother’s backlog of Harlequins. That took perhaps a month. Maybe two.

We lived in a town which didn’t have very many options for literato types. Which is how I fancied myself. Still do, even though now I know I’m a phony. There was the public library (always a great resource for those people who know how to keep track of books and then return them in a timely fashion). At the mall, we had a small chain bookstore, whose hardbacks were just out of reach of my family’s rather strapped budget (the Reagan years weren’t overly kind to my folks, both of whom worked in social services). Oh, of course there was the bestsellers section at Walgreens, a place my mom had made many late-night runs to when the cries through our house of “But there’s nothing to read!” became too loud. But we did have something of a reader’s Mecca in the form of The Old Book Barn.

When I was young, it actually had been a barn out in the country. Instead of housing chickens or cows, the barn was stuffed to the rafters with books holding up more books that were topped with books and hunting through the stacks had been an adventure in itself. While my dad stood around and negotiated the price of hay with the owner (we’d lived in the country back then and had horses) my twin sister, Sara, and I would rummage through the dusty piles of books. A Dr. Seuss might pop up beneath a cookbook, a Boxcar Children could be stuck between the Dune series, or else the Bobbsey Twins might be found hiding in a pile of mildewy *Dress for Success*’s. One just never knew and it was possible to lose oneself in a world of books for hours and hours. Then one day the owners must have decided it was time to make a proper go of it because they’d bought a giant warehouse on the edge of town and moved. They wrangled up all of those books, organized them up into sections, alphabetized them, and displayed them in long rows of bookshelves broken down by genre. My mom had developed a complicated system of buying stacks of romances at the Salvation Army for a nickel and then trading them in for credit at The Old Book Barn. She knew which employees would accept just about anything for trade. Which meant that, if we went with her, she would let us choose anything we wanted.

In a building with “Over 200,000 Titles!” the Literature section still managed to be woefully underrepresented. It was a waiting game. We could take five or six trips there and the same tired copies of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Wuthering Heights* would sit in the same dusty places. But every so often some old person would die, his books would be donated, and I’d luck across a beaten-up copy of Hemingway or Steinbeck or Fitzgerald. All well and good, but there was something more that I wanted. I’d heard about Salinger, I guess on TV or as a trope in another book, and I knew that *The Catcher in the Rye* was considered the anthem of disillusioned youth everywhere. I was a disillusioned youth. I wanted that book. I looked in the ‘S’ section every time, hoping that this time he’d be sitting on the shelf waiting for me, J.D. Salinger. But it wasn’t to be. I could never find Salinger.

My family sat around the kitchen table, hunched over a legal pad. I was sketching out a contract of sorts. If we were going to do this hypnosis thing, there were going to be stipulations. I was going to get them in writing.

“This is really silly. We’re talking about putting you into a suggestive state, not regression,” my dad said for the hundredth time, “I don’t even know how to do that! I don’t even really believe it can be done!”

“You know, Mark,” my mom cut in, sending him one of her unwavering glares that could have cut through a diamond, “If we’d just stuck to the rule of no library books for the girls, we’d all of had a nicer Sunday. You shouldn’t have let her talk you into it.”

“Mom!” I snapped, “Fine! I’m terrible! I’m a terrible person who can’t keep hold of her library books! Ok? I get it!” But, of course, she was right. I’d finally been unable to wait any longer to read *The Catcher in the Rye* and so I had worked on my dad for weeks to take me to the library. He’d caved and we went and then he caved even further when I’d shown up at the counter with not just Salinger, but a giant stack of books (*But they’re educational! They’re about Native Americans, Dad. Like us!*). My mom was not happy with him.

“Why am I even sitting here?” my twin sister complained, “Beck lost the books.”

“Because I need you to be my witness, Sara, come on!” I pleaded, hoping that for just once she’d be on my side. It was a foolish hope.

“I’m totally going to ask about…” she said, but I cut her off hastily.

“Okay, I’m writing down, *Sara can’t ask any questions.* That’s a new rule. And I think there should be a tape recorder. I want some proof that everyone stuck to these rules,” I said.

“Well, we can do that, but that means we’re going to have to find a blank tape,” my mom responded.

“I remember seeing one. Somewhere. Where was that?” said my dad, and we all sighed and went off searching.

This next part will have to remain a bit vague in order to protect the innocent. Okay, no, in order to protect myself. You see, some years back I read a story in the paper about how J.D. Salinger was suing someone for publishing bootleg copies of the twenty-three short stories he’d published in magazines and never collected. Instead of thinking, *That’s his property! How dare you!* I thought, *I have to have those! Where can I find those?* I, of course, went to the internet to find out. Which, given how many websites there were in his honor, was surprisingly difficult information to find. I imagine Salinger must have had an entire army of internet trollers on payroll, because on website after website, I read about cease-and-desist orders being handed out like Pringles that you can’t stop once you pop. People were afraid to even quote a bit of anything Salinger had written, lest his wrath come down on them. “All morons hate it when you call them a moron.” Please cease. And desist. “Anyway, I'm sort of glad they've got the atomic bomb invented. If there's ever another war, I'm going to sit right the hell on top of it. I'll volunteer for it; I swear to God I will.” Please cease. And desist. I was shocked. I guess I’d imagined that Salinger probably wasn’t even aware of the leaps in technology that had happened since he’d shuttered himself away in Cornish. I’d fancied he was holed up in his office and doing nothing but typing on his old Remington typewriter. As he finished each page, he’d lay it lovingly on top of the last one, which itself sat atop a huge stack of yellowing pages. Which sat next to another. And another. Some fifty years’ worth, in fact. Had he switched to a computer?

I was starting to despair when I came across the mother lode. Someone had lovingly listed each of the twenty-three uncollected short stories and the magazines in which they’d originally appeared. Not only that, but they’d also logged each Volume and Edition number. I’d just have to find those magazines and then I could have the stories. I could have the rest of Salinger! I actually did a little dance around my office. Luckily, I lived in [redacted], and the main library downtown was sure to have all of them stored on microfiche (microfilm?). I printed out the list and headed out immediately.

Mind you, I still didn’t have a library card. Actually, that’s not true. I did have a library card, but the fine on it was so huge (this time I’d lost a load of Carson McCullers books and a videotape of John Irving I’d used for a class presentation) that I wished I hadn’t had one. When I’d opened my account, I’d known it was a bad idea. But I’m like a crack addict when it comes to books. I can’t control myself. I felt guilty even walking into the building, as if every librarian could tell that I should be branded as The Worst Library Patron of All Time. Ever. When I entered the microfiche (microfilm?) room, I was relieved that nobody asked to see my library card. In fact, there weren’t even any employees in there, just me and a few others whom I could only assume were grad students doing research. Handily, there was a stack of baskets, like the type they have at grocery stores, just next to the door. But what I was hunting for was better than food! This was Salinger.

It didn’t take long for me to ferret out all twenty-three rolls of film. I put some money on a print card and hunkered down in front of a large machine that could both read and, supposedly, print the pages. I learned a few things very quickly. The microfilm (microfiche? Seriously, what is the difference?) was very fragile. Even just turning the knob to scroll through the pages could result in a tear. And did. Over and over again. Not to mention trying to get it loaded up in the first place. Secondly, printing a readable page was like finding a Sasquatch. A Sasquatch that pooped gold. And had fathered a child with a unicorn. It was impossible. After a few hours (and many trips to reload my card until I’d paid well over a hundred dollars) I’d only managed the smallest stack of printed pages. And I’d pretty well destroyed every roll of film that held a Salinger story. Not only would I not have even one complete version of these stories, but now nobody else in the city of [redacted] would ever have them either. But at least I had read them! I had found more Salinger, and I was elated. I left my basket of mangled film in the return area to be reshelved (*By whom*? I’d wondered, since I still hadn’t seen a single employee by the time I left.)

Later that night, over dinner with my boyfriend, I tried to recall some of the stories for him.

“Well, there was this one that was written like a letter. By Seymour! When he was a kid. He was at camp,” I said, still glowing about the day.

“What was he writing about?” he asked, barely hiding his envy.

“He was writing home,” I answered, reaching for another roll.

“But what about? What was he writing home *about*?” he prodded.

“Well, hmmm,” I said and then thought about it for a minute, “I can’t remember.”

I lay down on the couch in the living room, an old velour thing we’d bought with the house from the previous owners. It was worn but comfortable.

“You swear, Dad? Just the script we discussed?” I asked. I’d gone one further and made him write out everything he was planning to say.

“I swear. You’re really making this into more than it is! Just lie back. Relax,” he said.

“Okay, as long as it’s a promise promise. Okay. Mom, hit record,” I said.

He said, *You can trust me.* *Relax*. He said, *Concentrate on your face now and feel all of the muscles in your face relax*. He said, *Feel them relax. Concentrate on your eyes and let them relax.* He said, *Relax.*

Every few years, a journalist has decided that it’s time for someone else to go to Cornish and see about Salinger. A story would be published, and something had happened, some secret had leaked, some postman or barber or waitress had let just a little bit of information slip, or else nothing was discovered, and the story was that everything was as everything had been in Salingerland. He’s still secretive. He’s still locked away. There was always one question left lingering. Is he writing?

Really, it’d always been the photos attached to those articles that had captured my imagination the longest. And even though there are a few different versions, each one is essentially identical (are they discarded author photos?); an unvarying, dismissive smirk, a dapper jacket, the same slicked back hair. I would stare at him, that handsome man so very much the epitome of the Fifties for me, and think selfishly, *We know something more about you!* But, of course, we didn’t, we haven’t, we couldn’t. His gaze seems to say just that. Go ahead and ogle me, try to come find me if you want, because it doesn’t matter. I have nothing for you.

I suspect that he’s right. Even now, the headline **J.D. Salinger Dead: *Catcher in the Rye* Author Dies At 91** has only just barely been typed and still, in his obituaries, in his tributes and remembrances, we are wondering. *Was he writing? Can we see it?* Yes, yes of course, he was writing. There will be more stories discovered among his papers, perhaps even mountains of them. He was a writer, after all, and writers can only truly feel connected to the world through their fingertips; through the process of visualizing something beautiful and then arranging letters to draw the picture of it. By spilling words on paper. For the great writers of the world, and what was Salinger if not a Great Writer of the World, that spillage runs together. It collects. It fills up the largest basins and becomes like a warm mountain lake for the rest of us to build our cabins ‘round. Most writers spend a lifetime trying to produce just a raincloud or two. But for some writers, for Salinger, it can come like the Great Flood. Inexplicably, it just rains and rains and rains and then, just as inexplicably, the sun comes up. It is over. Salinger knew it was over. He spent fifty years telling us that it was over. There will be stories found, but I suspect we will find nothing for us.

With a start, I sat up on the couch. I felt hot and sweaty, but otherwise everything was exactly as it had been. Sunlight crept in through the blinds at the same angle. The clock indicated that only an hour had passed. I remembered my dad telling me to lie back and be comfortable. To imagine that I was sinking into the couch. To feel my muscles, to tighten each one and then to let them relax. And then nothing. I’d just simply fallen asleep.

“It didn’t work!” I yelled into the kitchen where my dad was making himself a sandwich, “I have no idea where the books are!”

“That’s how these things go,” he said, “Anything with the mind can be unreliable. Sometimes you can get the best of it and sometimes it can get the best of you.”

I slogged upstairs to my bathroom, sure that my dad was a fraud. A phony. A huckster unworthy of his doctorate! I’d made myself so vulnerable in a way and for what? For nothing! It was going to take dozens of shifts at the steakhouse where I bussed tables to pay back the debt to my father. In teenage terms, it was going to be a lifetime. I turned on the tap and splashed some water on my face and then. Something came over me like a voice in my head that I couldn’t quite hear, but that I could feel. It said, *Open the cabinet. Open the cabinet.* So, I did. I opened the cabinet beneath the sink and there, hidden behind the old shampoo bottles and lotions and boxes of tampons, was the stack of library books. I’ll never be quite certain how they got there, but I do know that I had found Salinger and that it meant everything.