Catcher in the Rye – J. D. Salinger
Excerpts

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, an what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.

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Where I want to start telling is the day I left Pencey Prep. Pencey Prep is this school that's in Agerstown, Pennsylvania. You probably heard of it. You've probably seen the ads, anyway. They advertise in about a thousand magazines, always showing some hotshot guy on a horse jumping over a fence. Like as if all you ever did at Pencey was play polo all the time. I never even once saw a horse anywhere near the place. And underneath the guy on the horse's picture, it always says: "Since 1888 we have been molding boys into splendid, clear-thinking young men." Strictly for the birds. They don't do any damn more molding at Pencey than they do at any other school. And I didn't know anybody there that was splendid and clear-thinking and all. Maybe two guys. If that many. And they probably came to Pencey that way.

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"I flunked you in history because you knew absolutely nothing."

"I know that, sir. Boy, I know it. You couldn't help it."

"Absolutely nothing," he said over again. That's something that drives me crazy. When people say something twice that way, after you admit it the first time. Then he said it three times. "But absolutely nothing. I doubt very much if you opened your textbook even once the whole term. Did you? Tell the truth, boy."

"Well, I sort of glanced through it a couple of times," I told him. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. He was mad about history.

"You glanced through it, eh?" he said--very sarcastic. "Your, ah, exam paper is over there on top of my chiffonier. On top of the pile. Bring it here, please."

It was a very dirty trick, but I went over and brought it over to him--I didn't have any alternative or anything. Then I sat down on his cement bed again. Boy, you can't imagine how sorry I was getting that I'd stopped by to say good-by to him. He started handling my exam paper like it was a turd or something. "We studied the Egyptians from November 4th to December 2nd," he said. "You chose to write about them for the optional essay question. Would you care to hear what you had to say?"

"No, sir, not very much," I said.
He read it anyway, though. You can't stop a teacher when they want to do something. They just do it.

"The Egyptians were an ancient race of Caucasians residing in one of the northern sections of Africa. The latter as we all know is the largest continent in the Eastern Hemisphere."

I had to sit there and listen to that crap. It certainly was a dirty trick.

"The Egyptians are extremely interesting to us today for various reasons. Modern science would still like to know what the secret ingredients were that the Egyptians used when they wrapped up dead people so that their faces would not rot for innumerable centuries. This interesting riddle is still quite a challenge to modern science in the twentieth century."

He stopped reading and put my paper down. I was beginning to sort of hate him. "Your essay, shall we say, ends there," he said in this very sarcastic voice. You wouldn't think such an old guy would be so sarcastic and all. "However, you dropped me a little note, at the bottom of the page," he said.

"I know I did," I said. I said it very fast because I wanted to stop him before he started reading that out loud. But you couldn't stop him. He was hot as a firecracker.

DEAR MR. SPENCER [he read out loud]. That is all I know about the Egyptians. I can't seem to get very interested in them although your lectures are very interesting. It is all right with me if you flunk me though as I am flunking everything else except English anyway.

Respectfully yours, HOLDEN CAULFIELD.

He put my goddam paper down then and looked at me like he'd just beaten hell out of me in ping-pong or something. I don't think I'll ever forgive him for reading me that crap out loud. I wouldn't've read it out loud to him if he'd written it--I really wouldn't. In the first place, I'd only written that damn note so that he wouldn't feel too bad about flunking me.

"Do you blame me for flunking you, boy?" he said.

"No, sir! I certainly don't," I said. I wished to hell he'd stop calling me "boy" all the time.

He tried chucking my exam paper on the bed when he was through with it. Only, he missed again, naturally. I had to get up again and pick it up and put it on top of the Atlantic Monthly. It's boring to do that every two minutes.
"Who belongsa this?" Ackley said. He was holding my roommate's knee supporter up to show me. That guy Ackley'd pick up anything. He'd even pick up your jock strap or something. I told him it was Stradlater's. So he chucked it on Stradlater's bed. He got it off Stradlater's chiffonier, so he chucked it on the bed. He came over and sat down on the arm of Stradlater's chair. He never sat down in a chair. Just always on the arm. "Where the hellja get that hat?" he said.

"New York."

"How much?"

"A buck."

"You got robbed." He started cleaning his goddam fingernails with the end of a match. He was always cleaning his fingernails. It was funny, in a way. His teeth were always mossy-looking, and his ears were always dirty as hell, but he was always cleaning his fingernails. I guess he thought that made him a very neat guy. He took another look at my hat while he was cleaning them. "Up home we wear a hat like that to shoot deer in, for Chrissake," he said. "That's a deer shooting hat."

"Like hell it is." I took it off and looked at it. I sort of closed one eye, like I was taking aim at it. "This is a people shooting hat," I said. "I shoot people in this hat."

I'm not too sure old Phoebe knew what the hell I was talking about. I mean she's only a little child and all. But she was listening, at least. If somebody at least listens, it's not too bad.

"I got my damn bags at the station," I said. "Listen. You got any dough, Phoeb? I'm practically broke."

"Just my Christmas dough. For presents and all. I haven't done any shopping at all yet."

"Oh." I didn't want to take her Christmas dough.

"You want some?" she said.

"I don't want to take your Christmas dough."
"I can lend you some," she said. Then I heard her over at D.B.'s desk, opening a million drawers and feeling around with her hand. It was pitch-black, it was so dark in the room. "If you go away, you won't see me in the play," she said. Her voice sounded funny when she said it.

"Yes, I will. I won't go way before that. You think I wanna miss the play?" I said. "What I'll do, I'll probably stay at Mr. Antolini's house till maybe Tuesday night. Then I'll come home. If I get a chance, I'll phone ya."

"Here," old Phoebe said. She was trying to give me the dough, but she couldn't find my hand.

"Where?"

She put the dough in my hand.

"Hey, I don't need all this," I said. "Just give me two bucks, is all. No kidding--Here." I tried to give it back to her, but she wouldn't take it.

"You can take it all. You can pay me back. Bring it to the play."

"How much is it, for God's sake?"

"Eight dollars and eighty-five cents. Sixty-five cents. I spent some."

Then, all of a sudden, I started to cry. I couldn't help it. I did it so nobody could hear me, but I did it. It scared hell out of old Phoebe when I started doing it, and she came over and tried to make me stop, but once you get started, you can't just stop on a goddam dime. I was still sitting on the edge of the bed when I did it, and she put her old arm around my neck, and I put my arm around her, too, but I still couldn't stop for a long time. I thought I was going to choke to death or something. Boy, I scared hell out of poor old Phoebe. The damn window was open and everything, and I could feel her shivering and all, because all she had on was her pajamas. I tried to make her get back in bed, but she wouldn't go. Finally I stopped. But it certainly took me a long, long time. Then I finished buttoning my coat and all. I told her I'd keep in touch with her. She told me I could sleep with her if I wanted to, but I said no, that I'd better beat it, that Mr. Antolini was waiting for me and all. Then I took my hunting hat out of my coat pocket and gave it to her. She likes those kind of crazy hats. She didn't want to take it, but I made her. I'll bet she slept with it on. She really likes those kind of hats. Then I told her again I'd give her a buzz if I got a chance, and then I left.