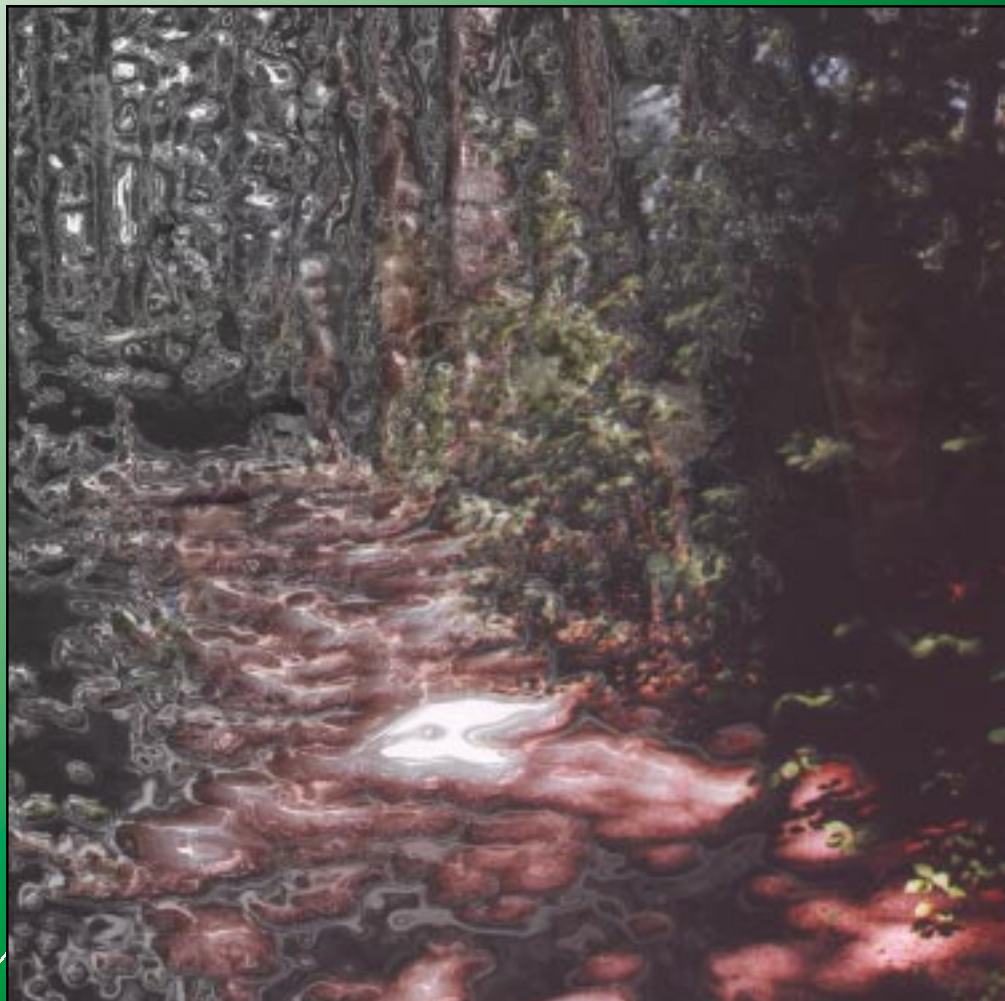




A Whispering Through the Branches



by Justin Katz

A Symphony Without Music: 1

PROPOSAL FOR THE PUBLICATION OF

A Whispering Through the Branches

A Symphony Without Music: 1

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The whisper (ideas & plot)

One literary tidbit that I have been able to keep in my mind for some reason is a quotation — rather, a sentiment — of Tolstoy’s upon being asked to explain what *Anna Karenina* was really about. Tolstoy’s answer was something to the effect of, “To answer that question, I would need to write another, even longer, book.” If Leo was offering the same opinion that I have of my first novel, *A Whispering Through the Branches*, he was explaining that fiction allowed the shortest and most direct method of conveying the ideas that he had wanted to instill in his work. To explain what the novel is about, in a fashion that is even close to comprehensive, would require more words put in a way that couldn’t help but shift, if not diminish, the effect of the work, which is connected, I believe, intrinsically to the work’s meaning.

With the combination of this opinion and the vanity/pretension of a young writer who envisions his work being studied one day, I can obviously do no more within the scope of this proposal than offer a few of the more obvious of my intentions and give a cursory plot summary. *A Whispering Through the Branches* is, in part, about entering myself into the perennial literary discussion — taking a place among the literary authors of the past, in a way. A very much related aspect of the work is the progression of learning how to write: from blatant mimicry to the development of one’s own voice. A third intention, perhaps inherent to those just mentioned, is an exploration of the space between reality and fiction, in this case, between my life and that of my protagonist, Nathaniel Ariss.

More important to my goal for the work than any of these admittedly self-centric fiddlings is my hope that I have created a work that will guide readers to letting some authors of the past who were far greater than I could hope to be back into their consciousnesses — or to open doors for my literary predecessors into the minds of those who may not have read them. In short, it is my larger goal to play a small role in what I hope is an impending trend toward the reading and consideration of books that are more than, in effect, movies put into narrative text form.

Of course, I spent too many years developing my novel for this to be the extent, or even among the larger aspects, of its meaning. The more personal, individual, and (not paradoxically) universal ideas that I worked so hard to put into my creation I leave to others than myself to explore and divulge.

A synopsis of the plot of *A Whispering Through the Branches* can be put concisely enough. At some point before the beginning of the book, a young man named Nathaniel Ariss found a mansion hidden in the Catskill mountains of New York state. Over the years, wanderers have found their way to the mansion, called the Pequod, and taken for themselves the names of the main characters of “great American novels” (for the most part), returning to the house each summer to play, with varying facility, the roles of their namesakes in the society of the Pequod. The house and its inhabitants are discovered to the reader through the latest visitor, known only

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as D. until she picks a name for herself. Each of the characters tells D. a story of Nathaniel's past, each story tainted by the perceptions of the character and the restrictions of the book from which he's taken his name.

Just as it becomes apparent to D., through the stories of the others, that something major has happened in the external life of Nathaniel, the man himself makes his appearance with the intention of disbanding the group so that he may return to the "real" world and get married. Before he does so, however, D., now known as Sybil [misspelling intentional] discovers a book of essays that Nathaniel has written and unsuccessfully attempts to convince him to publish them.

Despite Nathaniel's initial wishes to the contrary, Sybil, who's occupation is with a publishing company, publishes the book with Nathaniel's hesitant permission — partly a result of the persuasion of his fiancé and their relative poverty (Nathaniel makes his living as a dock worker). What he does not expect when he takes the deal is that his book will catch on and his fame will lead to a tabloidesque probing of his past. As the story plummets toward its conclusion, each of the Pequod's patrons makes his appearance in his real world capacity, some trying to make something of their acquaintance with Nathaniel, others trying to help him, and others more or less indifferent.

Acoustics (strategies)

In keeping with the subtitle of the book, *A Symphony Without Music: 1* (1st movement), *A Whispering Through the Branches* is in sonata form. Essentially, this means that, after a brief Prelude, the work introduces each theme — each character, for my purposes, with Nathaniel as an underlying and central idea — by means of an Exposition. Following the Exposition, the themes are changed around or further explored through the Development; the way in which I fulfill this requirement is by introducing Nathaniel in this section and developing the theme that has only been secondary thus far: him. The final required section of a work in sonata form is a repetition of the Exposition through a Recapitulation, which can present the themes with slight variations.

Obviously, since each of my characters was required by Nathaniel to pick a "great American novel" protagonist to emulate, I had to decide which to use, the extent to which my characters would be able or willing to play their part, how that assessment would influence their telling of Nathaniel's story, and the extent to which I, for both the "style" of the characters and the pervasive theme



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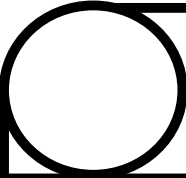
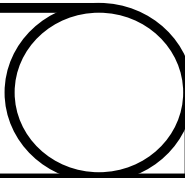
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of my becoming a more experienced writer, should usurp the writing style of each author. (This last question requiring quite a bit of thought, study, and general work on my part.)

In a sort of symbiotic relationship with the decisions related to book choice and character development, I worked within the architectural framework of the setting (the Pequod mansion) as I envisioned it, dividing the characters, in meaningful ways, by the locations of the rooms that they occupied. Ultimately, the Pequod ended up with the following character blueprint:



	Nathaniel Ariss Nathaniel Hawthorne's complete oeuvre and life	
Martin Martin Eden Jack London		D./Sybil History Nathaniel Ariss
Nick The Great Gatsby F. Scott Fitzgerald		Othello Othello William Shakespeare
Holden Catcher in the Rye J.D. Salinger		Steinbeck East of Eden John Steinbeck
Sal On the Road Jack Kerouac		Jake The Sun Also Rises Ernest Hemingway
Alex A Clockwork Orange Anthony Burgess		Huck Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Mark Twain
	John the Baptist The Bible	



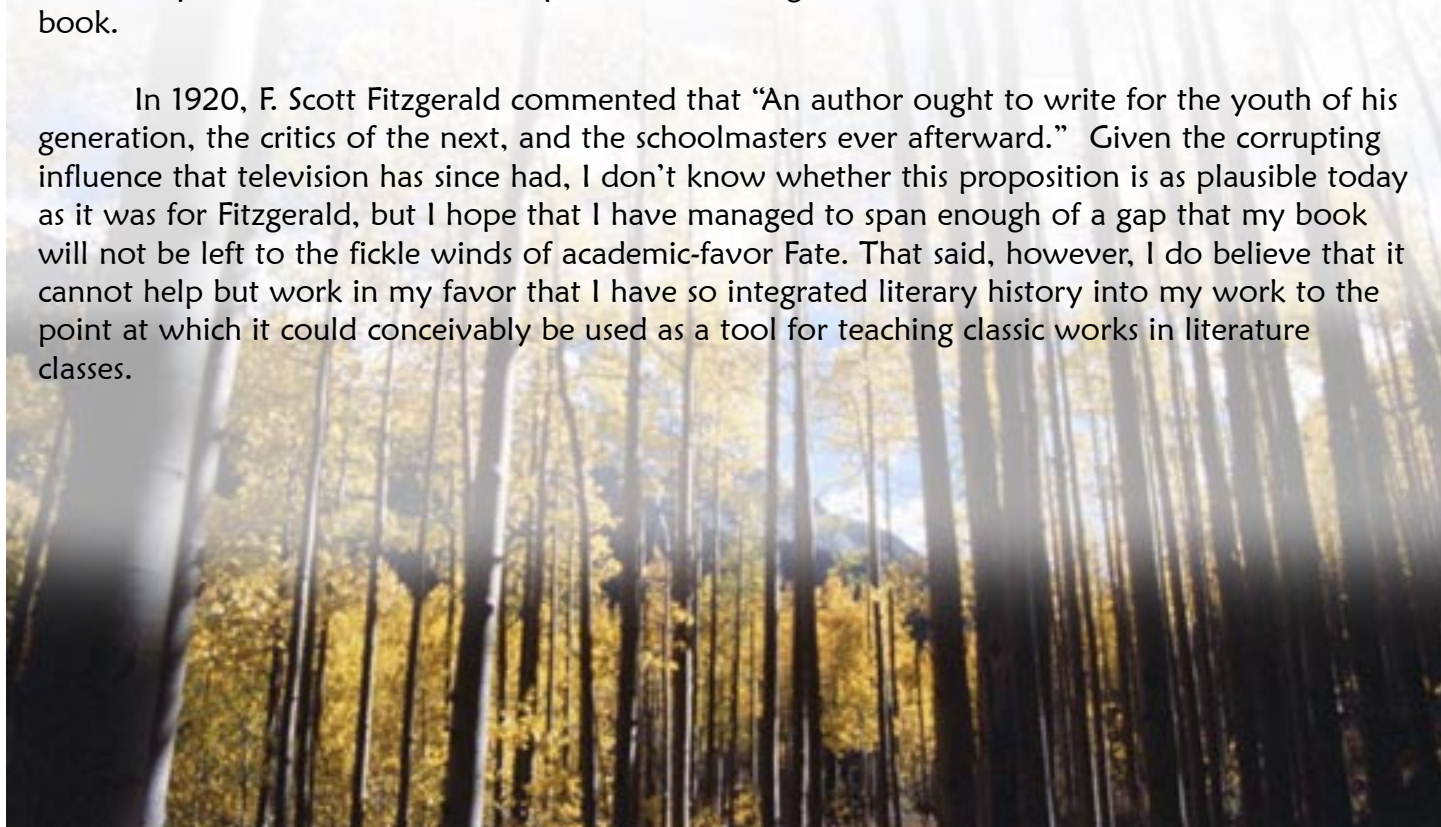
Dust (numbers & statistics)

Using an average-sized type with moderate spacing, *A Whispering Through the Branches* will be approximately 440 pages, Preface included. Not being an experienced typesetter, I cannot say for sure what the range of possible page numbers for 120,099 words might be, but I derived my estimate by typing a full page of what appeared to be an average book (the average being in layout only).

Leaves (audience)

I will openly admit that my novel is not likely to reach the masses, whose reading dollars (as few as they are) find their way more readily into the pockets of authors of mystery, horror, and romance novels and memoirs. A friend of mine once asked whether I believed a well-written book with a brilliant underlying meaning to be a “better” book than one that touches millions of people in some way. My answer was that an author, given his or her goals and ideas for a work, ought to shoot for something between the two extremes. The “best” books, in this case, would be those that allow for a variety of reader types — from the academic to the evening reader — and offer potential for readers to expand their reading habits on the basis of and within that one book.

In 1920, F. Scott Fitzgerald commented that “An author ought to write for the youth of his generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters ever afterward.” Given the corrupting influence that television has since had, I don’t know whether this proposition is as plausible today as it was for Fitzgerald, but I hope that I have managed to span enough of a gap that my book will not be left to the fickle winds of academic-favor Fate. That said, however, I do believe that it cannot help but work in my favor that I have so integrated literary history into my work to the point at which it could conceivably be used as a tool for teaching classic works in literature classes.



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About the author

I finished my undergraduate work belatedly in 1999 after several years spent working in the commercial fishing industry, graduating from the University of Rhode Island with “Highest Honors,” as they call it there, and working my way into comfortable positions among faculty with whom I came in contact either as a student or an employee. Having entered the working world for the time being, I’ve had the perplexity and thrill of re-proving myself, and am enjoying my work, though I often feel the itch, much to the chagrin of my friends, wife, and in-laws (though not my own father), to make up for the classroom arguing to which I’ve become accustomed.

I am currently working as a Copywriter/Graphic Designer for the Creative Services department of Lightolier, an industrial lighting fixture company. I have also been seeking publication of poetry, nonfiction, short stories, and literary criticism. It is highly likely, barring inexplicable success, that I will return to my education in the future to acquire a Ph.D. in Literature/English en route to a professorial career.



Publications to date

Poetry

“Two Seagulls”: *Syncopated City* — Autumn/Winter 1998

News Articles and Press Releases (printed verbatim)

“Commas, Quotation Marks, Pronouns”: *The Editorial Eye* — March 2000

“Two area students experience coastal learning”: *Westerly Sun* — December 1, 1998

“URI junior learns about sustaining the landscape”: *Narragansett Times* — November 6, 1998

“Virtual Environmentalism: URI junior works on blueprint for watershed management”
East Greenwich Magazine — November 1998

“New wave of learning in coastal studies crests at the University of Rhode Island”:

Providence Journal — 1998 Special Edition

University Pacer — Sept/Oct, 1998

Narragansett Times — July 31, 1998

“Experience of depth: URI graduate follows the tides”: *Block Island Times* — October 3, 1998

“Two area URI students experience coastal learning”: *Warwick Beacon* — September 24, 1998

“URI grad student factors salmon into her career equation”:

Cranston Herald — Thursday, September 3, 1998

Web Pages

“Timshel Arts”: <http://www.timshelarts.com> (and related pages)

“Partnership for the Coastal Environment”: <http://www.edc.uri.edu/pce> (and related pages)

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*P*relude

Shall we open with the trees? Would that we could all branch outward from such serenity. To be so well centered. To be so balanced by our roots! O to have the faith in the ground on which we stand to dig as deeply inward as we reach out grasping toward the heavens! And to have such little care concerning those with whom we mix our leaves in our aspirations! The sweetly dominating Maple linking arms with the stout Oak and the molting Birch; and the Pines, all yearning to shed their innocent coats, as their cousins have, and show their naked wrinkles to the world.

Yes, let's open with the trees, because the Spring is looming lustily over every field. Let us take shelter under those arms as they are slowly renewed with each bursting bud until the sky is but a memory to the ground. Let us lie upon the carpeting of leaves and needles, patterned by the wind. We will create our own patterns, each of us pushing our own imprint into the soft comfort — deeper and deeper, and deeper still, until the wind, jealous of our forms, blows to dust all of our endeavors.

But for now we spread ourselves atop our plots and the wind can do no more than caress us. So will we open, each with a tree at our heads, and breathe our bodies up through the branches. Let us close our eyes to sleep and sleep until these new leaves turn old and weigh on us as memories and sleep until the weight of those fallen leaves presses us deep into the ground and sleep as the wind scatters the memories and sleep with a tree at each of our heads and sleep.

And listen for the one song we've yet to hear.

Past the birds with their endless chatter. We have heard every tune they have to offer. Do not separate them now. Take them all as one gliding wave of a lullaby and the breathing silence of one as filled by the hum of another. Taken as a drone they are easy to ignore. Listen past their eternal chirp and past the panting pounded out in unison by their wings.

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Below the bitter old brook, grumbling her journey from high beginnings to the low swirl of the anonymous ocean. Hers is a melancholy ballad: bubbling and weeping as she is dragged over the stones. With the return of her heaven-banished children, falling into her bosom as rain, her bed will not contain her lament and she will lash out, ripping trees from their uneasy stance at her side. But our ground is removed enough that we no longer need to fear the flood. And sad soft songs are the most lulling of all.

Listen. What is this new noise that blends its cries with her mumblings? Why, those are human whimpers. Shh, shh, quiet. Let us listen closely. Here is a sound of depth. A sweeping rhythm of echoes. Are those tears that we hear dropping carelessly into the stream? Yes, yes, and then a sigh. O what a sigh! A call to arms, that sigh. What power in that thrusting of air! An endless source of sorrow. So much have they to regret, and it is all there in that one sigh. We can hear in that sigh the cries of every child left uncuddled and cold. In that sigh the broken dreams of countless ages, each alike in nothing but their differences. Each sadly aware of how little they matter. And yet so many asking for aid. An exasperated sigh. A sigh begged for and cherished by every injustice. A sigher spread too thinly in her attempt to cover so many in her warm embrace. Here is your champion all ye humbled poor! Curled up by the water's edge, here is one who dashes her tears upon the stones for all of ye pariahs. But wait, she speaks:

“Who will save me?”

A cry for help? For what could such a savior need assistance? For what such desperate phrasing? Perhaps we were mistaken. No, perhaps we were correct before we started speaking, and there is no hope for the downcast. Perhaps there are none truly worth saving, anyway.

But such lovely tones of sorrow we cannot resist. Come, have we not been wooed by this voice? Come, can we deny the seduction of so heart-torn an aria? Let us all rise up and offer consolation. Come now, come.

Ah, but we are too slow to our purpose. We are beaten to it: another approaches. Well then, we will postpone our slumbers and watch for a while. Perchance to pick up the pieces. Perchance a chance for one last souvenir.

Chapter 8

D. woke up quite a bit earlier the next morning. She wondered if she had slept at all or if the sun had crept early to the horizon without warning. She hadn't dreamt, and so her last memory was of dangling her keys above her eyes, thinking. For a moment she panicked and padded around on the bed. She threw the pillows from the head to the foot of the bed and looked over the edge at the floor. Jim was sleeping with the key ring between his paws. *Quite a guard dog*, D. mused.

Jim opened one eye as she picked up the keys. "Good morning, Jim," said D., patting him on the head. Jim stood up and stretched like a cat.

After getting out of bed and putting on her dress, D. walked Jim down to the front door. There was nobody in the courtyard, and the front hall was silent and peaceful and the morning sun shone through the cracks around the door, sending dust specks into swirls. D. let Jim outside and shut the door quietly. Turning around, she looked up at the stained glass window. She wondered how close the sun would get to its center and was puzzled at a tiny pang of regret that she wouldn't find out. She would be gone by then.

"You look like you're trying to feel a good-bye," called a voice from her left. D. jumped a little. Sitting in one of the chairs on the other side of the dining room table with his feet up and a notebook resting on his knees was a young man who looked to be in his mid-to-late twenties. He had scruffy brown hair, dirty sneakers, worn jeans, and a blue sweater.

Partly because she was becoming used to surprises in this house, and partly because her surprise was directed, this time, mostly at herself for not having looked into that room when she came down the stairs, D. only paused slightly before responding, "I'm not trying to, but strangely enough I am."

"Well, if you're going to leave a place, you always feel worse if you don't," said the young man. "I'm Holden."

He didn't show any signs that he intended to stand up, so D. walked toward him and stopped at the spot where one room turned into the other.

“So what’s it look like to you?” asked Holden.

“Pardon?”

“That window that you were looking at. Everybody likes to think that it’s something different.”

D. looked over her shoulder but couldn’t see the window from where she stood. The stairs were in the way. “I don’t know. Am I allowed to just see a window?”

“Well, I’m not gonna be the one to tell you that you can’t. That’s all it is to me. But as far as windows go, it’s better than most.”

“Why do you say that?” asked D., trying to remember what his response might be.

“I don’t know. I guess I like a window that you can’t see into or out of too easy unless you really want to. I hate windows that you’re always seeing people out of whenever you walk by them, even if you’re not in the mood for that kind of thing. I mean if you’re sort of thinking about something and you’re forced to see another thing that makes you think about something else and forget what it was that you wanted to be thinking about. Who wants a window like that? Nobody. On the other hand, if you *are* in the mood, then you can look through that piece in the middle and see even better, because it’s like a magnifying glass.”

D. smiled. “Does it work that way?”

“I think so,” said Holden, “but I’ve never tried it.”

Letting out a small laugh of a breath, D. glanced toward where the window would be if she were able to see it.

“So you’re leaving, then?” asked Holden.

“I suppose.”

“Well that’s too bad. It’d be nice to see a girl around here for a change. Even if all you did was look out the windows or something.”

Smiling sarcastically, D. said, “I’m glad that you have such a liberated view of women.”

“Oh!” Holden looked embarrassed. “I didn’t mean it like that. Really. I mean, I guess you’d be great and fun to talk to and all, but I don’t know you that well. If you’re the type of girl that you

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could hang out with and just sort of play a game with or anything, it'd be nice to have you around. I don't know if I'm saying this right, but you know what I mean. I mean, there aren't many people around here that are clear-headed all the time and able to carry on a normal goddam conversation."

He looked down at the notebook on his lap. "So if you're leaving, why did you come here?"

"It wasn't on purpose, I can assure you of that."

"It never is. But that doesn't explain why you would want to leave."

D. thought for a moment. "Why would I stay?"

Looking up at her, Holden told her that he didn't know. "There are worse places to be. If you don't have anywhere that you *have* to be and all."

D. could hear Jim whimpering quietly to be let in, so she crossed the entrance hall and opened the door. There was nobody around, leading D. to believe that it was earlier than she had thought. The morning sun sparkled like a waking eye through the half-filled branches of the trees on the other side of the yard. She heard a page being turned.

"What are you reading?" she asked Holden when she had returned to her post and stood there for a moment as if unnoticed.

"Oh, just a notebook. Nathaniel's got a million of them all stuffed in boxes in here. They're really kind of neat. I could just read these the whole time I'm here and never know how long I'd been doing it."

"What's in them?"

"Mostly just random thoughts and stuff. Some of them are from classes and have algebra and school crap in them. Those are my favorites because sometimes he would write poems in them to keep from being bored. I was always bored in school."

"Did you write much poetry?"

Holden laughed sheepishly. "No, I never did anything like that. I drew some pictures and that kind of crap. I don't really have the talent for it. Nathaniel, though. Boy, he can write. One of these boxes has a whole bunch of the beginnings of books and stories that he never got around to finishing. He could be a hell of a writer if he ever finished anything. What kills me is when I read

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those stories and I just have to go call up to his room when I'm all done with what's written and try to get Nathaniel to tell me how it was going to end."

"Does he tell you?"

"No, not yet. He usually asks me what I think and all that teacher type of crap. The thing about Nathaniel is that he knows just about every goddam thing there is to know about. I mean he's one of those guys that knows that you can't know everything and that if somebody *really* wants to know how a story ends or something, then they probably can figure out how it's supposed to. But then he knows *that*, too, so he probably knows that if somebody else finishes his stories then they'll do it how *they* want and it'd be like an insult that they didn't think enough of him to try to write it how he would've. If I *did* finish one, I probably wouldn't show anybody, anyway, because I'd be worried that they thought that I was trying to write it the way I thought *Nathaniel* would do it and not the way *I* wanted to. But I'm not a fiction writer. Maybe some of these other guys could just up and jump into somebody else's story, but not me. What if I finished it the way I wanted and that wasn't the way it was supposed to be at all? Then everybody would get all touchy as hell about it and wish that they had tried because they'd think they could do it better. People are always thinking they can do everything better than you."

"Sounds like charming company."

Holden put his feet down on the ground and shook his head with wide, pleading eyes like a child who has mistakenly implicated a friend in some misdemeanor. "Oh, I don't mean it like that. These guys are actually better than most other people. I mean, I might be the only normal bastard here, but it's the same everywhere. If you're going to go somewhere to get away, you could go somewhere with a lot more goddam phonies. I mean you could go somewhere where there's all these stupid bastards who don't even have a brain or a sense of humor. Or where everybody's *so* smart that they know they're smart and act like it. Those kind of people never like to talk to real people, and when they do, they only like to talk about whatever *they* want to talk about."

Suppressing a yawn, D. began to excuse herself, but Holden asked her to wait.

"You could stay if you wanted, couldn't you? There's nothing you can't do here that you can

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somewhere else. I mean, if you know a lot about art and literature and those kinds of things you could have quite a good time here for a while. Of course, there isn't any place in the world that you can stay for a *long* time and not get bored, except maybe if you get drunk all the time. But why did you come in the first place if you're going to leave before you really get to know everybody?"

"I told you, I had no intention of coming in the first place," D. was losing patience. She felt like she was talking to one of those people who's really nice, but that could drive her crazy if she had to talk to them for too long a time.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Longer than I've liked."

"Well then how come it's taken you this long to decide to leave?"

"It hasn't been a question of deciding: I just couldn't. Somebody had my car keys."

Holden offered her a distracted look as if to say that things weren't supposed to happen that way. "Well then now you ought to stay because it would be your choice. People can't just *leave* everywhere just because they can. Nobody would ever be anywhere, they'd always be in-between. You can't stop doing something that you haven't even started."

"But I haven't started anything."

"Well then what's the point of leaving? It's like Jake told me when I first got here, 'Even if you didn't think you were coming here, or didn't really know you wanted to come here, you must have been looking for something that you couldn't find anywhere else.'"

"I'm trying to explain to you that I didn't come..."

Just then, Jim came scampering down the stairs with Huck close behind him. "Good mornin' all," Huck said. He smiled at D. and greeted Holden. "Anibody want some coffee an' brekfast?"

Huck didn't protest much when he found out that D. was intending to leave before lunch. He merely suggested that she not leave on an empty stomach, told her that he'd be "sahry ta see y'go," and offered to walk her to her car if she wanted. She thanked him and said she'd appreciate it.

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Holden waited a little while before he came into the kitchen to get a glass of orange juice. He said that he didn't eat much and might have a Swiss cheese sandwich later.

"Hope ya brought yer own cheese," Huck told him, "'cause we ain't got none."

Holden didn't seem to be too upset. "I'll probably just skip lunch then, I'm not a very big eater. That's why I'm so skinny," he explained. He stopped D. when she was about to dump the eggs that she hadn't eaten in the garbage and asked if he could finish it.

After breakfast, Holden found D. staring out the window in her room half-mindlessly scratching Jim behind the ears. He stood in her doorway for a while and then said, "I look out the window a lot when I'm feeling lonely."

D. glanced over her shoulder before she turned around.

"Did I scare you?" asked Holden.

"No. Actually you didn't." Then, "I've got this funny feeling that I should be packing or something."

"Packing always depresses me. But sometimes if you feel like you should be packing and you don't have anything to pack it's even sadder. But at least if you don't have anything to pack, then nobody has to look at your suitcases and think about how theirs are better."

D. jumped a little as a branch, moved by a gust of wind, tapped at her window. "Well, one wouldn't want to upset the sensibilities of the better off."

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that," said Holden. "I can be quite sarcastic sometimes. Sometimes I don't really mean a single thing that I say."

Sitting on the bed, D. said, "That's mature."

"I'm not," Holden told her, jumping forward as if to assure her of something. "I know I'm not. People always tell me that I shouldn't always do the kinds of things that I do to keep from getting bored. But I don't *always* act like that. People always think that just 'cause you do something sometimes you *always* do them. Sometimes I can be very quiet and humble if there's something to keep my mind off being bored. I really can."

D. glanced toward the window. Perhaps sensing that he was losing his audience, Holden stepped a little further into the room. "I can see why you would want to leave and all," he said.

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“Oh you can?”

“Sure. It’s always kind of boring here at first. I mean, when I got here it was in the middle of the summer and everybody was around and having a grand old time. And Nathaniel was always playing the piano. When he wasn’t making a fool of himself, that is.”

“I was under the impression that you thought that he was a genius.”

“He is, though. It’s funny, he could write this poem that makes you want to hug him or beat him up or something, but then in person he’s always getting as emotional as hell. You know what it is? He’s very emotional. He really is. Sometimes he’s too affectionate, too. He’s exactly the type of guy that could write something that you love to read as long as you can put it down and go look at a goddam beaver make a dam or something and come back to it when you’re in the mood again, but you wouldn’t want to be stuck listening to him reading it over and over. But who would want to listen to *anybody* read *anything* all the time? Not me.”

Feigning comprehension with a forced “hmm,” D. stood up and looked out the window again. Holden stood where he was for a minute or two and then sat down in the chair and sighed to draw attention to himself.

“You can’t really blame him, though. He’s gotten a hell of a lot better since my first summer. I mean John would do that to anybody if they were stuck in a house with him for a whole goddam winter and all. Always saying something and then nodding about it and then saying it again. Whatever he’s talking about. You know what I think? I think that he doesn’t know his ass from his elbow. He’s always talking about the rules and stuff like it’s his goddam job to make sure that everybody knows all the crap they’re supposed to be doing and be not doing. What a swell job for an old-as-hell guy to have.”

Holden stopped talking and waited for a response, but D. only looked out at the trees. Then she began to make the excuse of wanting to wash up a little, but Holden interrupted her. “And the only time Nathaniel’s really mean at all is when Martin won’t leave him alone. I mean I feel sorry for Martin and all, but he’s exactly the type of guy that won’t leave a room when you want him to. Everybody in the world would know that they weren’t wanted around, but not Martin. You

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practically have to curse at him to get rid of him till he *finally* gets the message. And then he'll still hang around for a while just to make sure that you weren't just horsing around with him. He could bring out the old sadist in anybody.

"But he's alright. It's *nice* to have him two doors down from your room and all, but I wouldn't want to be right *next* to him for Chrissakes. If you live next to a guy like Ack... I mean... Martin, he thinks that he can just walk in whenever the hell he wants to and make it look like a mistake. Like he just walked in the wrong door or something and didn't even realize that it wasn't his room until you started talking to him. That's why I picked the middle room on the *other* side. I didn't want to be right next to Jake. I mean he's smart and witty, if you know what I mean, but he's quite a heavy drinker, and who needs a big guy like that climbing into bed with you in the middle of the night when he's drunk as a bastard and can't see straight enough to tell that he's in the wrong room? Not me. I mean at least Nick can hold his liquor. He's usually pretty friendly, too. Sometimes I don't think he's always acting like himself, but at least he's willing to be the guy who lives in the next room over from Martin. When I first got here, Nick was always hanging around Nathaniel, and of course Martin was always there, too. And Jake was always kind of waiting for his turn. You know what I hate? I hate when people feel like they've gotta take turns to hang around somebody. I don't care, as many people can hang around *me* as want to.

"Goddamn Nick. He's always saying that Nathaniel says 'old sport' all the time, but he really doesn't. Nick kills me with that 'old sport' crap. It's like Nick wants to say it all the time and the only way he feels like he can do it is to say that Nathaniel said it. Nathaniel would never say anything like 'old sport'. It's too phony."

"Listen, Holden, I don't mean to be rude..."

"That's just the thing," Holden leaned back in the chair. "Nathaniel's never rude. I mean you can just say anything to him and he'll never get mad. He's aces, Nathaniel. Just a little emotional is all."

D. tried to say something.

Holden stood up and started to leave the room. "Well, I've got some things I've got to do."

He stopped at the door and turned around. “Say, what’a ya wanna leave for anyway? I mean where do you have to go?”

“Home.”

“Yeah, I can understand *that*, but where do you live? Goddam New York or someplace? I hate New York. What’s terrible about New York is that you can hear somebody laugh clear across town. You can never be alone in New York because some chucklehead’s always laughing up town or something. It’s the loneliest place in the world. It really is. I mean you could be sitting on your roof and wondering how in the hell you’re going to eat or something that week, and the next thing you know some big shot is letting you know just how great his life is way the hell up town or something. Who wants to spend their summer in a place like that? Not me.”

Raising her eyebrows as if to concede the point, D. shrugged.

“You know what I think?” asked Holden. “I think you’ll get to New York or wherever and figure out that it doesn’t interest you. You could leave this place and find out that you didn’t *know* that you really wanted to stay. I mean, sometimes you don’t know where you want to be ‘till you hang around someplace that you really *don’t* want to be. At least if you stayed ‘till everybody got here you could say that you made a fair choice. Deciding to leave now would be like going to bed when you’re not even tired.” He paused. “I don’t know exactly what I’m trying to say by that, but I mean it.” He shuffled his feet. “Well, I have to go do some things. Are you going to stay for lunch at least.”

“Yes, I probably will. Huck convinced me that it would be a good idea.”

“OK. I’ll see you later then.”

Holden left the room, and D. could hear his footsteps moving down the balcony.

D. spent the remainder of the morning in the open courtyard and hadn’t seen anybody but Huck, Martin, and Holden. Martin seemed embarrassed when he walked by on the balcony. It looked as if he made a point of not looking at her. When the sun was almost directly over her head, D. decided to make her way to the kitchen and see what was going on with lunch.

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There was nobody in the kitchen, so D. made herself a sandwich, which, for no particular reason, she decided to eat in the dining room. The floor creaked under her as she made her way across the front hall. She put her plate on the table in front of the nearest chair, but, looking over her shoulder, picked it up and walked around to the seat in which Holden had been sitting earlier. As she passed one of the southern windows, she noticed him at the edge of the forest stamping what looked like pants into the dirt. She shook her head and sat down.

After taking a bite of her sandwich, D. glanced into a box on the seat to her right. In the box, there were at least four dozen notebooks of many colors and varieties. Sticking out a bit was one of those with black and white speckled covers that she had used for all of her classes when she was younger. She pulled it out of the box to have something to look at while she ate. She took another bite out of the sandwich, put it down on her plate, and wiped her hand on her dress.

The first page of the notebook was filled with the type of drawings that any junior high school boy might draw. There were pictures of eyes, some crying. There were pictures of mouths, some laughing, some frowning, some snarling. In the bottom right hand corner was the first of a stick figure flip-book that somebody, she assumed Nathaniel, had drawn. Taking another bite of her sandwich, she took the notebook in both of her hands and flipped through the pages. The stick figure person began to run around in circles and beat its head. It succeeded in cracking the head open, and another stick figure person began to emerge: hands first, then a head with a halo over it. The pictures stopped just as the angel stick figure had expurgated itself down to its waist. D. took another bite out of her sandwich and watched the incomplete metamorphosis of the stick figure person again. On the page after which the drawer had apparently lost his impetus, Nathaniel had written “History” at the top of the page. She knew that he had done it because on the next line were the words “by Nathaniel Ariss.” She began to read what looked like the beginning of a story written in a boy’s sloppy letters:

Chapter 1

The sun beat down on the field in it's cold winter way. The grass was brown and the trees were bare. The field was a dull, drab ocean of cold wind with a ♣ on each side and was surrounded by a gravel oval. The sun brought a little life to the field by glinting off any shiny object it could find. There were bottles brought by a caravan of cars and discarded when empty. There were cans left by the audience after the show was over. And off to one side there was a star shining more brightly than any of the assorted litter. The star was shining with a purpose to be discovered. It gleamed so brilliantly that it seemed to break free of its faded metal casing. Then a hand folded around the star and forced it back into its prison.

D. stopped reading and took another bite out of her sandwich. Holden walked through the front door and smiled when he saw what she was doing. "You'll get hooked," he said. The pants that he had been trampling in the dirt were slung over his shoulder, and D. could see the leather label that said, "Versace." *Expensive pants to be dragging around in the mud*, she thought.

"I just wanted something to glance through while I ate," she responded, somewhat laconically.

"Oh. Which one are you reading?"

Taking her time, D. chewed and swallowed the bit of sandwich that she had in her mouth. "I guess it's called 'History.'"

Holden thought for a moment and then informed her, "I don't think I ever read that one. It might be from when he was younger or something. I like to read the stuff that he wrote later. I think it was Jake who told me once that the better educated somebody is the more value is in the thing that they write."

Though attempting to appear as if she weren't initiating a conversation, D. told him that she didn't think that was always true.

"Of course not," said Holden. "Nothing's always true."

They both looked as footsteps on the stairs turned out to be Martin's. Holden waved his hand. "Hey, Martin. How was your goddam winter?"

Without answering, Martin offered an incomplete wave and nodded his way into the kitchen.

"He's the type of guy that never likes to answer you when you ask him a straight forward question," Holden explained, turning back to D. "You know," he began, "I was thinking about you leaving, and I was wondering if I could give you my address or something. Or if we could set up a place where you could write something or like scratch it into a telephone pole or something."

"Why?"

"Well, what I wanted to know. I mean, what I've been thinking about is whether as you're driving away you'll feel like you're disappearing or something every time you turn onto a different street. What I'm trying to say is, I always think that even though you keep taking smaller and smaller roads when you come here and the trees get thicker and all, at least you're coming someplace and not going away, but when you *leave* a place... well it's kind of spooky, but you feel like you're not going anywhere, just sort of... well... disappearing."

"Sounds like you don't need me to write anything to you."

"I don't. It's just that... that I've never asked anybody here, because I always think that they'll think that I'm doing everything backassward and not according to the rules and all. But since I'll never see you again, I'd kind of like to know if you feel the same way. All you'd have to do is write a 'yes' or 'no' in a special place that I'll know to look."

"I don't think so."

"Oh. OK. I was just asking." Holden pulled out a chair and threw the box that was on it under the table. He sat down.

D. started eating her sandwich again. *Weirdo*, she thought.

After a moment, Holden started talking again. "If you leave, you know, you might get all depressed because you'll keep wondering what's happening to us all."

Looking at him out of the tops of her eyes, D. told him that she'd take the risk.

"If you're into that sort of thing, then I guess you could do that. It's just that, if you don't stay

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here and meet everybody, and get to *like* everybody so much that you plan to come back, you'll always be wondering where the hell we all go when it's winter. You'll know that we couldn't just stay here and *ignore* the rest of our lives and all. I mean, we don't just *die* or hibernate or anything, and you'll start to wonder if we don't die or hibernate or something, or stay here, then we must be somewhere doing *something*, and you'll wonder what it is. It won't be like a funeral where you can get in your car and never come back and always know that whoever it was that you left there will always be right there because they're dead."

D. swallowed a chunk of bread. She often had trouble eating when people insisted on talking to her while she ate. As she bit into the sandwich again, Nick strode through the front door and across the hall.

"Hey Nick," called Holden.

Nick waved and started up the stairs, but turned and walked to where he could see D. "So, are you leaving us?" he asked her.

"Yes, I'm just waiting for Huck to show up."

Nick nodded. "Well, it was delightful to meet you. I don't suppose I could charm you into staying?" His smile was debonair.

Smiling back, D. told him that she didn't think so.

"Well, then. Have a safe trip home," he said, bowed, and sprung up the stairs.

Holden waited until he could no longer hear Nick's footsteps and then said, "He's always in a big goddam hurry. It's like he's runnin' away from something. He's probably only going to go fix himself up or something, like he wants to be all handsome as he runs away. And for who? For nobody, that's who."

D. ate the last of her sandwich.

"But on the other hand," Holden started up again, "if you were to stay until you thought that you might come back next year, then its like everything stayed just where it was when you come back. I mean everybody is just the same, that is. It's always like that. You don't even need to put everybody in a glass case like they have at the Museum of Natural History. They're the same

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because they *want* to be. It's like that carousel in Central Park that always played the same music until somebody came along and *changed* it on everybody. Hell, that guy must have thought he was being pretty goddam funny or something. Certain things shouldn't be changed."

"I agree," D. vouchsafed an answer. "Now if you'll excuse me..."

"You can go if you really want to. Who's going to stop you? Not me. It's up to you. Just don't be stupid and tell everybody or write about us."

"Don't worry," she smirked, "your secret's safe with me."

"Oh. I don't give a damn about that. You could draw a goddam map to the house if you wanted to. I'm just saying for you. Because maybe if you do you'll start missing everybody."

D. threw the notebook back into the box and stood up. "Excuse me," she said as she walked past Holden into the entranceway.

"Hold on," Holden stopped her. "There's something I want to show you."

D. looked toward the kitchen and then at the plate in her hand. "What?" she asked tersely. Getting down on his hands and knees, Holden began to crawl under the table, moving a chair out of his way. "It's under here," he said.

A "pfff" slipped between D.'s lips, and she said, "I'm not going to crawl around on the floor with you."

"Why not?"

"I'm just not going to."

Mumbling something about people never wanting to crawl around on the floor with somebody when they asked them just to show them something *interesting*, Holden told her, "Alright. You don't have to if you squat down a little."

D. shook her head with an annoyed look on her face, but she did as he had requested. The table was of an old sort, with intricate designs running around its edge and a veritable web of interlocking beams and supports. She remembered playing with her dolls under a similar, but smaller, table at her grandfather's house when she was a little girl. She almost had an impulse to slip under the table, if only to better picture the strange look of giant grown-up legs from a child's perspective.

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“It’s right here,” said Holden. He was pointing to something carved into a crossbeam.

Squinting a little, D. could make out what it said. It said “Fuck You.” She stood up, not quite understanding her intense irritation, and stepped out of the room, sorry that she had been so soft as to humor Holden. “Lovely,” she said.

Holden scampered out from under the table. “Well / didn’t write it! That’s for goddam sure.”

“I’m not saying that you did,” said D. without turning. She was halfway to the kitchen.

Holden stopped at the edge of the entrance hall and shouted, “Glad to’ve met you.”

A few feet away from the kitchen door, D. stopped and turned around. “What did you say?”

Looking slightly flustered, Holden repeated himself and then added, “You know, you have to say that stuff if you want to stay alive.”

D. went into the kitchen.

The sun is directly over head and the wind has increased to a mild pitch. The trees sway, but in contrary directions as if there are several breezes all blowing their allotted acres in whichever direction they please.

The house groans as the front door swings open and two figures step out. The first is an older man, graying slightly, but dressed and smiling as if he were a boy. Behind Huck, D. glides down the porch steps onto the soft lawn. The growing grass caresses her ankles.

“Is’t this way?” Huck asks.

“I believe so,” D. responds.

Nodding, Huck holds a branch up so that D. may walk under it, and they disappear through the same bush through which John led her not so long ago in the opposite direction.

In one of the southern windows on the ground floor, a curtain flutters even though the window is closed and the breeze cannot reach it to set it into motion.

Chapter 18

As the sun peeked slyly over the ocean at the fleeing moon, the machine whirred. Its metal slats scraped an occasional rasp against the walls along the sides of the mesh belt as they were dragged up and over and under and back into the salt water. The water frothed along the edges of the stainless steel tub and spun irritable ripples along the surface; underneath, it was roiled by the belt and twirled in a current as it was sucked through a tube and spit out onto the wooden planks. Rubber boots slopped across the slimy boards followed by the metal wheels of mechanized yellow palette-jacks piled high with empty waxed cardboard boxes that were being tossed in rows along the sides of the dock. Gnarled loops of thick rope thudded against the lids of the boxes and set them rocking as the cords slid down posts and tightened into the splintered grooves. The sides of the boat thumped against the worn wood and made the whole dock shudder. A cloud of smoke billowed out invisibly against the dark gray sky as the boat's engine gave a final thrust against the tide and was cut off. Huge, white, and stained buckets swung over the boat on ropes and floated into the hole in the deck, disappearing into the hold. They tottered as they reappeared, spilling whiting onto the deck, into the water, and onto the dock. The fish were dumped into a chute and rolled through the lime-colored plastic tubes in waves of cool salt water. The whiting churned over and around each other as the chute dipped and curved and emptied them out into the tub of the steel machine where they seethed with the water and were caught by the metal slats, which carried them over the mesh metal belt and dumped those that it did not shred onto the scale-encrusted cull-board. Bodies with torn and spilling guts were plucked from the surge of fish and tossed into the grimy water of the harbor, where the seagulls finished the disembowelment that the machine had begun. The whole fish were pushed along by a rubber glove and fell into a chain-linked basket on a rusting scale. In response to an uttered "yawp," the glove held up the flow of whiting while Nathaniel lifted the sixty-pound basket and poured its contents into a cardboard box, and the box was whisked away.

The men chattered as they worked, spilling rude jokes and spitting barely sensical exclama-

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tions into the air. They shouted to each other about drinking and gambling and women. They tossed good-spirited insults to their friends and roared boldfaced lies of rumors along the line. Nobody believed any of it. The red-eyed box-maker shouted a boorish question to the lanky palette-wrapper, who sneered it at the jack-ass, middle-aged and muscular, who laughed it in a husky voice to the chunky, charismatic foreman. The foreman whispered it to the assistant foreman, who loitered like a shifty toady by his side, and the assistant foreman shouted it like a dirty joke to the boxing team, who passed it around among themselves — from the stocky palette-loader to Nathaniel, the dumper, to the dark and jovial cull-board man, who was missing a finger on his left hand — and then cheered it down the dock in unison to the old, gnarled winch-man. The winch-man cackled it to the bucket-catcher. The bucket-catcher pushed it to the fishermen on the deck of the boat along with an empty bucket, and it followed the bucket through the hole to the lumper in the hold, coming back with a snide answer that followed the fish, the product, back down the line, anticipated with and pursued by roguish mirth.

Meanwhile, another boat docked on the opposite side of the pier, and banter shot back and forth across the boards like cannonballs. The sun was well into morning when the first boat was unloaded, and the second cut loose and lurched across the water to take its place. The dock workers took quick breaks, some staying behind to take a less onerous position on the line, though rank or brawn was likely to supersede the move, and some returning with the faint smell of brandy lingering in the air around their heads.

The second boat was all fluke, flounder, monk, and dogfish. Less weight but more work. Huge green vats were dragged out onto the dock for the monk and dogs. The sun beat down upon Nathaniel, and he began to sweat as he lifted boxes of flatfish onto the palettes in layers of six, five high, eighteen hundred pounds of fish on each before the jack-ass took it away with his yellow machine and Nathaniel slammed another wooden palette against the boards.

Next came lunch. The tourists, a thinning crowd as Autumn overtook New England, passed more hastily now than they had just moments before, when they had slowed to watch the workers as if it wasn't work at all, but a reenactment in an authentic outdoor museum and the workers only

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actors who mimicked the motions of ancient dock-hands in the actual costumes of ages past just as others, elsewhere, took the roles of blacksmiths and candle-makers. Now the workers dropped their rubber overalls around their ankles and sat at a desiccated picnic table to eat and ogle the wives and daughters of passing men, who diverted their eyes and hustled their families along toward the ferry.

After lunch, the workers made their way reluctantly back to the dock, some by way of the bathroom, two by way of the ice room (again, lending a subtle spice to the air when they emerged), to find a boat waiting to unload lobsters and stone crabs. A cloud was spreading across the sky and the wind picked up, putting a chill in the air.

Now that they had eaten and relaxed, and because lobsters and crabs are packed more lightly and make for slower, more careful work, the wind seemed to freeze their sweat and sea soaked shirts against their skin, and one by one they slipped away to add layers of clothing. They knew, though, that they would strip it all again when they got into the groove of unloading the next boat, a big one that was already strapped the posts.

It was mid-afternoon by the time Nathaniel paused to take off his heavy flannel shirt, and he had just slipped his hands into his grimy rubber gloves when the foreman stuck his head out of the office window and shouted that Nathaniel had a visitor.

Someone said, loud enough for all to hear, “See that? Once yer famous y’ain’t no good for workin’; can’t put t’gether a whole day ‘n less’n a week.”

Everybody laughed, including Nathaniel, and they all laughed again when the dark-skinned cull-board man with the missing finger yelled out, “Herry up ‘n sign yer ahtographs, boy, an’ get yer ass back here. Theh’s work ta do!”

Nathaniel slipped off his gloves as he stepped inside the barn-like building that housed the office. He could hear the thirty-five inch television on which the foremen and their boss liked to watch basketball games. He walked toward the sound but stopped when a familiar voice called out his name from behind him.

He turned and said, “Holden! What are you doing here?”

Holden shuffled his feet on the new wood floor, still covered with sawdust, as if he had more

of a confession than a request to make. Then he swung right into his pitch, “Listen Nathaniel. I’ve come a long way to do you a favor, and I’m not gonna insult you by beating around the bush.”

“Well it’s mighty fine to see you, too,” Nathaniel said, smiling because he wanted it to be an ambiguous joke.

“My father runs *Ethos* magazine. Have you heard of it?”

“Yeah, who hasn...”

“Well your book’s really taking off with our readers, and it would really be a great promotional tool for you to let me write an interview with you.”

“What... wait... I, I haven’t been looking to do any promotional interviews.”

“Exactly!” Holden exclaimed as if his point had been made and the matter settled. “That’s why nobody has printed it yet. And I wanna be the first.”

Nathaniel shoved his gloves in the pockets of the jeans that he wore under his rubber overalls and looked at Holden with bewildered eyes that hinted, though only slightly, that he foresaw impending helplessness. “Despite the fact that you’ve appeared from nowhere and sprung this on me without showing the slightest interest in visiting with me, Holden, I appreciate what you want to do for me, but it’s a path that I don’t want to start walking. I want to let the book do what it has in it to do on its own, but without involving me.”

Appearing to rear up a bit, Holden took the tone of an elder brother, “Nathaniel, I know you think of me as a kid, but I’ve seen enough to know that one of two things will happen: either the book will lose steam without promotional pushes from you, or it’ll take off anyway and drag you along.” Then, poking his left hand with his right pointer finger, “You have to get control now or you’ll lose it altogether, and if you start it off with a friend, you can be sure to start it off in a good way.”

“No.”

Holden threw his hands in the air, “Why are you being so stubborn?”

“I’m not being stubborn,” Nathaniel replied, keeping his composure though he was slightly displaced from reality by the rapid pace at which Holden moved in his thoughts, changing, entirely,

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the mood of the day for Nathaniel in mere seconds, “I’ve given this a lot of thought, and have made up my mind to stay out of it. Even the fact that it was published had nothing to do with me.”

Holden laughed sardonically, “Nothing to do with you?” He laughed. “You wrote the goddam thing!”

Nathaniel shook his head with an expression that confirmed his words, “Believe what you want, but I’m not going to change my mind. I’m sorry you came all this way just to find it out.”

With his demeanor making the transition from advisor to helpless friend to fretting child, Holden first shook his head, then, turning his back on Nathaniel, stomped his foot, finally flailing his arms from over his head to his sides, where they slapped his thighs. Nathaniel watched the transformation patiently.

With his temper petering out as if being flung off in pieces with each wave of an arm, Holden turned to face Nathaniel. “Well if you won’t do it for your stupid self, why don’t you do it for me?”

“What difference does it make to you?”

Holden bowed his head, preparing to make a confession, “Listen... I’m the owner’s son, and I haven’t really had a big story or idea yet, so nobody really takes me seriously. And I... I’m just sick of feeling like everybody is talking behind my back and thinking that I’m getting an easy ride. I mean, I may not be a bigshot reporter or nothing, with all the stars ringing my phone off the hook or great as hell stories falling into my lap, but I do work.”

Nathaniel was reticent to offer too much consolation, but tried to present a noncommittal comfort by saying, “Holden, I’m sure you’ll find something big if you keep at it long enough.”

“But you could be it.” His confidence was rebuilding. “I mean, if you gave me an interview I’m sure other things would follow. All it takes is one break, you know that.”

“No, I disagree. It takes a long time and hard work.”

Holden’s confidence slipped and his temper splashed up, “Oh whatta you know? Everything’s come to you on a platter. You don’t even want to do the work of an interview.”

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“It’s not that.”

“It *is* that! All you do is throw your fish around all winter and then sit in the woods picking your nose all summer, then somebody publishes a book you wrote and people are talking about you like you’re the next... the next J.D. goddam Salinger, and you won’t even help out a friend. Who wants a friend like that? I’d help you out if I was this big famous author and all.”

“Holden, I’m sorry, I just don’t want to...”

“To go down that path, I know. You said that already. Can’t you think of something new to say for Chrissakes? It’s a miracle you finished a book at all!” Holden stomped his foot and put his hands on his hips, saying, “Well, I didn’t want to have to do it, but if you’re not going to help me out I don’t have a choice.”

As if his ears had perked up, Nathaniel’s eyes flashed, and in a harsh tone he asked, knowing that his was precisely the expected reaction, “What do you mean?”

“Oh you know what I mean. I saw the way you used to act, and you can’t tell me that there isn’t a world of dirt out there on you. That’d be an even *bigger* story, and you know it. I wasn’t going to do it because I thought you were my friend and all, even though I knew it would be a better story.”

“You wouldn’t know how to begin looking,” Nathaniel said, getting angry.

“Oh I’ve read your notebooks. I know where to start, and you can’t stop me.”

“You better bet I can stop you! If you so much as...”

The foreman stepped out of the office looking large and imposing in the dark corridor, “Hey Nate, is this guy giving you a problem?”

Holden raised his hands in a defensive, dismissive gesture and said, “No. No problem. I was just leaving. I have to catch a train to New Jersey. Nathaniel, I’ll see you later.”

With that, as quickly as he had appeared with his tornado plea, Holden slipped out the door and was gone. Nathaniel was about to chase after him, but paused as the foreman spoke. “Is everything alright?”

Going slack, Nathaniel responded in a distant voice, “Yeah, he can go to New Jersey, but I

don't think he'll know what to do once he's there."

A car horn tooted, and Nathaniel heard the sound of tires trying to peel out on gravel. "Yeah," he said, "he's nothing to worry about."

The foreman slapped him on the back and said, "Whatever you say, Nate, but let me know if I can do anything for you."

Nathaniel stands looking out the doorway as the foreman walks back to the office and to the television. The sound of disparate drops of rain begins to reverberate through the empty wooden room. Going out into the fresh air, Nathaniel crosses to the storage room and emerges wearing a plastic raincoat. He looks at the sky as if refreshed by the slight drops that fall onto his face and slide down his neck.

He walks out onto the dock, the other workers brushing by him as they use the rain as an excuse for a break, if only one long enough to put on rain gear. With the dock momentarily cleared, Nathaniel is free to choose a station, and instead of trying to get away with taking one of the easier ones, he stands ready in a position that nobody will begrudge him. Ready to dump baskets.