

J. D. Salinger is Dead

by

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The pebbles hitting David's window pulled him out of a psychedelic dream about a goldfish and dark monks. The goldfish had been speaking, he thought, and the dark monks were deaf mutes clicking stones with their fingernails in a kind of Morse code.

David had to swim back up to reality. He stared at the blue numbers on his clock, trying to read them through the blur of his half-opened eyes.

By the time the next pebble clicked at his window, David had already forgotten the time that was displayed on the clock. He instinctively reached for his pack of cigarettes hidden underneath his mattress and once that was solidly in his right hand, he peered out the window.

Sally stood on the wet lawn, one floor below. She wore sweat pants and a long sleeve T-shirt. Her long dark hair was in a ponytail and her arm was cocked, ready to toss another pebble.

David motioned her to stay and remain quiet. Without even knowing he had done so, David placed an unlit cigarette in his mouth. He crept down the stairs and out the front door.

“Psst. Hey,” he called to Sally.

She was looking around towards the back.

“Hey,” she said in a loud whisper, “do you want to go for a drive?”

David smiled and shook his head.

Sally bugged her eyes out at him to ask *what?*

“If I wasn’t going to say yes to whatever you were asking, why would I even get out of bed?”

Sally planted a loud smacker on his cheek and ruffled his already messed up hair. As her arm came down, she pulled out his cigarette, tossed it on the dewy lawn, and ran away with an odd laughter.

David laughed, too, and called after her with mock anger in his voice. He picked up the cigarette, examined it, and chased after his girl. In addition to his sleeping clothes (sweat shorts and a stained, white, sleeveless T-shirt), David had on a pair of plastic flip-flops which gave him no traction at all while running on the nighttime grass. “Wait up.”

He made it to the curb and saw Sally leaning against her rustic-looking yellow Honda and looking bored. And then looking a little sad. Her previous laughter and smile had been but a flash in time.

“Are you OK?” he asked.

“Get in.” And Sally got in and didn’t even look back to see if David would do the same. She started the engine before David opened the passenger door.

“Come on,” she said. Sally peeled out and they were on their way.

“What’s this all about?” David asked and touched her shoulder.

“Don’t, I’m driving.”

David held the wet cigarette in his mouth and patted himself in search of his lighter. “Damn.”

“I just wanted to talk is all,” Sally said. “I couldn’t sleep, I finished reading *Nine Stories*, and just wanted to get out is all.”

“Uh-huh. I seemed to have forgot my lighter—”

“No smoking in my car anyway.”

David lowered the window a crack and threw the damp cigarette out into the passing night. “What are you listening to anyway?”

“The Smiths,” she said. The sound was turned down low. “I downloaded it last night. I was thinking what you said about music being better back then and that if you could, you’d have chosen to grow up in the Eighties and—”

“Or the Sixties.”

“Or the Sixties, but the Eighties is what stuck with me and I know you like the Smiths, so I thought I’d give it a try.”

“I haven’t heard this one,” David said.

The roads were empty and the darkness complete. It was like they were the only two beings alive in the world. David gave a big yawn. Something about a goldfish and monks entered his mind. The cold air rushing through the partially-opened window was helping him wake up, though.

“I can’t believe you haven’t read *Nine Stories* until now. I mean you read everything else first.”

“Ever since you went on your Salinger binge after he died, I thought I’d give it a try, too,” Sally said.

“But you read *Nine Stories* last.” David bent over and laughed.

Sally looked at him out of the corner of her eye and flashed that smile of hers again. “I love your laugh,” she said.

“Thank you.” David found that a good laugh had done more to wake him up than a yawn or the cold air did. “What’d you think?”

“You were right, a couple of them bored me.” Sally scratched her nose.

She didn’t really say anything else, though, and David stared at her. He had fallen in love with her petite nose and cute little ears. Well, it was other things, too, but he liked to stare at her and study her features. She was worried, though. Nervous maybe. David opened the glove box to look for matches.

“You’re not even listening to me,” Sally said.

“I am.” David slammed the glove box shut. “It’s just that you haven’t said anything since you said a couple of the stories were boring.”

“That’s right,” she said, “but they were mostly wonderful, so . . . so Salinger, you know?”

“I know. I’m glad you liked them.”

“I didn’t say I liked them,” she said. She looked over to David with a smirk on her face. “Not exactly.”

“You’re always trying to rile me up, kid.” David kissed her right temple.

“Not while I’m driving,” Sally said and pushed him back.

“Then pull over.”

“Not yet, I want to keep going.”

“Well, you’re not going to have an accident. It’s just me and you here and the empty world.”

“Yeah, well, I need to concentrate sometimes.”

The music changed to a song he did know. He reached out to turn up the volume. Sally opened her mouth as if she was about to say something, but then pressed her lips together.

“This is a good one,” David said.

It was, and Sally liked it, too, and with the music blaring, she sped up. They were on a two-lane highway now and there was still not a soul around. The trees that they were about to pass were a blur in the headlights.

Now that he was awake, David rolled up his window. He looked straight ahead, reclined his seat just a bit, and enjoyed the ride. They were moving fast, and it was good to be the only ones alive in the darkness.

The car began to drift to the right. They crossed the white line.

“Sally?” David looked over at her. Her eyes were open, both hands on the wheel.

“Sorry,” she said and corrected their path.

“If you’re sleepy, maybe we should pull over.”

“I’m okay.” She pressed her lips together again. “I liked the one about Teddy.”

“Teddy . . .”

“You know that really spiritual kid on the cruise with his parents.”

“Yeah, yeah.” David sat up straight again. “The last one . . . then at the end with the swimming pool . . .”

“He was kind of detached, you know,” Sally said, “like nothing affected him. I wish I could be like that, detached, you know.”

“Yeah, I could—”

“Don’t you sometimes think this world is too much?” she asked.

“Sure,” David said, “but wasn’t that kid just *a bit* creepy?”

“Maybe, I don’t know, but . . . do you believe in reincarnation?” Sally kept her hands at the top of the steering wheel and looked over at David who, at the sound of the question, renewed his silence. “Don’t leave me hanging, kid,” Sally said.

“You just surprised me is all. Kid.” David tried to smile at her, but he didn’t think she saw it. “No. I hate to be scientific about it, but how would the whole reincarnation thing work with the changes in populations over the years, animal, human . . .”

“Serious?”

“Serious, sorry, kid, that’s just what I think, but I’m open to your thoughts on the subject. I don’t know anything for sure.”

“I think it’s kind of silly,” Sally said, “but still wouldn’t it be something?”

David drummed his fingers on the armrest and stared out the passenger window. “Yeah, it would. To never really die like that.” David slipped another cigarette into his mouth and damned himself again for not grabbing his lighter.

The trees ahead of them were all lit up, then they blurred past and entered the darkness behind them.

“I’d be a songbird, you know,” Sally said, “in case you were wondering.”

“A songbird?”

“Beautiful voice, bringing joy to people in the morning as they wake up.”

“No shit,” David said, “that’s really beautiful. You know, you’re my song bird.”

Sally shoved him in the shoulder. “Don’t get corny on me.”

“I’m not.” David laughed, though. “You are. If it wasn’t for you, who knows, maybe I’d kill myself.”

“Really?” Sally said, but something had left her voice when she asked. It came out as a serious whisper.

“Are you all right?” David asked. He could smell the virgin cigarette in his mouth just waiting to be lit.

“Would you, would you commit suicide?” Sally asked. Her arms were trembling as she grasped the wheel.

“It’s all right,” David said. He touched her shoulder again. This time she didn’t pull away. “Let’s pull over.”

A tear made its way down Sally’s cheek, but she was forcing herself to smile. A stuttered laugh came out from her mouth, too. A turnout was ahead, and she began to slow down. She pulled off, stopped, turned off the engine and the lights. The music was silent.

“I wouldn’t kill myself, no,” David said.

“Never?” Sally asked. “Not even if World War Three started? Not even if you lost everyone you love? Not even if you were in extreme pain at the state of the world?”

“I don’t think I would,” David said, “I mean, there’s always a chance a new Salinger story would be released and then I’d miss it.” He tried to laugh at his own joke, but only a silent breath escaped his mouth.

Sally looked at him with something like disappointment in her eyes. But, really, it was hard to tell what was in those eyes with the darkness all around.

“How about you?” David asked. “What’s on your mind, kid?”

“No,” she said—almost too quickly. “I wouldn’t and I can’t figure out why Seymour did either.”

“Ah,” David said and held his unlit cigarette between his fingers. “Seymour. I don’t get it either, but I think Salinger regretted ever killing him. Really, I do. Maybe that’s why all he ever wrote about afterwards was Seymour.”

“That’s why he lived to a hundred,” Sally said.

“Huh? Well, not quite a hundred.”

“To punish himself for killing Seymour, he lived as long as he could.” And then Sally’s voice turned into a whisper again. “How can anyone stand to live so long?”

“I suppose life gets better when you’re older.” David’s words were flat.

The two stared out into the darkness.

“A perfect night for bananafish,” Sally said and continued to stare.

“Seriously, did something happen to you before you came over?”

“Lots of things have been on my mind is all . . . I’ll get to it, I want to be happy, really.”

“You’re usually happy, that’s why I asked.”

Sally stared at him in the darkness again. She put one hand on his chest and with the other she twirled a lock of his hair that was beside his left ear.

“Why does Salinger get censored so much?” Sally asked.

“Probably because of all that ‘fuck you’ business . . . and maybe because Holden visits a prostitute. I don’t know. It’s irrational as hell, but people do it.”

“Yeah, but Salinger was against all the ‘fuck yous’ in the world, so why would they ban it?”

“I don’t know. I just know he’s dead.”

Sally stopped playing with his hair. “Do you really think he has all these stories hidden away somewhere?”

“That’s the rumor. Who knows if we’ll ever see them, though?” David kept his hands on his lap. The cigarette was poised between two fingers and standing up. “The only censorship that makes sense is if the author censors himself, you know?”

“That seems silly.”

“You really think so? I mean Stephen King took *Rage* out of print.”

“Well, I guess he has that right, but I still have a copy.” Sally’s laugh in the darkness seemed a little unstable. “And don’t tell me you wouldn’t kill to get those Salinger stories.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Sally moved back a little.

David gave out a quick breath, a shadow of a laugh. “It’s coming back to me now,” he said. “Weird.”

“What’s that?”

“Just before you woke me up, I was having this dream.”

“What—”

“Shh!” It was David’s turn to stare out into the blackness. And it really was black—pitch black—outside. Maybe it wasn’t the whole world that was asleep, maybe it was them. “It was in some mountains somewhere, Japan maybe, in the East. And there were all these monks around, in this tremendous circle around a big pond. Each one had a stone in front of them—their fingernails were long, too. Their heads were shaved and they wore orange robes. They didn’t say a word, though. I don’t know if they could even speak, but they clicked on the stones with their fingernails in some sort of code.”

David put the cigarette to his mouth again and failed to even notice it was unlit still.

“But what they were communicating wasn’t to me. It was to the fish.”

“Fish?” Sally asked.

“There was this big goldfish, a koi maybe, the biggest goddam goldfish you’ve ever seen. It filled the whole pond, and the monks were there to protect it, ward off anyone who would seek it, but it wasn’t up to them, I don’t think. They were saying to the fish, ‘Stay hidden, don’t show yourself.’ Weird, but it was so cool and so beautiful. Gold and white and orange shimmering in the water, but I couldn’t really see it. I knew it was there, but I couldn’t see it, you know?”

David wished for his lighter. And after a long moment of silence, Sally touched David’s shoulder.

“I change my answer,” she said. And her voice was sweet and happy again. All of a sudden. Life went in and out of her in mere instants.

“What answer?” David asked.

“The songbird, reincarnation. No, I’d be that fish instead. The unseen goldfish.”

Sally held a hand up to her mouth now.

“Would I be able to see you?” David asked.

“Maybe, kid.” And then, “David?”

He sat up straight again. He was always losing his posture somehow. “Yeah?”

“David, make love to me.”

David opened his mouth. No words came out.

Sally spoke in not quite a rush. “I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, and I think we should . . . you know?”

“Um, yeah,” David said. “We can plan a really special night and . . .”

“No, now,” Sally said, and then she let out a big sigh and a laugh. “It feels so good to finally say it.”

“Is that what all of this has been about?”

David could see her nod in the shadows of the faint moonlight that now peaked through the forest. The light grew, and revealed an approaching car that disappeared in another instant.

“Are you sure?” David asked. “Here?”

“Don’t you want to?”

“Yes, I want to. I . . .”

“I love you, David, let’s do this, let’s share our love.”

“I love you, too.”

He kissed her softly at first. He kissed her cheek and tasted the saltiness of a leftover tear almost dried.

They went slowly at first, and then the kissing got heavier, and they wriggled their way to the backseat. David's cigarette had been dropped somewhere between here and there. His hands were full with other things now. He maneuvered on top of her. They were creating so much heat now. Invisible heat waves emitted between them. He kissed her neck and down to her breasts. And he tasted the saltiness in her sweat.

(The car rocked, but not from them. Another vehicle passed on the road and shook the Honda.)

And Sally kissed him, too. And he was just as salty and he was strong. And when it came time for the act, Sally was trembling and saying things under her breath. David couldn't make out what they were. He couldn't really concentrate on listening right now.

It was both their first times, and it didn't last long, but it was finished, and they were both satisfied in their own ways. They held each other for a while.

"Thank you for that," David said.

Sally nodded. A quiet peaceful look on her face. She whispered some more.

"What's that?" David asked.

"Huh?"

"What were you saying all that time?"

"Huh?" Sally said again. "There are matches in my purse if you really want that cigarette now, big boy."

David couldn't stifle his laugh.

“Thank you,” Sally said, “for that.”

“It really was good. I’m sure the next time—”

“Shh!”

They stepped out of the car after reassembling their clothes. They leaned back against the hood and looked up at the stars that peaked through the treetops.

“I needed that,” Sally said. “The last thing I needed. Thank you so much, David.”

The forest was lighting up again. Another vehicle was approaching from behind them. David’s attention went to his right. He thought he had just seen a deer among the trees. “Hey, Sally, do you see it?”

But Sally wasn’t there anymore. She stepped out into the road at the last instant.

It was a truck that hit her. The driver probably never saw her, but David did. He saw it all.

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