

Salinger Pays Caulfield a Visit

by Terry DeHart

The old man climbs through a hole in his fence. He trudges away, ignoring the complaints of his arthritic knees. No journalists wait out front. It's been months since he's seen any of the goddam nosy bastards. He leaves the gated compound behind him

Out in the world again, pretending to belong. Trench coat and hat in the rain. Taking a bus downtown. Feeling the voices of women and hearing the silence of men.

Then walking the streets, looking at all the boys smoking cigarettes. He bypasses groups of them. He's looking for the boy who smokes alone. The one who walks quickly and talks to himself about goddam this and that. The one who is skinny and flighty and smokes far too much for his own good.

And he finds him, the boy so thin he doesn't cast a shadow. Smoking and looking jealously at the other boys who go about in groups, and at the boys who have nice physiques and do sexy things with girls. He's a goddam mess of a kid.

The old man follows as the boy goes around town, never seeming to touch down long enough to get what he needs. Going to see an old teacher and then rushing out fast. Breaking into the apartment where his family lives and coming out with nothing but cigarettes. Cigarettes and tears. Faster and faster. Walking without a coat in the cold rain. Getting a bad cough. Winding himself up and then down, finally, in an alley.

The boy slumps against a brick wall, looking up at a faded advertisement for a dry goods company that probably went out of business about a thousand years ago. He pulls a sharp knife from his pocket and makes shallow practice slashes up and down his wrists. He's about to put the knife away when the old man stands over him.

"Here now. Let me help you."

The old man pulls the knife from the boy's hand. He pats the boy's mop of hair with his mottled hand. He tries to remember how he once loved the boy, but it's a distance he can't stretch. The old man puts the knife blade against the boy's forearm and slashes the artery to ribbons.

He watches the words leak out. Rivulets of letters form a brilliant puddle on the ground. He tries to sop them up with his stained handkerchief so he'll have something to take home with him, but the glowing mess crawls up the boy's leg and flows uphill, back into the wound. The boy is alive. Immortal. Unstoppable.

The old man returns to his gated compound. The phone rings, but he doesn't have the voice to answer it. The caller hangs up without leaving a message, and the old man has no choice but to seal up the last hole he will ever cut in that tall goddam fence.

