

## OLYMPIADS SCHOOL/GRADE 10 ENGLISH/HANDOUT 4

Read an excerpt from *The Catcher in the Rye* and discuss it by making use of the prompts and suggestions below. If there is time, read an excerpt from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (in the “Supplementary Reading” section) and compare and contrast the character portrayal.

### How to Analyze a Character(s)

#### *Setting:*

Where does the story take place?

#### *Description:*

Appearance: what does the character look like?

Personality: How would you describe the character's personality?

Protagonist or Antagonist?

#### *Insights:*

Thoughts: What are the character's most important thoughts?

Feelings: What are the characters' most important feelings?

#### *Development:*

Problem/Conflict: What is the character's problem at the beginning of the story?

Goal: What does the character want to happen by the end of the story?

Outcome: How does the end of the story affect the character?

#### *Statements and Actions:*

Statements: What is the most important or memorable thing the character says?

Actions: What is the character's most important action?

Interactions: How does the character get along with other characters?

#### *My Impressions:*

Like: What do you like most about this character?

Dislike: What do you dislike most about this character?

Personal Connection: Who does this character remind you of and why?

#### *Bigger Questions:*

How does the setting affect how the character:

- Speaks
- Acts
- Interacts
- Thinks
- Feels

What events foreshadow the future?

- How does the setting contribute to this?
- How do the character(s) actions contribute to this?

*In the End:*

Is the character Round? Flat? Dynamic? Static?  
How do you know?

**Four types of characterization:**

- Physical description.
- Speech and actions.
- Direct comment from the narrator.
- Speech and actions of other characters.

*Four types of characters:*

- Round: A complex and fully developed character.
- Dynamic: A character that develops throughout the story.
- Flat: A character described by one or two traits.
- Static: A character that does not change from the beginning of the story to its end.

*Five ways to analyze characters:*

- Motivation: What causes the character to act?
- Behavior: What does the character do?
- Consequences: What results from the character's behavior?
- Responsibility: Is the character held accountable for his/her actions?
- Expectations: Are the reader's expectations fulfilled or challenged? Why is this so?

*Questions for further analysis:*

- If they were a shape?
- If they were a car?
- If they were a weather system?
- If they were an article of clothing?
- If they were a book genre?
- If they were music/song?
- If they were a sport?
- If they were a piece of furniture?
- If they were an element in nature?
- If they were a food?
- If they were a number?
- If they were a sound?
- If they were an instrument?

*Most Importantly:*

- What is the author's purpose in creating this particular character in this particular manner?

THE CATCHER IN THE RYE  
by J.D. Salinger

TO  
MY  
MOTHER

1

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. In the first place, that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're nice and all--I'm not saying that--but they're also touchy as hell. Besides, I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas just before I got pretty run-down and had to come out here and take it easy. I mean that's all I told D.B. about, and he's my brother and all. He's in Hollywood. That isn't too far from this crumby place, and he comes over and visits me practically every week end. He's going to drive me home when I go home next month maybe. He just got a Jaguar. One of those little English jobs that can do around two hundred miles an hour. It cost him damn near four thousand bucks. He's got a lot of dough, now. He didn't use to. He used to be just a regular writer, when he was home. He wrote this terrific book of short stories, *The Secret Goldfish*, in case you never heard of him. The best one in it was "The Secret Goldfish." It was about this little kid that wouldn't let anybody look at his goldfish because he'd bought it with his own money. It killed me. Now he's out in Hollywood, D.B., being a prostitute. If there's one thing I hate, it's the movies. Don't even mention them to me.

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.

Anyway, it was the Saturday of the football game with Saxon Hall. The game with Saxon Hall was supposed to be a very big deal around Pencey. It was the last game

of the year, and you were supposed to commit suicide or something if old Pencey didn't win. I remember around three o'clock that afternoon I was standing way the hell up on top of Thomsen Hill, right next to this crazy cannon that was in the Revolutionary War and all. You could see the whole field from there, and you could see the two teams bashing each other all over the place. You couldn't see the grandstand too hot, but you could hear them all yelling, deep and terrific on the Pencey side, because practically the whole school except me was there, and scrawny and faggy on the Saxon Hall side, because the visiting team hardly ever brought many people with them.

There were never many girls at all at the football games. Only seniors were allowed to bring girls with them. It was a terrible school, no matter how you looked at it. I like to be somewhere at least where you can see a few girls around once in a while, even if they're only scratching their arms or blowing their noses or even just giggling or something. Old Selma Thurmer--she was the headmaster's daughter--showed up at the games quite often, but she wasn't exactly the type that drove you mad with desire. She was a pretty nice girl, though. I sat next to her once in the bus from Agerstown and we sort of struck up a conversation. I liked her. She had a big nose and her nails were all bitten down and bloody-looking and she had on those damn falsies that point all over the place, but you felt sort of sorry for her. What I liked about her, she didn't give you a lot of horse manure about what a great guy her father was. She probably knew what a phony slob he was.

The reason I was standing way up on Thomsen Hill, instead of down at the game, was because I'd just got back from New York with the fencing team. I was the goddam manager of the fencing team. Very big deal. We'd gone in to New York that morning for this fencing meet with McBurney School. Only, we didn't have the meet. I left all the foils and equipment and stuff on the goddam subway. It wasn't all my fault. I had to keep getting up to look at this map, so we'd know where to get off. So we got back to Pencey around two-thirty instead of around dinnertime. The whole team ostracized me the whole way back on the train. It was pretty funny, in a way.

The other reason I wasn't down at the game was because I was on my way to say good-by to old Spencer, my history teacher. He had the grippe, and I figured I probably wouldn't see him again till Christmas vacation started. He wrote me this note saying he wanted to see me before I went home. He knew I wasn't coming back to Pencey.

I forgot to tell you about that. They kicked me out. I wasn't supposed to come back after Christmas vacation on account of I was flunking four subjects and not applying myself and all. They gave me frequent warning to start applying myself--especially around midterms, when my parents came up for a conference with old Thurmer--but I didn't do it. So I got the ax. They give guys the ax quite frequently at Pencey. It has a very good academic rating, Pencey. It really does.

Anyway, it was December and all, and it was cold as a witch's teat, especially on top of that stupid hill. I only had on my reversible and no gloves or anything. The week before that, somebody'd stolen my camel's-hair coat right out of my room, with my fur-lined gloves right in the pocket and all. Pencey was full of crooks. Quite a few guys came from these very wealthy families, but it was full of crooks anyway. The more expensive a school is, the more crooks it has--I'm not kidding. Anyway, I kept standing next to that crazy cannon, looking down at the game and freezing my ass off. Only, I wasn't watching the game too much. What I was really hanging around for, I was trying to feel some kind

of a good-by. I mean I've left schools and places I didn't even know I was leaving them. I hate that. I don't care if it's a sad good-by or a bad goodby, but when I leave a place I like to know I'm leaving it. If you don't, you feel even worse.

I was lucky. All of a sudden I thought of something that helped make me know I was getting the hell out. I suddenly remembered this time, in around October, that I and Robert Tichener and Paul Campbell were chucking a football around, in front of the academic building. They were nice guys, especially Tichener. It was just before dinner and it was getting pretty dark out, but we kept chucking the ball around anyway. It kept getting darker and darker, and we could hardly see the ball any more, but we didn't want to stop doing what we were doing. Finally we had to. This teacher that taught biology, Mr. Zambesi, stuck his head out of this window in the academic building and told us to go back to the dorm and get ready for dinner. If I get a chance to remember that kind of stuff, I can get a good-by when I need one--at least, most of the time I can. As soon as I got it, I turned around and started running down the other side of the hill, toward old Spencer's house. He didn't live on the campus. He lived on Anthony Wayne Avenue.

I ran all the way to the main gate, and then I waited a second till I got my breath. I have no wind, if you want to know the truth. I'm quite a heavy smoker, for one thing--that is, I used to be. They made me cut it out. Another thing, I grew six and a half inches last year. That's also how I practically got t.b. and came out here for all these goddam checkups and stuff. I'm pretty healthy, though.

Anyway, as soon as I got my breath back I ran across Route 204. It was icy as hell and I damn near fell down. I don't even know what I was running for--I guess I just felt like it. After I got across the road, I felt like I was sort of disappearing. It was that kind of a crazy afternoon, terrifically cold, and no sun out or anything, and you felt like you were disappearing every time you crossed a road.

Boy, I rang that doorbell fast when I got to old Spencer's house. I was really frozen. My ears were hurting and I could hardly move my fingers at all. "C'mon, c'mon," I said right out loud, almost, "somebody open the door." Finally old Mrs. Spencer opened it. They didn't have a maid or anything, and they always opened the door themselves. They didn't have too much dough.

"Holden!" Mrs. Spencer said. "How lovely to see you! Come in, dear! Are you frozen to death?" I think she was glad to see me. She liked me. At least, I think she did.

Boy, did I get in that house fast. "How are you, Mrs. Spencer?" I said. "How's Mr. Spencer?"

"Let me take your coat, dear," she said. She didn't hear me ask her how Mr. Spencer was. She was sort of deaf.

She hung up my coat in the hall closet, and I sort of brushed my hair back with my hand. I wear a crew cut quite frequently and I never have to comb it much. "How've you been, Mrs. Spencer?" I said again, only louder, so she'd hear me.

"I've been just fine, Holden." She closed the closet door. "How have you been?" The way she asked me, I knew right away old Spencer'd told her I'd been kicked out.

"Fine," I said. "How's Mr. Spencer? He over his grippie yet?"

"Over it! Holden, he's behaving like a perfect--I don't know what. . . He's in his room, dear. Go right in."

They each had their own room and all. They were both around seventy years old, or even more than that. They got a bang out of things, though--in a half-assed way, of course. I know that sounds mean to say, but I don't mean it mean. I just mean that I used to think about old Spencer quite a lot, and if you thought about him too much, you wondered what the heck he was still living for. I mean he was all stooped over, and he had very terrible posture, and in class, whenever he dropped a piece of chalk at the blackboard, some guy in the first row always had to get up and pick it up and hand it to him. That's awful, in my opinion. But if you thought about him just enough and not too much, you could figure it out that he wasn't doing too bad for himself. For instance, one Sunday when some other guys and I were over there for hot chocolate, he showed us this old beat-up Navajo blanket that he and Mrs. Spencer'd bought off some Indian in Yellowstone Park. You could tell old Spencer'd got a big bang out of buying it. That's what I mean. You take somebody old as hell, like old Spencer, and they can get a big bang out of buying a blanket.

His door was open, but I sort of knocked on it anyway, just to be polite and all. I could see where he was sitting. He was sitting in a big leather chair, all wrapped up in that blanket I just told you about. He looked over at me when I knocked. "Who's that?" he yelled. "Caulfield? Come in, boy." He was always yelling, outside class. It got on your nerves sometimes.

The minute I went in, I was sort of sorry I'd come. He was reading the Atlantic Monthly, and there were pills and medicine all over the place, and everything smelled like Vicks Nose Drops. It was pretty depressing. I'm not too crazy about sick people, anyway. What made it even more depressing, old Spencer had on this very sad, ratty old bathrobe that he was probably born in or something. I don't much like to see old guys in their pajamas and bathrobes anyway. Their bumpy old chests are always showing. And their legs. Old guys' legs, at beaches and places, always look so white and unhairy. "Hello, sir," I said. "I got your note. Thanks a lot." He'd written me this note asking me to stop by and say good-by before vacation started, on account of I wasn't coming back. "You didn't have to do all that. I'd have come over to say good-by anyway."

"Have a seat there, boy," old Spencer said. He meant the bed.

I sat down on it. "How's your gripe, sir?"

"M'boy, if I felt any better I'd have to send for the doctor," old Spencer said. That knocked him out. He started chuckling like a madman. Then he finally straightened himself out and said, "Why aren't you down at the game? I thought this was the day of the big game."

"It is. I was. Only, I just got back from New York with the fencing team," I said. Boy, his bed was like a rock.

He started getting serious as hell. I knew he would. "So you're leaving us, eh?" he said.

"Yes, sir. I guess I am."

He started going into this nodding routine. You never saw anybody nod as much in your life as old Spencer did. You never knew if he was nodding a lot because he was thinking and all, or just because he was a nice old guy that didn't know his ass from his elbow.

"What did Dr. Thurmer say to you, boy? I understand you had quite a little chat."

"Yes, we did. We really did. I was in his office for around two hours, I guess."

"What'd he say to you?"

"Oh. . . well, about Life being a game and all. And how you should play it according to the rules. He was pretty nice about it. I mean he didn't hit the ceiling or anything. He just kept talking about Life being a game and all. You know."

"Life is a game, boy. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules."

"Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it."

Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right--I'll admit that. But if you get on the other side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game. "Has Dr. Thurmer written to your parents yet?" old Spencer asked me.

"He said he was going to write them Monday."

"Have you yourself communicated with them?"

"No, sir, I haven't communicated with them, because I'll probably see them Wednesday night when I get home."

"And how do you think they'll take the news?"

"Well. . . they'll be pretty irritated about it," I said. "They really will. This is about the fourth school I've gone to." I shook my head. I shake my head quite a lot. "Boy!" I said. I also say "Boy!" quite a lot. Partly because I have a lousy vocabulary and partly because I act quite young for my age sometimes. I was sixteen then, and I'm seventeen now, and sometimes I act like I'm about thirteen. It's really ironical, because I'm six foot two and a half and I have gray hair. I really do. The one side of my head--the right side--is full of millions of gray hairs. I've had them ever since I was a kid. And yet I still act sometimes like I was only about twelve. Everybody says that, especially my father. It's partly true, too, but it isn't all true. People always think something's all true. I don't give a damn, except that I get bored sometimes when people tell me to act my age. Sometimes I act a lot older than I am--I really do--but people never notice it. People never notice anything.

Old Spencer started nodding again. He also started picking his nose. He made out like he was only pinching it, but he was really getting the old thumb right in there. I guess he thought it was all right to do because it was only me that was in the room. I didn't care, except that it's pretty disgusting to watch somebody pick their nose.

Then he said, "I had the privilege of meeting your mother and dad when they had their little chat with Dr. Thurmer some weeks ago. They're grand people."

"Yes, they are. They're very nice."

Grand. There's a word I really hate. It's a phony. I could puke every time I hear it.

Then all of a sudden old Spencer looked like he had something very good, something sharp as a tack, to say to me. He sat up more in his chair and sort of moved around. It was a false alarm, though. All he did was lift the Atlantic Monthly off his lap and try to chuck it on the bed, next to me. He missed. It was only about two inches away, but he missed anyway. I got up and picked it up and put it down on the bed. All of a sudden then, I wanted to get the hell out of the room. I could feel a terrific lecture coming on. I didn't mind the idea so much, but I didn't feel like being lectured to and smell Vicks Nose Drops and look at old Spencer in his pajamas and bathrobe all at the same time. I really didn't.

It started, all right. "What's the matter with you, boy?" old Spencer said. He said it pretty tough, too, for him. "How many subjects did you carry this term?"

"Five, sir."

"Five. And how many are you failing in?"

"Four." I moved my ass a little bit on the bed. It was the hardest bed I ever sat on. "I passed English all right," I said, "because I had all that Beowulf and Lord Randal My Son stuff when I was at the Whooton School. I mean I didn't have to do any work in English at all hardly, except write compositions once in a while."

He wasn't even listening. He hardly ever listened to you when you said something.

"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.

"What would you have done in my place?" he said. "Tell the truth, boy."

Well, you could see he really felt pretty lousy about flunking me. So I shot the bull for a while. I told him I was a real moron, and all that stuff. I told him how I would've done exactly the same thing if I'd been in his place, and how most people didn't appreciate how tough it is being a teacher. That kind of stuff. The old bull.

The funny thing is, though, I was sort of thinking of something else while I shot the bull. I live in New York, and I was thinking about the lagoon in Central Park, down near Central Park South. I was wondering if it would be frozen over when I got home, and if it was, where did the ducks go. I was wondering where the ducks went when the lagoon got all icy and frozen over. I wondered if some guy came in a truck and took them away to a zoo or something. Or if they just flew away.

I'm lucky, though. I mean I could shoot the old bull to old Spencer and think about those ducks at the same time. It's funny. You don't have to think too hard when you talk to a teacher. All of a sudden, though, he interrupted me while I was shooting the bull. He was always interrupting you.

"How do you feel about all this, boy? I'd be very interested to know. Very interested."

"You mean about my flunking out of Pencey and all?" I said. I sort of wished he'd cover up his bumpy chest. It wasn't such a beautiful view.

"If I'm not mistaken, I believe you also had some difficulty at the Whooton School and at Elkton Hills." He didn't say it just sarcastic, but sort of nasty, too.

"I didn't have too much difficulty at Elkton Hills," I told him. "I didn't exactly flunk out or anything. I just quit, sort of."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Why? Oh, well it's a long story, sir. I mean it's pretty complicated." I didn't feel like going into the whole thing with him. He wouldn't have understood it anyway. It wasn't up his alley at all. One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam window. For instance, they had this headmaster, Mr. Haas, that was the phonest bastard I ever met in my life. Ten times worse than old Thurmer. On Sundays, for instance, old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents. You should've seen the way he did with my roommate's parents. I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny-looking or something, and if somebody's father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Hans would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe a half an hour, with somebody else's parents. I can't stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. It makes me so depressed I go crazy. I hated that goddam Elkton Hills.

Old Spencer asked me something then, but I didn't hear him. I was thinking about old Haas. "What, sir?" I said.

"Do you have any particular qualms about leaving Pencey?"

"Oh, I have a few qualms, all right. Sure... but not too many. Not yet, anyway. I guess it hasn't really hit me yet. It takes things a while to hit me. All I'm doing right now is thinking about going home Wednesday. I'm a moron."

"Do you feel absolutely no concern for your future, boy?"

"Oh, I feel some concern for my future, all right. Sure. Sure, I do." I thought about it for a minute. "But not too much, I guess. Not too much, I guess."

"You will," old Spencer said. "You will, boy. You will when it's too late."

I didn't like hearing him say that. It made me sound dead or something. It was very depressing. "I guess I will," I said.

"I'd like to put some sense in that head of yours, boy. I'm trying to help you. I'm trying to help you, if I can."

He really was, too. You could see that. But it was just that we were too much on opposite sides of the pole, that's all. "I know you are, sir," I said. "Thanks a lot. No kidding. I appreciate it. I really do." I got up from the bed then. Boy, I couldn't've sat there another ten minutes to save my life. "The thing is, though, I have to get going now. I have quite a bit of equipment at the gym I have to get to take home with me. I really do." He looked up at me and started nodding again, with this very serious look on his face. I felt sorry as hell for him, all of a sudden. But I just couldn't hang around there any longer, the way we were on opposite sides of the pole, and the way he kept missing the bed whenever he chucked something at it, and his sad old bathrobe with his chest showing, and that grippy smell of Vicks Nose Drops all over the place. "Look, sir. Don't worry about me," I said. "I mean it. I'll be all right. I'm just going through a phase right now. Everybody goes through phases and all, don't they?"

"I don't know, boy. I don't know."

I hate it when somebody answers that way. "Sure. Sure, they do," I said. "I mean it, sir. Please don't worry about me." I sort of put my hand on his shoulder. "Okay?" I said.

"Wouldn't you like a cup of hot chocolate before you go? Mrs. Spencer would be--"

"I would, I really would, but the thing is, I have to get going. I have to go right to the gym. Thanks, though. Thanks a lot, sir."

Then we shook hands. And all that crap. It made me feel sad as hell, though.

"I'll drop you a line, sir. Take care of your gripe, now."

"Good-by, boy."

After I shut the door and started back to the living room, he yelled something at me, but I couldn't exactly hear him. I'm pretty sure he yelled "Good luck!" at me,

I hope to hell not. I'd never yell "Good luck!" at anybody. It sounds terrible, when you think about it.

3

I'm the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life. It's awful. If I'm on my way to the store to buy a magazine, even, and somebody asks me where I'm going, I'm liable to say I'm going to the opera. It's terrible. So when I told old Spencer I had to go to the gym and get my equipment and stuff, that was a sheer lie. I don't even keep my goddam equipment in the gym.

Where I lived at Pencey, I lived in the Ossenburger Memorial Wing of the new dorms. It was only for juniors and seniors. I was a junior. My roommate was a senior. It was named after this guy Ossenburger that went to Pencey. He made a pot of dough in the undertaking business after he got out of Pencey. What he did, he started these undertaking parlors all over the country that you could get members of your family buried for about five bucks apiece. You should see old Ossenburger. He probably just shoves them in a sack and dumps them in the river. Anyway, he gave Pencey a pile of dough, and they named our wing after him. The first football game of the year, he came up to school in this big goddam Cadillac, and we all had to stand up in the grandstand and give him a locomotive--that's a cheer. Then, the next morning, in chapel, he made a speech that lasted about ten hours. He started off with about fifty corny jokes, just to show us what a regular guy he was. Very big deal. Then he started telling us how he was never ashamed, when he was in some kind of trouble or something, to get right down his knees and pray to God. He told us we should always pray to God--talk to Him and all--wherever we were. He told us we ought to think of Jesus as our buddy and all. He said he talked to Jesus all the time. Even when he was driving his car. That killed me. I just see the big phony bastard shifting into first gear and asking Jesus to send him a few more stiffs. The only good part of his speech was right in the middle of it. He was telling us all about what a swell guy he was, what a hot-shot and all, then all of a sudden this guy sitting in the row in front of me, Edgar Marsalla, laid this terrific fart. It was a very crude thing to do, in chapel and all, but it was also quite amusing. Old Marsalla. He damn near blew the roof off. Hardly anybody laughed out loud, and old Ossenburger made out like he didn't even hear it, but old Thurmer, the headmaster, was sitting right next to him on the rostrum and all, and you could tell he heard it. Boy, was he sore. He didn't say anything then, but the next night he made us have compulsory study hall in the academic building and he came up and made a speech. He said that the boy that had created the

THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

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the  
**perks** of being a  
wallflower

STEPHEN CHBOSKY



1  
part

August 25, 1991

Dear friend,

I am writing to you because she said you listen and understand and didn't try to sleep with that person at that party even though you could have. Please don't try to figure out who she is because then you might figure out who I am, and I really don't want you to do that. I will call people by different names or generic names because I don't want you to find me. I didn't enclose a return address for the same reason. I mean nothing bad by this. Honest.

I just need to know that someone out there listens and understands and doesn't try to sleep with people even if they could have. I need to know that these people exist.

I think you of all people would understand that because I think you of all people are alive and appreciate what that means. At least I hope you do because other people look to you for strength and friendship and it's that simple. At least that's what I've heard.

So, this is my life. And I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be.

I try to think of my family as a reason for me being this way, especially after my friend Michael stopped going to school one day last spring and we heard Mr. Vaughn's voice on the loudspeaker.

"Boys and girls, I regret to inform you that one of our students has passed on. We will hold a memorial service for Michael Dobson during assembly this Friday."

I don't know how news travels around school and why it is very often right. Maybe it was in the lunchroom. It's hard to remember. But Dave with the awkward glasses told us that Michael killed himself. His mom played bridge with one of Michael's neighbors and they heard the gunshot.

I don't really remember much of what happened after that except that my older brother came to Mr. Vaughn's office in my middle school and told me to stop crying. Then, he put his arm on my shoulder and told me to get it out of my system before Dad came home. We then went to eat french fries at McDonald's and he taught me how to play pinball. He even made a joke that because of me he got to skip an afternoon of school and asked me if I wanted to help him work on his Camaro. I guess I was pretty messy because he never let me work on his Camaro before.

At the guidance counselor sessions, they asked the few of us who actually liked Michael to say a few words. I think they were afraid that some of us would try to kill ourselves or something because they looked very tense and one of them kept touching his beard.

Bridget who is crazy said that sometimes she thought about suicide when commercials come on during TV. She was sincere and this puzzled the guidance counselors. Carl who is nice to everyone said that he felt very sad, but could never kill himself because it is a sin.

This one guidance counselor went through the whole group and finally came to me.

"What do you think, Charlie?"

What was so strange about this was the fact that I had never met this man because he was a "specialist" and he knew my name even though I wasn't wearing a name tag like they do in open house.

"Well, I think that Michael was a nice guy and I don't understand why he did it. As much as I feel sad, I think that not knowing is what really bothers me."

I just reread that and it doesn't sound like how I talk. Especially in that office because I was crying still. I never did stop crying.

The counselor said that he suspected that Michael had "problems at home" and didn't feel like he had anyone to talk to. That's maybe why he felt all alone and

killed himself.

Then, I started screaming at the guidance counselor that Michael could have talked to me. And I started crying even harder. He tried to calm me down by saying that he meant an adult like a teacher or a guidance counselor. But it didn't work and eventually my brother came by the middle school in his Camaro to pick me up.

For the rest of the school year, the teachers treated me different and gave me better grades even though I didn't get any smarter. To tell you the truth, I think I made them all nervous.

Michael's funeral was strange because his father didn't cry. And three months later he left Michael's mom. At least according to Dave at lunchtime. I think about it sometimes. I wonder what went on in Michael's house around dinner and TV shows. Michael never left a note or at least his parents didn't let anyone see it. Maybe it was "problems at home." I wish I knew. It might make me miss him more clearly. It might have made sad sense.

One thing I do know is that it makes me wonder if I have "problems at home" but it seems to me that a lot of other people have it a lot worse. Like when my sister's first boyfriend started going around with another girl and my sister cried for the whole weekend.

My dad said, "There are other people who have it a lot worse."

And my mom was quiet. And that was that. A month later, my sister met another boy and started playing happy records again. And my dad kept working. And my mom kept sweeping. And my brother kept fixing his Camaro. That is, until he left for college at the beginning of the summer. He's playing football for Penn State but he needed the summer to get his grades right to play football.

I don't think that there is a favorite kid in our family. There are three of us and I am the youngest. My brother is the oldest. He is a very good football player and likes his car. My sister is very pretty and mean to boys and she is in the middle. I get straight A's now like my sister and that is why they leave me alone.

My mom cries a lot during TV programs. My dad works a lot and is an honest man. My Aunt Helen used to say that my dad was going to be too proud to have a midlife crisis. It took me until around now to understand what she meant by that because he just turned forty and nothing has changed.

My Aunt Helen was my favorite person in the whole world. She was my mom's sister. She got straight A's when she was a teenager and she used to give me books to read. My father said that the books were a little too old for me, but I liked them so he just shrugged and let me read.

My Aunt Helen lived with the family for the last few years of her life because something very bad happened to her. Nobody would tell me what happened then even though I always wanted to know. When I was around seven, I stopped asking about it because I kept asking like kids always do and my Aunt Helen started crying very hard.

That's when my dad slapped me, saying, "You're hurting your aunt Helen's feelings!" I didn't want to do that, so I stopped. Aunt Helen told my father not to hit me in front of her ever again and my father said this was his house and he would do what he wanted and my mom was quiet and so were my brother and sister.

I don't remember much more than that because I started crying really hard and after a while my dad had my mom take me to my room. It wasn't until much later that my mom had a few glasses of white wine and told me what happened to her sister. Some people really do have it a lot worse than I do. They really do.

I should probably go to sleep now. It's very late. I don't know why I wrote a lot of this down for you to read. The reason I wrote this letter is because I start high school tomorrow and I am really afraid of going.

Love always,  
Charlie

September 7, 1991

Dear friend,

I do not like high school. The cafeteria is called the “Nutrition Center,” which is strange. There is this one girl in my advanced english class named Susan. In middle school, Susan was very fun to be around. She liked movies, and her brother Frank made her tapes of this great music that she shared with us. But over the summer she had her braces taken off, and she got a little taller and prettier and grew breasts. Now, she acts a lot dumber in the hallways, especially when boys are around. And I think it’s sad because Susan doesn’t look as happy. To tell you the truth, she doesn’t like to admit she’s in the advanced english class, and she doesn’t like to say “hi” to me in the hall anymore.

When Susan was at the guidance counselor meeting about Michael, she said that Michael once told her that she was the prettiest girl in the whole world, braces and all. Then, he asked her to “go with him,” which was a big deal at any school. They call it “going out” in high school. And they kissed and talked about movies, and she missed him terribly because he was her best friend.

It’s funny, too, because boys and girls normally weren’t best friends around my school. But Michael and Susan were. Kind of like my Aunt Helen and me. I’m sorry. “My Aunt Helen and I.” That’s one thing I learned this week. That and more consistent punctuation.

I keep quiet most of the time, and only one kid named Sean really seemed to notice me. He waited for me after gym class and said really immature things like how he was going to give me a “swirlie,” which is where someone sticks your head in the toilet and flushes to make your hair swirl around. He seemed pretty unhappy as well, and I told him so. Then, he got mad and started hitting me, and I just did the things my brother taught me to do. My brother is a very good fighter.

“Go for the knees, throat, and eyes.”

And I did. And I really hurt Sean. And then I started crying. And my sister had to leave her senior honors class and drive me home. I got called to Mr. Small's office, but I didn't get suspended or anything because a kid told Mr. Small the truth about the fight.

"Sean started it. It was self-defense."

And it was. I just don't understand why Sean wanted to hurt me. I didn't do anything to him. I am very small. That's true. But I guess Sean didn't know I could fight. The truth is I could have hurt him a lot worse. And maybe I should have. I thought I might have to if he came after the kid who told Mr. Small the truth, but Sean never did go after him. So, everything was forgotten.

Some kids look at me strange in the hallways because I don't decorate my locker, and I'm the one who beat up Sean and couldn't stop crying after he did it. I guess I'm pretty emotional.

It has been very lonely because my sister is busy being the oldest one in our family. My brother is busy being a football player at Penn State. After the training camp, his coach said that he was second string and that when he starts learning the system, he will be first string.

My dad really hopes he will make it to the pros and play for the Steelers. My mom is just glad he gets to go to college for free because my sister doesn't play football, and there wouldn't be enough money to send both of them. That's why she wants me to keep working hard, so I'll get an academic scholarship.

So, that's what I'm doing until I meet a friend here. I was hoping that the kid who told the truth could become a friend of mine, but I think he was just being a good guy by telling.

Love always,  
Charlie

September 11, 1991

Dear friend,

I don't have a lot of time because my advanced english teacher assigned us a book to read, and I like to read books twice. Incidentally, the book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If you haven't read it, I think you should because it is very interesting. The teacher has assigned us a few chapters at a time, but I do not like to read books like that. I am halfway through the first time.

Anyway, the reason I am writing to you is because I saw my brother on television. I normally don't like sports too much, but this was a special occasion. My mother started crying, and my father put his arm around her shoulder, and my sister smiled, which is funny because my brother and sister always fight when he's around.

But my older brother was on television, and so far, it has been the highlight of my two weeks in high school. I miss him terribly, which is strange, because we never really talked much when he was here. We still don't talk, to be honest.

I would tell you his position, but like I said, I would like to be anonymous to you. I hope you understand.

Love always,  
Charlie

September 16, 1991

Dear friend,

I have finished *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is now my favorite book of all time, but then again, I always think that until I read another book. My advanced english teacher asked me to call him "Bill" when we're not in class, and he gave me another book to read. He says that I have a great skill at reading and understanding

language, and he wanted me to write an essay about *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

I mentioned this to my mom, and she asked why Bill didn't recommend that I just take a sophomore or junior english class. And I told her that Bill said that these were basically the same classes with more complicated books, and that it wouldn't help me. My mom said that she wasn't sure and would talk to him during open house. Then, she asked me to help her by washing the dishes, which I did.

Honestly, I don't like doing dishes. I like eating with my fingers and off napkins, but my sister says that doing so is bad for the environment. She is a part of the Earth Day Club here in high school, and that is where she meets the boys. They are all very nice to her, and I don't really understand why except maybe the fact that she is pretty. She really is mean to these boys.

One boy has it particularly hard. I won't tell you his name. But I will tell you all about him. He has very nice brown hair, and he wears it long with a ponytail. I think he will regret this when he looks back on his life. He is always making mix tapes for my sister with very specific themes. One was called "Autumn Leaves." He included many songs by the Smiths. He even hand-colored the cover. After the movie he rented was over, and he left, my sister gave me the tape.

"Do you want this, Charlie?"

I took the tape, but I felt weird about it because he had made it for her. But I listened to it. And loved it very much. There is one song called "Asleep" that I would like you to listen to. I told my sister about it. And a week later she thanked me because when this boy asked her about the tape, she said exactly what I said about the song "Asleep," and this boy was very moved by how much it meant to her. I hope this means I will be good at dating when the time comes.

I should stick to the subject, though. That is what my teacher Bill tells me to do because I write kind of the way I talk. I think that is why he wants me to write that essay about *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

This boy who likes my sister is always respectful to my parents. My mom likes

him very much because of this. My dad thinks he's soft. I think that's why my sister does what she does to him.

This one night, she was saying very mean things about how he didn't stand up to the class bully when he was fifteen or something like that. To tell you the truth, I was just watching the movie he had rented, so I wasn't paying very close attention to their fight. They fight all the time, so I figured that the movie was at least something different, which it wasn't because it was a sequel.

Anyway, after she leaned into him for about four movie scenes, which I guess is about ten minutes or so, he started crying. Crying very hard. Then, I turned around, and my sister pointed at me.

"You see. Even Charlie stood up to his bully. You see."

And this guy got really red-faced. And he looked at me. Then, he looked at her. And he wound up and hit her hard across the face. I mean hard. I just froze because I couldn't believe he did it. It was not like him at all to hit anybody. He was the boy that made mix tapes with themes and hand-colored covers until he hit my sister and stopped crying.

The weird part is that my sister didn't do anything. She just looked at him very quietly. It was so weird. My sister goes crazy if you eat the wrong kind of tuna, but here was this guy hitting her, and she didn't say anything. She just got soft and nice. And she asked me to leave, which I did. After the boy had left, she said that they were "going out" and not to tell mom or dad what happened.

I guess he stood up to his bully. And I guess that makes sense.

That weekend, my sister spent a lot of time with this boy. And they laughed a lot more than they usually did. On Friday night, I was reading my new book, but my brain got tired, so I decided to watch some television instead. And I opened the door to the basement, and my sister and this boy were naked.

He was on top of her, and her legs were draped over either side of the couch. And she screamed at me in a whisper.

“Get out. You pervert.”

So, I left. The next day, we all watched my brother play football. And my sister invited this boy over. I am not sure when he left the previous night. They held hands and acted like everything was happy. And this boy said something about how the football team hasn’t been the same since my brother graduated, and my dad thanked him. And when the boy left, my dad said that this boy was becoming a fine young man who could carry himself. And my mom was quiet. And my sister looked at me to make sure I wouldn’t say anything. And that was that.

“Yes. He is.” That’s all my sister could say. And I could see this boy at home doing his homework and thinking about my sister naked. And I could see them holding hands at football games that they do not watch. And I could see this boy throwing up in the bushes at a party house. And I could see my sister putting up with it.

And I felt very bad for both of them.

Love always,  
Charlie

September 18, 1991

Dear friend,

I never told you that I am in shop class, did I? Well, I am in shop class, and it is my favorite class next to Bill’s advanced english class. I wrote the essay for *To Kill a Mockingbird* last night, and I handed it in to Bill this morning. We are supposed to talk about it tomorrow during lunch period.

The point, though, is that there is a guy in shop class named “Nothing.” I’m not kidding. His name is “Nothing.” And he is hilarious. “Nothing” got his name when kids used to tease him in middle school. I think he’s a senior now. The kids started

calling him Patty when his real name is Patrick. And “Nothing” told these kids, “Listen, you either call me Patrick, or you call me nothing.”

So, the kids started calling him “Nothing.” And the name just stuck. He was a new kid in the school district at the time because his dad married a new woman in this area. I think I will stop putting quotation marks around Nothing’s name because it is annoying and disrupting my flow. I hope you do not find this difficult to follow. I will make sure to differentiate if something comes up.

So, in shop class Nothing started to do a very funny impersonation of our teacher, Mr. Callahan. He even painted in the mutton-chop sideburns with a grease pencil. Hilarious. When Mr. Callahan found Nothing doing this near the belt sander, he actually laughed because Nothing wasn’t doing the impersonation mean or anything. It was just that funny. I wish you could have been there because it was the hardest I’ve laughed since my brother left. My brother used to tell Polish jokes, which I know is wrong, but I just blocked out the Polish part and listened to the jokes. Hilarious.

Oh, incidentally, my sister asked for her “Autumn Leaves” mix tape back. She listens to it all the time now.

Love always,  
Charlie

September 29, 1991

Dear friend,

There is a lot to tell you about the last two weeks. A lot of it is good, but a lot of it is bad. Again, I don’t know why this always happens.

First of all, Bill gave me a C on my *To Kill a Mockingbird* essay because he said that I run my sentences together. I am trying now to practice not to do that. He also said that I should use the vocabulary words that I learn in class like “corpulent” and

“jaundice.” I would use them here, but I really don’t think they are appropriate in this format.

To tell you the truth, I don’t know where they are appropriate to use. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t know them. You should absolutely. But I just have never heard anyone use the words “corpulent” and “jaundice” ever in my life. That includes teachers. So, what’s the point of using words nobody else knows or can say comfortably? I just don’t understand that.

I feel the same way about some movie stars who are terrible to watch. Some of these people must have a million dollars at least, and yet, they keep doing these movies. They blow up bad guys. They yell at their detectives. They do interviews for magazines. Every time I see this one particular movie star on a magazine, I can’t help but feel terribly sorry for her because nobody respects her at all, and yet they keep interviewing her. And the interviews all say the same thing.

They start with what food they are eating in some restaurant. “As \_\_\_\_\_ gingerly munched her Chinese Chicken Salad, she spoke of love.” And all the covers say the same thing: “\_\_\_\_\_ gets to the bottom of stardom, love, and his/her hit new movie/television show/album.”

I think it’s nice for stars to do interviews to make us think they are just like us, but to tell you the truth, I get the feeling that it’s all a big lie. The problem is I don’t know who’s lying. And I don’t know why these magazines sell as much as they do. And I don’t know why the ladies in the dentist’s office like them as much as they do. A Saturday ago, I was in the dentist’s office, and I heard this conversation.

“Did you see that movie?” as she points to the cover.

“I did. I saw it with Harold.”

“What do you think?”

“She is just lovely.”

“Yeah. She is.”

“Oh, I have this new recipe.”

“Low-fat?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Do you have some time tomorrow?”

“No. Why don’t you have Mike fax it to Harold?”

“Okay.”

Then, these ladies started talking about the one star I mentioned before, and they both had very strong opinions.

“I think it’s disgraceful.”

“Did you read the interview in *Good Housekeeping*? ”

“A few months back?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Disgraceful.”

“Did you read the one in *Cosmopolitan*? ”

“No.”

“God, it was practically the same interview.”

“I don’t know why they give her the time of day.”

The fact that one of these ladies was my mom made me feel particularly sad because my mom is beautiful. And she’s always on a diet. Sometimes, my dad calls her beautiful, but she cannot hear him. Incidentally, my dad is a very good husband. He’s just pragmatic.

After the dentist’s office, my mom drove me to the cemetery where a lot of her relatives are buried. My dad does not like to go to the cemetery because it gives him the creeps. But I don’t mind going at all because my Aunt Helen is buried there. My mom was always the pretty one, as they say, and my Aunt Helen was always the other one. The nice thing was my Aunt Helen was never on a diet. And my Aunt Helen was “corpulent.” Hey, I did it!

My Aunt Helen would always let us kids stay up and watch *Saturday Night Live* when she was baby-sitting or when she was living with us and my parents went to

another couple's house to get drunk and play board games. When I was very little, I remember going to sleep, while my brother and sister and Aunt Helen watched *Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island*. I could never stay awake when I was that little, and I wish I could, because my brother and sister talk about those moments sometimes. Maybe it's sad that these are now memories. And maybe it's not sad. And maybe it's just the fact that we loved Aunt Helen, especially me, and this was the time we could spend with her.

I won't start listing television episode memories, except one because I guess we're on the subject, and it seems like something everyone can relate to in a small way. And since I don't know you, I figure that maybe I can write about something that you can relate to.

The family was sitting around, watching the final episode of *M\*A\*S\*H*, and I'll never forget it even though I was very young. My mom was crying. My sister was crying. My brother was using every ounce of strength he had not to cry. And my dad left during one of the final moments to make a sandwich. Now, I don't remember much about the program itself because I was too young, but my dad never left to make a sandwich except during commercial breaks, and then he usually just sent my mom. I walked to the kitchen, and I saw my dad making a sandwich... and crying. He was crying harder than even my mom. And I couldn't believe it. When he finished making his sandwich, he put away the things in the refrigerator and stopped crying and wiped his eyes and saw me.

Then, he walked up, patted my shoulder, and said, "This is our little secret, okay, champ?"

"Okay," I said.

And Dad picked me up with the arm that wasn't holding the sandwich, and carried me to the room that had the television, and put me on his lap for the rest of the television episode. At the end of the episode, he picked me up, turned off the TV, and turned around.

And my dad declared, “That was a great series.”

And my mom said, “The best.”

And my sister asked, “How long was it on the air?”

And my brother replied, “Nine years, stupid.”

And my sister responded, “You... stupid.”

And my dad said, “Stop it, right now.”

And my mom said, “Listen to your father.”

And my brother said nothing.

And my sister said nothing.

And years later I found out my brother was wrong.

I went to the library to look up the figures, and I found out that the episode we watched is the highest watched anything of television history, which I find amazing because it felt like just the five of us.

You know... a lot of kids at school hate their parents. Some of them got hit. And some of them got caught in the middle of wrong lives. Some of them were trophies for their parents to show the neighbors like ribbons or gold stars. And some of them just wanted to drink in peace.

For me personally, as much as I don't understand my mom and dad and as much as I feel sorry for both of them sometimes, I can't help but love them very much. My mom drives to visit the cemetery of people she loves. My dad cried during *M\*A\*S\*H*, and trusted me to keep his secret, and let me sit on his lap, and called me “champ.”

Incidentally, I only have one cavity, and as much as my dentist asks me to, I just can't bring myself to floss.

Love always,  
Charlie