“Just because Ted Williams and twenty-two others did it, homering on your last at bat is not guaranteed.”—The Wordspinner

“In life, as in baseball, we must leave the dugout of complacency, step up to the plate of opportunity, adjust the groin cup of caution, and swing the bat of hope at the curve ball of fate….”—George Will

For some thirty years, I played slow-pitch softball for the Mercenaries, a team whose name promised fame and fortune. In fact, I never made a dime playing for this team, but we did acquire some “fame.” The Mercenaries’ record of three wins for every loss led one opposing pitcher to fashion a crude T-shirt whose caption under an impaled heart read, “I HATE THE MERCENARIES.” He played for the Bleeding Hearts, a team from the school of social work at a university where intramurals is a way of life within our “walls.” As I recall, every time this pitcher wore his heart on his sleeve, the Hearts bled.

Team names and nicknames make an interesting sidebar to any sport, but it’s the impossible dance-like plays that stick in the files of the memory lobes. I recall playing first base years ago when, with a runner on first, the batter hit a line drive over my head. I turned sharply and saw our right fielder catch or trap the ball—I wasn’t sure which; indeed, no one was. I hoped, of course, that he’d caught it, but either way, there was going to be a play at first, for the hitter was thundering toward me, and so was the returning base runner. We all met in an orange cloud of comic synchronicity and then went tumbling over in the grass while the umpires huddled.

The mind refuses to unhand these gems. Others include Jack Davis’s epical foul ball that rolled all the way to Hardee’s restaurant, Gary Campbell at the plate waving an aluminum bat in the lightning storm that limbed a nearby sycamore, the lunar hemisphere rising from John “The Pagan” Idol’s forehead after he was beaned by a line drive, and “Knee” Harrison on deck being told that a neighbor had just driven his nine-month pregnant wife to the hospital and “Knee” saying, “Tell her to wait until I hit.” She did, and “Knee” homered. After crossing the plate, he picked up his bat and glove, and loped off to the parking lot.

Baseball or softball, I’m pleased to say, is now embedded in five generations of Eisimingers. My grandfather, “Three-Finger” Floyd, pitched in a semi-pro league in Illinois despite the farm accident that threatened to end his dream. Later, Floyd hit infield practice to his five children in the lumpy backyard of their home outside of St. Louis, and my father followed suit by pitching and hitting to me before taking me to the Polo Grounds on my tenth birthday. Dad occasionally played softball at the Armed Forces Staff College where I sat on the sidelines watching him. But the play I remember best was one he made on the way to the Cardinals-Giant’s game in Manhattan. As we were walking from
our car to the stadium, a stickball-playing boy, just a little older than I was, hit an arcing drive over everyone’s head. Without a word, Dad leapt off the sidewalk and speared the ball before it rolled into a busy intersection. He then flipped the Spalding “Pinky” back to the fielder who was chasing it. “Give this man,” the boy yelled, “a big cigar!” I seldom loved Dad more.

As athletic as Dad was, we shared few moments like this either in the bleachers or on a sandlot. I’m sure I heard more from Harry Carey, the voice of the Cardinals, than my taciturn father. A colonel in the Corps of Engineers without a blotch on his scutcheon, Dad was a success on and off the field, but before he died, he told me he was disappointed he had not made general. My mother, he said, was even more disappointed, and I was left disappointed with their disappointment.

Nevertheless, I reminded him that perhaps the best hitter in baseball history walked back to the dugout six or seven times in every ten without a hit or walk, but who thinks of Ty Cobb as a failure in baseball? Cobb may never have learned to mark his own scorecard, but he is the sort you want in right field even with that porous glove he wore. To Cobb and other Manichean sporting fanatics, the only truth other than winning is the ninety feet separating the bases as Red Smith observed. And if Cobb had lived long enough, he probably would have joined the masses genuflecting before Curt Schilling’s bloody sock and his own sharpened spikes at Cooperstown.

I said there were five generations of us, so let me finish that list. Our son caught and played first base for his high school baseball team, and our daughter’s son is showing a keen eye for the wiffle ball. I’ve taught our grandchildren to play the old favorites: “Indian Baseball” and “500” as well as “Beach Wall Ball,” a game I dreamed up one summer when three of us had a yen to play ball. The “field” consists of the usual four bases, but the “fielder”-“hitter” throws a tennis ball at a broad strike zone chalked on a sea wall, which is situated right behind second. The ball is then retrieved by one of the fielders who tries to tag the runner before he reaches a base. “Ghost” runners may occupy the bases, and pitches which miss the strike zone are considered foul balls. It helps to play at low tide.

The real beauty of playing ball for me, however, is the way throwing and catching can stimulate conversation between two men. My son and I used to “throw” after most meals when he was playing baseball and I was playing softball. As we focused on making an accurate throw or catching the ball cleanly, most of the obstacles to speech and candor fell away. During the course of a meal, we might not say any more than “pass the gravy,” but when tossing a ball or Frisbee, no subject was off limits.

More to the point, however, is the “Code,” the intuited rules of the game which make it a moral enterprise. Rule One: it’s not the runs scored that truly matter but the bunts and other sacrifices which enable a teammate to advance. Rule Two: after hitting a ball over the fence, the hitter shouldn’t stand at the plate watching his masterpiece or in any way disrespecting the opposition. And Rule Three: if a player has committed an error, his teammates shouldn’t stare.

As I gained a fuller appreciation of baseball’s existential rules, I came to enjoy umpiring. Intramural softball rules stipulate that except for tournaments, each team at bat has to supply two umpires: one behind the plate and one in the field. Frankly, I preferred the plate because that was where more of the action was. Initially, I thought it would be hard calling strikes on my teammates, but objectivity was not a problem when I realized that
both teams carried bats and wore cleats. Fortunately, called third strikes in slow-pitch are rare.

When arthritis, relocations, and the death of our right fielder led the Mercenaries to retire from the field of pipe dreams, I was heartsick for weeks and wrote the following verses:

“It’s hard not to look for the manager’s sign when your sole duty is shinin’ the pines.”

Since then, I’ve accepted my place on the bench, and privately begun editing the “Code” for the grandchildren. One tenet, which used to read, “If softball interferes with work, quit work,” now reads:

“Placing balls before books is a perversity on the hollered grounds of a university.”

**Mister Dog**

*by Maxine Rosaler*

Margaret Wise Brown’s *Mister Dog* with illustrations by Garth Williams, is my favorite children’s book. When I was shopping for baby presents recently I was delighted to see that the Little Golden Book from the 1950s was still in print. Before presenting *Mister Dog* to the baby I read it aloud to my sister-in-law in the kitchen of the house where the annual family reunion was being held. When I got to the part about how Mister Dog wanted everything to be exactly the way it is supposed to be I burst into tears. I don’t know why it had taken me this long to realize how much my son and Mister Dog had in common.

Benjy was diagnosed with autism eighteen years ago. He was four and a half. The signs had been there long before but my husband and I refused to see them. After spending two frantic weeks traversing the different time zones by telephone I came across a man in Brooklyn who told me about a therapy that could “cure” my son. It will bankrupt you. It will destroy your marriage. It will make you old before your time. But you will have your son back.

For ten years I deluded myself into thinking that Benjy would be cured. He would get married. He would have children. He would have a career. He might not grow up to be president but he would have a life. That was what the psychologist with the smile glued to her face who had diagnosed him in the basement of an old church had told us.

I spent the next ten years in a furious race against time. My son had been diagnosed just six months before the magical age of five—the time after which, I kept on hearing, the brain starts to lose its “plasticity,” meaning its ability to form new neural connections becomes greatly diminished. In other words, my son had just six months to be cured.

In the beginning Phil and I did the therapy, which consisted of sitting Benjy down at his baby table with a clipboard filled with Velcro stickers—tokens of the rewards he would earn if he learned the thousands of things that neurotypical children learn through osmosis, things that autistic children have to learn step by step over and over and over again: things like a smile means a person is happy and a frown means he is sad; the difference between the pronouns “you” and “me” and “he” and “she”; and important safety tips
such as it wouldn’t be a good idea to jump headfirst into an empty swimming pool or to put your hand on a hot stove.

The man with the cured son had warned me not to go to the board of education, the government agency charged with the job of providing therapy to disabled children, until I had letters from doctors attesting to the fact that Benjy needed this particular treatment, and at a minimum intensity of forty hours a week.

Since there was no consensus as to what the treatment for autism was, the only real utility the doctors could have for me was to sign the letters that I offered to compose for them—to save them the trouble, I would say. I was building an argument, and my plan was for each letter to support that argument.

It took me a long time to get all my documentation in place—not all the doctors were willing to sign my letters, or write letters of their own, and there were often long waits for appointments, so it wasn’t until six months after Benjy’s diagnosis that my career as a professional beggar began.

To my surprise the people at the local school district didn’t seem to share my fervor for saving my son. Indeed, not only did they not seem to care about him at all, they thought it was greedy of me to be asking for so much and over the course of the next several years they went out of their way to do everything within their power to stop me from getting Benjy the help he needed. I spent nearly two decades in a desperate search for schools and therapies and therapists, spending tens of thousands of dollars of money we didn’t have in the process, and then devoting years fighting to be reimbursed for the money we had spent. I spent this money, and did this work and fought this fight because I had never stopped believing that a cure was within reach.

It wasn’t until the first hairs appeared on Benjy’s upper lip that it began to dawn on me that my son would never be cured. That was when the second wave of despair set in. And the despair gave rise to anger—anger at Benjy for not getting better—for not growing up to be the man he was meant to be. I started to become impatient with the careless things he would do and I yelled at him. I would always apologize and tell him how sorry I was for being so mean to him. I love you so much, I would say. I have never loved anyone as much as I love you.

My anger didn’t hurt Benjy exactly—Benjy’s feelings don’t get hurt the way other people’s feelings get hurt, but my anger bewildered him, and it made him seek out my love in ways that astounded me. “Love Mom,” he would say, holding his arms out for my embrace. “You’re a good mother,” he would say, stroking my face. My apology always included a part about it not being his fault, that he hadn’t done anything wrong: It is because Mommy is having a nervous breakdown, I would say. He would always respond in his usual way, “You’re a good mother.” “Love Mom.” And whenever I included the part of about my nervous breakdown, he would say, “Don’t break down nervously.”

Over the years I had become adept at manipulating the system, not adept as in skilled, not adept as in crafty, but adept as in determined to get results no matter what: Because although I have never been particularly shrewd, I am very stubborn. Anyway, because of my inept but nevertheless adept manipulations I managed to delay Benjy’s graduation from high school until he was twenty-one.

The end of high school, the end of his public education: That was what the previous seventeen years of fighting had been all about. Nevertheless Benjy’s impending graduation
came as a terrific shock to me. What was he going to do now? What was I going to do now? I had heard the horror stories. I had seen the haggard, aging mothers, stuck at home with their disabled, aging sons, who had nothing to do but watch TV or play computer games, if they had the skill to hold the controls and press the buttons.

As the time of Benjy’s graduation approached, I scrambled around, trying to come up with a plan for the rest of his life. All those years of grasping onto futile hope after futile hope had left me feeling heartbroken and exhausted, and I didn’t think I had it in me to go back into full throttle, but somehow I managed. My fear about what would become of what was left of my life, as well as what would become of Benjy’s, was the fuel that drove me.

The day treatment programs, which are the usual next step for autistic children, were out of the question: Because although Benjy is autistic, he is very smart, with a keen and hungry mind. Still my husband and I visited one of them—the creme de la creme. It was a “work readiness” program where high-functioning autistic young adults sat around Formica tables learning job skills. We saw one girl laboriously punching holes into paper, one sheet at a time, while a boy next to her sat stuffing brochures into envelopes. It was housed in the corner of a cavernous concrete room that reeked of cafeteria food and disinfectant.

The one expectation that Benjy ever had about life after high school was that he would go to college. Learning has always been his greatest, indeed, his only, passion: He is the “walking encyclopedia” that everyone associates with Asperger Syndrome. On his own he has accumulated enormous stores of knowledge in the areas of human biology, rocks and minerals, musical instruments, music theory, etymology (he loves studying the dictionary—the unabridged Webster’s that sits on his night table is in tatters), geography, botany and numerous fields of science. Chemistry is his latest obsession: He has taught himself nuclear chemistry: He can tell you what beta decay is and how plutonium changes into thorium; yet he is totally stumped if you ask him what he did today, and although he could draw the entire street and subway maps of Manhattan by heart, he couldn’t be trusted to travel on public transportation on his own, or go out for more than a block or two by himself. Also, he was still calling out in class—an issue I had been begging his school to address for months.

But college was what Benjy wanted. More importantly, it was what he expected. So I investigated colleges and I put an ad on Craig’s List and hired a team of mentors (that’s what I called them) to go to school with him.

Benjy got straight A’s in his first semester at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. He even received a special commendation from the school praising him for his exceptional scholarship. His success at BMCC has made Phil and me appreciate how competent our son is and for the first time since his diagnosis a realistic vision of his future is beginning to form in my mind.

Accompanied by his mentors, he is now in the middle of his third semester as a college student. He is currently taking Organic Chemistry, Spanish, Calculus II and English.
We knew that English was going to be a problem; things like nuance, subtext and character mean nothing to Benjy, and the dangers of “conformity,” apparently the pet peeve of his English professor, hold no interest and have no relevance for him either.

But English is a requirement, and so Benjy, who has spent the past seventeen years of his life being forced to learn how to conform to the rules of the society, has been reading essays with titles such as “Against School” and “The Disadvantages of an Elite Education.” The assigned topic for one of his most recent essays was “My Indoctrination.” At our prompting he wrote about the time he spent at his baby table with everyone trying to get him to be like everyone else; although he didn’t say it in so many words, the conclusion he reached was that we had failed miserably.

One of Benjy’s longtime obsessions has been musical instruments; for years Phil and I have been taking him to the Sam Ash Music Store in Midtown Manhattan. It bores the hell out of me, but Benjy could spend hours there, investigating the intricacies of how each instrument is made, if we let him. One day a young man behind the counter gave him a child’s violin that had been left for repair and never picked up.

When our friend Luellen, a professional violinist, saw how well Benjy was handling his free violin, she announced that she thought he had talent and insisted that we get him a real violin and that we hire her to give him lessons.

Benjy has been taking violin lessons for almost four years now and Luellen thinks he is so good that one day he could be part of quartet, which as far as I’m concerned would take care of the social component of his life.

Whenever I think about how that nice young man at Sam Ash gave my son a violin I always remember what the woman who diagnosed Benjy told us: He’s handsome and charming, she said. That’s good. People will be kind to him; they will want to help him.

I hold onto that hope now the way I used to hold onto the hope that Benjy would be cured; because I know that, as gifted and competent as my son is, he will always need help—exactly what degree of help he will need is yet to be determined.

And so the third wave of despair has taken up residence in the pit of my stomach: What will happen to Benjy when Phil and I are dead? Will there always be people who will want to help him, people who will be kind to him? Will there always be someone to love him? And when that worry kicks in, a vestigial hope emerges: Maybe one day an eccentric young woman who has a thing for weird men will come down from the heavens and marry my son.

Apparently Benjy expects to get married too. He told one of his mentors that he will be married by the time he is twenty-five and have children by the time he is twenty-seven. Because like Mister Dog, that contented, solitary creature, Benjy has always wanted everything to be exactly the way it is supposed to be.
“You have a good ear for dialogue.”

That was the first compliment my writing ever fetched me. It came from a colleague many years ago, a film teacher. He had just finished reading a story of mine that was published in a men’s magazine. Men’s slick magazines used to be a good market for short story writers, back when there was such a thing as a market. Of course, I was very pleased to receive any favorable comments, professional writers being the neurotically needy and obsessive-compulsive bunch that many of us are.

But then I began to hear the same thing from others—editors, fiction teachers, readers, and I began to believe it. Why not? They did. It allowed me to take a small step forward in my pursuit of broadening my writing skills, by building on my strengths—or rather strength, singular. It’s worth mentioning here that no one had ever commented on my scintillating prose or the dynamism of my characters. I apparently had only one thing going for me as a writer. I could produce some pretty good dialogue.

Why was that? What—was I born with the dialogue gene? Was I a savant at the art of conversation? No to both of those. I had somehow picked up the knack for reproducing the cadences and melody of spoken language, and I could mimic them at will. It was sort of like being good at counterfeiting, although not as immediately rewarding or dangerous. I was able to put some words on a page, put quotation marks around them, and then if you read them aloud, it sounded like real people talking. What do you know about that?

In the big picture—not necessarily the over-referenced grand scheme of things, but just in the craft of producing a decent short story—this wasn’t much of an accomplishment, unless I could drop those conversations into a tightly woven plot and a sonorous bed of text. That would have to wait till later, though, when I “matured” as an artist. (In a documentary movie I wrote about him, author T.C. Boyle says to me, “They talk about an artist maturing. All that means is, you get older. If you’re lucky, you get older.”)

But back to this ear business—the business about having a good “ear” for dialogue. Only now, from this distance, all these years later, do I begin to see a pattern as to how such a thing might have occurred, how I might have excelled at one aspect of fiction writing. I was an avid listener: to conversations, the idle ramblings of various teachers, the spoken lines of actors. I memorized what they said and I imitated how they said it, all mentally and reflexively. I replayed strings of verbal outbursts in my mind, and altered them with my imagination.

And I eavesdropped a lot. I still do it—at restaurants, in movie theaters, much to my wife’s embarrassment. The people in the next booth have secrets, and my ear rubs up against them, becomes privy. “Quit listening to them,” she whispers to me sternly.

And I was reading the works of some masters of the art of dialogue, all the while not realizing I was absorbing their own counterfeited exchanges, writers such as Kurt Vonnegut, Raymond Chandler, J.D. Salinger, and a fellow little remembered these days (unfortunately), Jack Dillon. Jack Dillon was a New York commercial writer who penned
two novels—The Advertising Man and A Great Day for Dying. The former title became a training manual for me. Dillon’s characters bristle with actuality, with realism. When I first read his dialogue the characters stood up out of the book and walked around the room in front of me. And he must have been aware of his own talent for recreating the patterns of spoken words. In one chapter a client tells the protagonist’s boss, “This guy writes like people talk.”

He sure did.

Let me give you a sample of Dillon’s dialogue. Here’s the set-up: The protagonist, Jim Bower, an advertising writer, is out to lunch with his art director, Brook Parker. Their boss has asked Brook to tell Jim that he is fired.

“He said he wants to talk to you after lunch. You know, if you want to call him names or anything.”

“You want to know something? I just lost my wife and my job the same day.”

Brook looked at me. “What happened to your wife?”

“Oh, there was something missing in her life and it turned out to be a divorce. This is some day. I have this feeling I was just caught stealing in the officers’ club.”

“I didn’t know you were having trouble at home.”

“Everybody’s got something.”

“You were married a long time, weren’t you?”

“Twenty years last week.”

“What do you do when you get a divorce? One of you moves out, right?”

“I guess so. I never got divorced before. She’s getting this lawyer. He’ll probably have a training manual.”

To this day, when I read that selection, I feel as if Jim and Brook are sitting at the restaurant table next to me. In fact, I want to offer to buy Jim a drink, the poor, depressed guy. His wife and his job in the same day.

I was sitting at a bar with author Thomas E. Kennedy one afternoon, right here in good old Palatine. (There is no segue here because I couldn’t think of one, but we’re still on the theme of having drinks, so that contributes continuity.) Tom had just finished giving a reading at Harper College, my academic home, and we were talking about something or other, Coltrane, I think. Our bartender was a woman, and one of her patrons who was sitting a few stools down from us tried to break the ice with her by less-than-suavely handing her this line:

“You know, I wish I was cross-eyed so I could see two of yas.”

And she said, “Can it, you fetus. I’ve got enough to do.”

Without missing a beat, Kennedy reached into the breast pocket of his sport coat, pulled out a small notebook and a pen, and began jotting away.

I said, “What are you doing, writing it down?”

“Oh, yes,” he replied. “It’s going to be in the next story.”

A fellow eavesdropper. No wonder we share such camaraderie. He wasn’t kidding, either. Those lines were in his next published fiction.

But this isn’t meant to be didactic, a lesson. I’m just ruminating on the page. Most of the purposeful advice I was given about fiction writing when I was young proved useless. I
once had a writing professor who suggested that whenever I found myself using the bath-
room of a friend or an acquaintance, I should surreptitiously go through their medicine
cabinet, see what was in there. I told him that sounded intrusive to me.

“You have to be intrusive, he countered. “All writers are on a hunt for material!”

Perhaps that is true, but you will not find me riffling through anyone’s medicine
cabinet, not anymore. That practice renders some pretty disturbing results. I don’t need or
want that kind of material.

I hear talk in my head all the time, while I am grading papers, in the shower, even
while I am driving. I was once on Route Illinois 90, heading toward Chicago, when voices
so commanding began to speak. I had no idea who was addressing whom because I hadn’t
fleshed out the situation, hadn’t envisioned it yet. It was just the insistent tones of the
voices that struck me, and so I started to listen to what was being said. What a situation!
I was clipping along at 75 miles per hour (you can’t do the speed limit on Route 90 or
you will get killed) with the top down, no pen or paper near to capture the words as they
flowed out. I reached into the center console, found a black indelible marker. This was one
of those split-second impulses—not even a decision. There was no time to decide. It was
either lose the moment of inspiration, or capture it forever. My dashboard was large and
beige. I uncapped the marker and began to write across it in cursive, alternating my line
of sight between the windshield and the dashboard.

Nydia said, “She’s in love with you.”

“Who is?”

“Your student teacher.”

I said, “There’s a psychologist in the next room, if you’d like to see one, and
I think you should.”

She pulled me out into the hallway where there was such a between-classes
racket that we couldn’t be overheard, even by the CIA. With an open hand she
hit me in the chest. “Don’t you see what’s going on? This girl has fallen for you,
and she’s fallen hard. My God, she can’t even look at you without broadcasting
it.” She stopped, put her hands on her hips, squinted her eyes, and tilted her
head.

“Wait a minute—is something going on between you two?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. I think you’re crazy altogether.”

“Then why take her to Maggiano’s for lunch? Why not the cafeteria?”

“Because the food in the cafeteria has been eaten once before.”

That started a novel that I wrote, Streethearts, about a burned out inner-city high school
teacher and his gang member students. It took years to finish, and it was published last year
by Serving House Books, fortunately. I literally transcribed the dialogue into a notebook as I
read it off the dashboard. I figured I’d clean the dashboard with some spray-on solution, you
know, Armorall or something. It didn’t work. Neither did Windex or anything else. When I
traded in that car, the salesman had a look at it and said, “That’s going to take several hundred
dollars off your trade-in price.” I expected such news. And then he asked, “Who wrote that?”
“I did.”
“No, seriously. Who wrote it?”
“I just told you.”
“But come on, now.”
“I knew I’d read it somewhere. He’s my favorite.”
“Is he?”
That was Hemingway, not Fitzgerald. But I said, “Me too,” and that got $200 added into the trade-in price. Then I told him he should read Fitzgerald’s *The Sun Also Rises*.
“That any good?”
“Oh, yeah. It makes *The Old Man and the Sea* read like a fish story.”

Something remarkable happened since those asterisks appeared. It’s Thanksgiving Day as I write this, suddenly inspired about the idea of an ear for dialogue. I work well under pressure on my favorite holiday of the year while everybody else is enjoying a scrumptious turkey dinner and I’m locked up in my writing room, starving.

Todd Seymour just emailed me with information that is transformative in terms of my life’s work. Let me tell you who Todd Seymour is.

Todd Seymour is the grown-up man version of the kid who grew up next door, son of the late, great Jim Seymour, legendary wide receiver for Notre Dame (1966-1968) and the Chicago Bears, and the beautiful, wonderful late Nancy Seymour, both of whom we lost to cancer in just a two-year span. They were our neighbors for nearly a quarter of a century, and we (my wife, my son, and I) loved them. We still do. Todd tells me in this email that three new J.D. Salinger stories are available on the Internet. Well, they’re not new, but they have never been available before. Not so incidentally, I met J.D. Salinger at his home in Cornish, New Hampshire, when I was 28. I met him because he was my writing hero and I tracked him down and wrote him a letter as part of a literary quest, and he was kind enough to come out and talk to me and my girlfriend, which is why Todd took time out on this, my favorite holiday, to email me. (I can smell the turkey from up here, where I can’t have any. The muses are singing like Billy Holiday, like the Everly Brothers.)

The first of these stories is one I have read about many times but have never had the pleasure to read until now, “The Ocean Full of Bowling Balls.” There are several striking things about this piece of fiction. (I devoured it in ten minutes.) First of all, Salinger wrote it. Next, there are three Caulfield brothers who populate it: Vince, Kenneth, and yes, Holden, in an earlier incarnation. Vince I had met earlier in uncollected stories: “The Stranger” and “The Last Day of the Last Furlough.” But Kenneth is brand new, a missing Salinger character of awkward brilliance. My God, he is wonderful. How could Salinger have kept him a secret all this time?

Let me take you straight to the set-up. Vincent is the older brother, a fiction writer who vaguely resembles D.B. in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Kenneth is the youngest of the Caulfields, and he has a dangerous heart condition. (He prefigures Allie Caulfield in that same, famous Salinger novel.) In this scene, Vince interrupts Kenneth while he is reading
The story Vincent has written is called “The Bowler.” It involves a man whose wife denies him the prosaic pleasures of his life, listening to hockey games and prize fights on the radio, reading cowboy stories. So every Wednesday night he goes bowling instead, to compensate. He has his own bowling ball which he keeps in a canvas bag. This goes on for a number of years, and then the fellow passes away. His wife visits his grave on Monday nights and leaves flowers. But once she visits on a Wednesday instead of a Monday, and she finds unfamiliar flowers, violets, on the cemetery plot. She is confused, and in her confusion she asks an old man, the caretaker, where the flowers came from. Very innocently, the man responds that they were left by the same woman who visits every Wednesday night, his wife, he supposes. And the woman freaks, she screams at him that she is the wife.

That night the woman's neighbors hear a racket next door, broken glass. And in the morning they see a shattered window and a bowling ball on the front lawn. So we have a story within a story. But what stands out is Kenneth’s reaction, and his voice, which is so anchored to the time, the 1940s. What is terribly aggravating for me, by this time, is that I can't tell you what Kenneth says, not verbatim, anyway. That would be a violation of copyright. I can give you the gist of it, but I can't outright quote him. But the delivery is skillful, and the dialogue is a great period-piece sampling.

The gist: Kenneth is upset that his brother Vince has done this to the woman, allowed her to find out about her husband's apparent lack of fidelity. He agrees that what she did to her husband by denying him his simple pleasures was wrong, but he believes she didn't understand that, and he asks Vince to please not do this to her. I wish you could hear him say it for himself. What a marvelous performance. It is the perfect illustration of young Kenneth's entire being, his outstanding, pure innocence, his soul. And it is captured in not more than twelve lines!

What we are left with, and what I will leave you with, are Kenneth's moral outrage, and his beautiful, unique voice, which I will have to hand to you in Salinger's very memorable and quotable bouquet of “early blooming parentheses”:

(((0))))

Now off to the movie theater with my wife. With any luck I'll be able to eavesdrop on a conversation or two in the audience. Of course I'll pretend to be deeply engrossed in the previews, but I'll remember every word.

Work Cited