

Finding Salinger



It had been raining again today, so Sonia had decided to forego her original plan to walk home after school. On a nicer day, it wouldn't have been too bad. Her house was just a little over a mile away from the school where she had just started her seventh year, and if she walked fast, she could cover the distance in less than twenty minutes. When she had her headphones in and listened to music, it felt like the time and distance went by even faster. Lately, she had been trying to listen to her older brother Tom's music collection. It was mostly just old guys with guitars: Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, and Bruce Springsteen. Sonia thought it was alright; nothing special. But it was better than nothing.

It was better than nothing, which was exactly what she had today. Her MP3 player had run out of battery, so she left it at home to charge. And she wasn't allowed to have a cellphone until high school, so she couldn't keep herself occupied by playing games or sending text messages to her friends, like everyone else on the bus was doing. It was pretty unfair, she thought. Everyone else got to have a phone to entertain themselves, and she just had to sit there, bored, wasting her time. She stared out the window at the grey skies and grey town, and thought about how ugly it all was. Then she shifted her attention to the spots and smudges on the window, inspecting them to see if they looked like anything. She found a group of water spots that formed a lopsided face. The rest looked like nothing at all. Everything was just so dreary. Bored with her game, she sat and stared blankly into space for the remainder of the short bus trip.

The bus dropped her off just half a block from the house she lived in with her mom, brother and cat, Salinger. They had rescued the cat from a shelter less than a year ago. It was a grey tabby cat with black stripes, and Tom had insisted on naming it after some writer he liked. They had adopted the cat at Sonia's insistence, because she wanted someone to keep her company in the afternoons when her mom was still at the accounting firm, and Tom was at his part-time job at the mall food court. Salinger was already a few years old when they brought him home, and at first Sonia had been disappointed not to get a kitten, but later she decided it was probably better this way. He had a good temperament and wasn't constantly scratching and biting at things. Most afternoons, he was content to just curl up in Sonia's lap and let her stroke his ears while she did her homework or watched television.

As she unlocked the front door, Sonia decided that today she would allow herself to just lie around for an afternoon and do nothing but watch cartoons. She didn't have much homework anyway, and there wasn't much else to do around the place. When her parents got divorced, her mom had insisted on moving out to a nice house in the suburbs so that Sonia and her brother wouldn't have to grow up amid the chaos and noise of Seattle. But on afternoons like this, thought Sonia, what she wouldn't give to be in the city. She could go to the movies or the arcade or the mall, in a matter of minutes, and she wouldn't have to constantly beg her mother and Tom to drive her around.

Sonia kicked off her sneakers, which were slightly damp from the day's rain, and hung her jacket next to the door. It was a little bit chilly inside the house, because her mom liked to turn the heat off during the day when no one was home, to save on gas bills. Sonia flipped open the thermostat cover and set the temperature to 80 degrees. She felt like making the house really warm so that she could sit in front of the television wearing just a T-shirt and jeans to watch cartoons, and then she could pretend it was summer again, rather than the seemingly never-ending dreariness that went on for months and months every winter.

She pulled her sweater off over her head and set off to find Salinger so that she could watch cartoons with him. In the afternoons, he could usually be found sunbathing in front of one of the upstairs bedroom windows, but he wasn't in one of his regular spots today. Where could that cat have gone to? She checked the closets and the bathrooms, and did a thorough inspection of the rooms downstairs as well, even looking under all the furniture just to be sure. Was it possible he had gotten out?

"SALINGER!" she yelled at the top of her lungs. "SALINGER, COME HERE!"

After a few minutes, she stopped, feeling a bit silly. Logically, she had known that wouldn't work. It's not like they had ever trained him to answer to his name, and did cats even do that, anyway? Not sure. Sonia made a mental note that when she found Salinger she would try to train him to answer to his name.

Then something caught her attention in the kitchen. Sonia noticed that one of the windows above the sink had been left slightly ajar—Tom had opened it in the morning after setting off the smoke alarm while making toast. It might just be possible for a cat to jump onto the counter and slip through that opening. Salinger wasn't an outdoor cat, though, and he had never gone out of the house since they'd brought him home. Worried, Sonia quickly bundled up again, jammed her feet into her still-damp sneakers, and went out to the backyard to look for the cat.

She couldn't remember the last time she had actually come out here. No one in her family was particularly inclined toward gardening or home improvement, so they had left the backyard the way it was when they moved in. It was overgrown and untamed, covered in wild grass and shapeless bushes, and there was never quite enough sunlight, due to the massive trees that cast their shadows over the yard all year round. It felt like being in a forest. Everything was still covered in water droplets from the day's rain, and the ground smelled damp and sweet in that special way that only wet earth and vegetation can smell.

This was one thing Sonia enjoyed about living out in the middle of nowhere. When it rained in the city, it just smelled like wet pavement, mixed with the same city smells that are always there: cigarette smoke, gasoline, exhaust, urine.

She spotted a movement out of the corner of her eye, near an opening in a thicket. Salinger? She immediately followed the source of the movement, pushing her way through the thicket to see if the cat had gone through to the other side. She had to hunch over to get through the opening, and she emerged on the other side with her clothes damp and all covered with leaves. Hopefully there weren't any creepy bugs in that thicket. She started checking her clothes to see if she had anything crawling on her, but then she saw something that made her forget her concerns about spiders and ants.

Right in front of her, there was a small pond that she could have sworn had never been there before. She hadn't been out in the backyard in a very long time, but the summer her family had moved in, Sonia had done some exploring, and she certainly would have remembered if there had been a pond. Looking closely, she could see small shapes swimming around in the water—tadpoles! The pond must have been dry in the summer, but the torrential rains of the past few weeks had restored it!

And over on the other side of the pond, also staring intently at the tadpoles, was Salinger the cat!

"Salinger!" Sonia hissed at him. The cat looked up. So he does know what his name is, she thought. She went over and scooped him up, carefully carrying him back through the thicket and toward the house.

Before going back inside the warm house, she turned back to look at the yard and took a deep breath, inhaling the earthy smell. I should really come out here more, she thought. There was a whole world out here she had been missing. Maybe tomorrow she would take Salinger out to try and catch some of the tadpoles in the pond.