

Selection of Letters Available for "What Would Holden Do?"

Selection 1:

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.

Selection 2:

When I got out of the bathroom, I heard a noise in the room where we left our coats. I opened the door, and I saw Patrick kissing Brad. It was a stolen type of kissing. They heard me in the door and turned around. Patrick spoke first.

"Is that you, Charlie?"

"Sam's making me a milkshake."

"Who is this kid?" Brad just looked real nervous and not in the Bob way. "He's a friend of mine.

Relax."

Patrick then took me out of the room and closed the door. He put his hands on both of my shoulders and looked me straight in the eye.

"Brad doesn't want people to know."

"Why?"

"Because he's scared."

"Why?"

"Because he is ... wait ... are you stoned?"

"They said I was downstairs. Sam is making me a milkshake." Patrick tried to keep from laughing.

"Listen, Charlie. Brad doesn't want people to know. I need you to promise that you won't tell anyone. This will be our little secret. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Thanks."

With that, Patrick turned around and went back into the room. I heard some muffled voices, and Brad seemed upset, but I didn't think it was any of my business, so I went back to the kitchen.

I have to say that it was the best milkshake I ever had in my life. It was so delicious, it almost scared me.

Before we left the party, Sam played me a few of her favorite songs. One was called "Blackbird." The other was called "MLK." They were both very beautiful. I mentioned the titles because they were as great when I listened to them sober.

Another interesting thing happened at the party before we left. Patrick came downstairs. I guess Brad had left. And Patrick smiled. And Bob started to make fun of him having a crush on the quarterback. And Patrick smiled more. I don't think I ever saw Patrick smile so much. Then, Patrick pointed at me, and said something to Bob.

"He's something, isn't he?"

Bob nodded his head. Patrick then said something I don't think I'll ever forget.

"He's a wallflower."

And Bob really nodded his head. And the whole room nodded their head. And I started to feel nervous in the Bob way, but Patrick didn't let me get too nervous. He sat down next to me.

"You see things. You keep quiet about them. And you understand." I didn't know that other people thought things about me. I didn't know that they looked. I was sitting on the floor of a basement of my first real party between Sam and Patrick, and I remembered that Sam introduced me as her friend to Bob. And I

remembered that Patrick had done the same for Brad. And I started to cry. And nobody in that room looked at me weird for doing it. And then I really started to cry.

Bob raised his drink and asked everyone to do the same.

"To Charlie."

And the whole group said, "To Charlie."

I didn't know why they did that, but it was very special to me that they did. Especially Sam. Especially her.

Selection 3:

December 21, 1991

Dear friend,

Wow. Wow. I can paint the picture for you if you like. We are all sitting in Sam and Patrick's house, which I had never seen before. It was a rich house. Very clean. And we were all giving our final presents. The outside lights were on, and it was snowing, and it looked like magic. Like we were somewhere else. Like we were someplace better.

It was the first time I had ever met Sam and Patrick's parents. They were so nice. Sam's mom is very pretty and tells great jokes. Sam said she used to be an actress when she was younger. Patrick's dad is very tall and has a great handshake. He is also a very good cook. A lot of parents make you feel very awkward when you meet them. But not Sam and Patrick's. They were friendly all through dinner, and when dinner was over, they left so we could have our party. They didn't even check on us or anything. Not once. They just let us pretend it was our house. So, we decided to have the party in the "games" room, which had no games but a great rug.

When I revealed that I was Patrick's Secret Santa, everyone laughed because everyone knew, and Patrick did his best impersonation of being surprised, which was nice of him. Then, everyone asked what my last gift was, and I told them it was a poem I read a long time ago. It was a poem that Michael made a copy of for me. And I have read it a thousand times since because I don't know who wrote it. I don't know if it was ever in a book or a class. And I don't know how old the person was. But I know that I want to know him or her. I want to know that this person is okay.

So, everyone asked me to stand up and read the poem. And I wasn't shy because we were trying to act like grown-ups, and we drank brandy. And I was warm. I'm still a little warm, but I have to tell you this. So, I stood up, and just before I read this poem, I asked everyone if they knew who wrote it to please tell me.

When I was done reading the poem, everyone was quiet. A very sad quiet. But the amazing thing was that it wasn't a bad sad at all. It was just something that made everyone look around at each other and know that they were there. Sam and Patrick looked at me. And I looked at them. And I think they knew. Not anything specific really. They just knew. And I think that's all you can ever ask from a friend.

That's when Patrick put on the second side of the tape I made for him and poured everyone another glass of brandy. I guess we all looked a little silly drinking it, but we didn't feel silly. I can tell you that.

As the songs kept playing, Mary Elizabeth stood up. But she wasn't holding a suit coat. It turns out that she wasn't my Secret Santa at all. She was the Secret Santa to the other girl with the tattoo and belly

button ring, whose real name is Alice. She gave her some black nail polish that Alice had had her eye on. And Alice was very grateful. I just sat there, looking around the room. Looking for the suit coat. Not knowing who could possibly be holding it.

Sam stood up next, and she gave Bob a handcrafted Native American marijuana pipe, which seemed appropriate.

More people gave more gifts. And more hugs were exchanged. And finally, it came to the end. No one was left except for Patrick. And he stood up and walked into the kitchen.

"Does anyone want any chips?"

Everyone did. And he came out with three tubes of Pringles and a suit coat. And he walked up to me. And he said that all the great writers used to wear suits all the time.

So, I put on the suit even though I didn't feel like I really deserved to since all I write are essays for Bill, but it was such a nice present, and everyone clapped their hands anyway. Sam and Patrick both agreed I looked handsome. Mary Elizabeth smiled. I think it was the first time in my life I ever felt like I looked "good." Do you know what I mean? That nice feeling when you look in the mirror, and your hair's right for the first time in your life? I don't think we should base so much on weight, muscles, and a good hair day, but when it happens, it's nice. It really is.

The rest of the evening was very special. Since a lot of people were going away with their families to places like Florida and Indiana, we all exchanged presents with the people we weren't Secret Santas for.

Bob gave Patrick an eighth of marijuana with a Christmas card attached. He even wrapped it. Mary Elizabeth gave Sam earrings. So did Alice. And Sam gave them earrings, too. I think that is a private girl thing. I have to admit, I felt a little sad because other than Sam and Patrick, nobody got me a present. I guess I'm not that close with them, so it makes sense. But I still felt a little sad.

And then it came to my turn. I gave Bob a little plastic tube of soap bubbles because it just seemed to fit his personality. I guess I was right.

"Too much," was all he said.

He spent the rest of the night blowing bubbles at the ceiling.

Next was Alice. I gave her a book by Anne Rice because she is always talking about her. And she looked at me like she couldn't believe I knew she loved Anne Rice. I guess she didn't know how much she talked or how much I listen. But she thanked me all the same. Next came Mary Elizabeth. I gave her forty dollars inside a card. The card said something pretty simple: "To be spent on printing Punk Rocky in color next time."

And she looked at me funny. Then, they all started to look at me funny except for Sam and Patrick. I think they started feeling bad because they didn't get me anything. But I don't think they should have because I don't think that's the point really. Mary Elizabeth just smiled, and said thanks, and then stopped looking at me in the eye.

Last came Sam. I had been thinking about this present for a long time. I think I thought about this present from the first time I really saw her. Not met her or saw her but the first time I really saw her if you know what I mean. There was a card attached.

Inside the card, I told Sam that the present I gave her was given to me by my Aunt Helen. It was an old 45 record that had the Beatles' song "Something." I used to listen to it all the time when I was little and thinking about grown-up things. I would go to my bedroom window and stare at my reflection in the glass and the trees behind it and just listen to the song for hours. I decided then that when I met someone I thought was as beautiful as the song, I should give it to that person. And I didn't mean beautiful on the outside. I meant beautiful in all ways. So, I was giving it to Sam.

Sam looked at me soft. And she hugged me. And I closed my eyes because I wanted to know nothing but her arms. And she kissed my cheek and whispered so nobody could hear.

"I love you."

I knew that she meant it in a friend way, but I didn't care because it was the third time since my Aunt Helen died that I heard it from anyone. The other two times were from my mom.

After that, I couldn't believe that Sam actually got me a present because I honestly thought that the "I love you" was it. But she did get me a present. And for the first time, something nice like that made me smile and not cry. I guess Sam and Patrick went to the same thrift store because their gifts went together. She took me to her room and stood me in front of her dresser, which was covered in a pillowcase with pretty colors. She lifted off the pillowcase, and there I was, standing in my old suit, looking at an old typewriter with a fresh ribbon. Inside the typewriter was a piece of white paper.

On that piece of white paper, Sam wrote, "Write about me sometime." And I typed something back to her, standing right here in her bedroom. I just typed.

"I will."

And I felt good that those were the first two words that I ever typed on my new old typewriter that Sam gave me. We just sat there quiet for a moment, and she smiled. And I moved to the typewriter again, and I wrote something.

"I love you, too."

And Sam looked at the paper, and she looked at me.

"Charlie ... have you ever kissed a girl?"

I shook my head no. It was so quiet.

"Not even when you were little?"

I shook my head no again. And she looked very sad.

She told me about the first time she was kissed. She told me that it was with one of her dad's friends. She was seven. And she told nobody about it except for Mary Elizabeth and then Patrick a year ago. And she started to cry. And she said something that I won't forget. Ever.

"I know that you know that I like Craig. And I know that I told you not to think of me that way. And I know that we can't be together like that. But I want to forget all those things for a minute. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I want to make sure that the first person you kiss loves you. Okay?"

"Okay." She was crying harder now. And I was, too, because when I hear something like that I just can't help it.

"I just want to make sure of that. Okay?"

"Okay."

And she kissed me. It was the kind of kiss that I could never tell my friends about out loud. It was the kind of kiss that made me know that I was never so happy in my whole life.

*Once on a yellow piece of paper with green lines
he wrote a poem
And he called it "Chops"
because that was the name of his dog
And that's what it was all about
And his teacher gave him an A
and a gold star
And his mother hung it on the kitchen door
and read it to his aunts
That was the year Father Tracy
took all the kids to the zoo
And he let them sing on the bus
And his little sister was born
with tiny toenails and no hair
And his mother and father kissed a lot
And the girl around the corner sent him a*

*Valentine signed with a row of X's
and he had to ask his father what the X's meant
And his father always tucked him in bed at night
And was always there to do it*

*Once on a piece of white paper with blue lines
he wrote a poem
And he called it "Autumn"
because that was the name of the season
And that's what it was all about
And his teacher gave him an A
and asked him to write more clearly
And his mother never hung it on the kitchen door
because of its new paint
And the kids told him
that Father Tracy smoked cigars
And left butts on the pews
And sometimes they would burn holes
That was the year his sister got glasses
with thick lenses and black frames
And the girl around the corner laughed
when he asked her to go see Santa Claus
And the kids told him why
his mother and father kissed a lot
And his father never tucked him in bed at night
And his father got mad
when he cried for him to do it.*

*Once on a paper torn from his notebook
he wrote a poem
And he called it "Innocence: A Question"
because that was the question about his girl
And that's what it was all about
And his professor gave him an A
and a strange steady look
And his mother never hung it on the kitchen door
because he never showed her
That was the year that Father Tracy died
And he forgot how the end
of the Apostle's Creed went
And he caught his sister
making out on the back porch
And his mother and father never kissed
or even talked
And the girl around the corner
wore too much makeup
That made him cough when he kissed her
but he kissed her anyway
because that was the thing to do
And at three A.M. he tucked himself into bed
his father snoring soundly*

*That's why on the back of a brown paper bag
he tried another poem
And he called it "Absolutely Nothing"
Because that's what it was really all about
And he gave himself an A
and a slash on each damned wrist
And he hung it on the bathroom door
because this time he didn't think
he could reach the kitchen.*

That was the poem I read for Patrick. Nobody knew who wrote it, but Bob said he heard it before, and he heard that it was some kid's suicide note. I really hope it wasn't because then I don't know if I like the ending.

Love always,
Charlie

Selection 3:

January 1, 1992

Dear friend,

It's now 4 o'clock in the morning, which is the new year even though it's still December 31, that is, until people sleep. I can't sleep. Everyone else is either asleep or having sex. I've been watching cable television and eating jello. And seeing things move. I wanted to tell you about Sam and Patrick and Craig and Brad and Bob and everyone, but I can't remember right now.

It's peaceful outside. I do know that. And I drove to the Big Boy earlier. And I saw Sam and Patrick. And they were with Brad and Craig. And it made me very sad because I wanted to be alone with them. This has never come up before.

Things were worse an hour ago, and I was looking at this tree but it was a dragon and then a tree, and I remembered that one nice pretty weather day when I was part of the air. And I remembered that I mowed the lawn that day for my allowance just like I shovel the driveway for my allowance now. So I started shoveling Bob's driveway, which is a strange thing to do at a New Year's Eve party really.

My cheeks were red cold just like Mr. Z's drinking face and his black shoes and his voice saying when a caterpillar goes into a cocoon, it goes through torture and how it takes seven years to digest gum. And this one kid Mark at the party who gave me this came out of nowhere and looked at the sky and told me to see the stars. So, I looked up, and we were in this giant dome like a glass snowball, and Mark said that the amazing white stars were really only holes in the black glass of the dome, and when you went to heaven, the glass broke away, and there was nothing but a whole sheet of star white, which is brighter than anything but doesn't hurt your eyes. It was vast and open and thinly quiet, and I felt so small.

Sometimes, I look outside, and I think that a lot of other people have seen this snow before. Just like I think that a lot of other people have read those books before. And listened to those songs.

I wonder how they feel tonight.

I don't really know what I'm saying. I probably shouldn't write this down because I'm still seeing things move. I want them to stop moving, but they're not supposed to for another few hours. That's what Bob said before he went to his bedroom with Jill, a girl that I don't know.

I guess what I'm saying is that this all feels very familiar. But it's not mine to be familiar about. I just know that another kid has felt this. This one time when it's peaceful outside, and you're seeing things move, and you don't want to, and everyone is asleep. And all the books you've read have been read by other people. And all the songs you've loved have been heard by other people. And that girl that's pretty

to you is pretty to other people. And you know that if you looked at these facts when you were happy, you would feel great because you are describing "unity."

It's like when you are excited about a girl and you see a couple holding hands, and you feel so happy for them. And other times you see the same couple, and they make you so mad. And all you want is to always feel happy for them because you know that if you do, then it means that you're happy, too.

I just remembered what made me think of all this. I'm going to write it down because maybe if I do I won't have to think about it. And I won't get upset. But the thing is that I can hear Sam and Craig having sex, and for the first time in my life, I understand the end of that poem.

And I never wanted to. You have to believe me.

Love always,
Charlie

Selection 4:

I was last. Sam walked up and held me for a long time. Finally, she whispered in my ear. She said a lot of wonderful things about how it was okay that I wasn't ready last night and how she would miss me and how she wanted me to take care of myself while she was gone.

"You're my best friend," was all I could say in return.

She smiled and kissed my cheek, and it was like for a moment, the bad part of last night disappeared. But it still felt like a good-bye rather than a "see ya." The thing was, I didn't cry. I didn't know what I felt.

Finally, Sam climbed into her pickup, and Patrick started it up. And a great song was playing. And everyone smiled. Including me. But I wasn't there anymore.

It wasn't until I couldn't see the cars that I came back and things started feeling bad again. But this time, they felt much worse. Mary Elizabeth and everyone were crying now, and they asked me if I wanted to go to the Big Boy or something. I told them no. Thank you. I need to go home.

"Are you okay, Charlie?" Mary Elizabeth asked. I guess I was starting to look bad again because she looked worried.

"I'm fine. I'm just tired," I lied. I got in my dad's car, and drove away. And I could hear all these songs on the radio, but the radio wasn't on. And when I got into the driveway, I think I forgot to turn off the car. I just went to the couch in the family room where the TV is. And I could see the TV shows, but the TV wasn't on.

I don't know what's wrong with me. It's like all I can do is keep writing this gibberish to keep from breaking apart. Sam's gone. And Patrick won't be home for a few days. And I just couldn't talk with Mary Elizabeth or anybody or my brother or anybody in my family. Except maybe my aunt Helen. But she's gone. And even if she were here, I don't think I could talk to her either. Because I'm starting to feel like what I dreamt about her last night was true. And my psychiatrist's questions weren't weird after all.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. I know other people have it a lot worse. I do know that, but it's crashing in anyway, and I just can't stop thinking that the little kid eating french fries with his mom in the shopping mall is going to grow up and hit my sister. I'd do anything not to think that. I know I'm thinking too fast again, and it's all in my head like the trance, but it's there, and it won't go away. I just keep seeing him, and he keeps hitting my sister, and he won't stop, and I want him to stop because he doesn't mean it, but he just doesn't listen, and I don't know what to do.

I'm sorry, but I have to stop this letter now.

But first, I want to thank you for being one of those people who listens and understands and doesn't try to sleep with people even though you could have. I really mean it, and I'm sorry I've put you through this when you don't even know who I am, and we've never met in person, and I can't tell you who I am because I promised to keep all those little secrets. I just don't want you to think that I picked your name out of the phone book. It would kill me if you thought that. So, please believe me when I tell you

that I felt terrible after Michael died, and I saw a girl in class, who didn't notice me, and she talked all about you to a friend of hers. And even though I didn't know you, I felt like I did because you sounded like such a good person. The kind of person who wouldn't mind receiving letters from a kid. The kind of person who would understand how they were better than a diary because there is communion and a diary can be found. I just don't want you to worry about me, or think that you've met me, or waste your time anymore. I'm so sorry that I wasted your time because you really do mean a lot to me and I hope you have a very nice life because I really think you deserve it. I really do. I hope you do, too. Okay, then. Goodbye.

Love always,
Charlie