MENTIDA

(A Lie)

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“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.”

The Catcher in the Rye,
J. D. Salinger

According to statistics, in past 12 months there were more than 18,000 crimes committed by minors. The most frequent of these were robberies: of cars, money, electronic devices (above all, mobile telephones). Occurring in all sorts of places: cars, supermarkets, out on the streets, inside houses. A total of 9,782 robberies.

Most of the young thieves were 17 years old. 17 must be a difficult age. Perhaps between 16 and 18 people get bored. The fact is that in just one year the police caught more than 3,000 17 year-old thieves. For 14 year-olds, on the other hand, the number was only half of that: 1,505.

After robbery, the statistics list assault and bodily harm: 2,416 minors ended up in jail for this reason. “Bodily harm” is when you fight a guy, hit him, and really hurt him. After this was rape: 267. Well, the law refers to these as “crimes against sexual freedom and identity”.

And then we get to the top of the list. Here we have murders. “Homicide and its forms”, as the law says. Total: 44 convictions. In short, not so many. Of these 44, 43 were boys. The only girl murderer this year was 16 years old. 17 yearolds led by a mile. There were 20. There were also some 16 year-old murderers, but a lot less: the official data says 13. Even so, it’s hard to imagine, isn’t it? In the Tarot, card number 13 is Death; how nice. We also had eight 15 year-old murderers and three 14 year-olds. Just three 14 year-olds. Three is very few.

The judges in juvenile court do not even want to hear about those under 14. Younger than 14 means that you are a child, an innocent kid, and “immune from prosecution”. This means that, no matter what you do, you cannot be found guilty. You are someone who still does not understand how the world works. Someone whom life has never given a bitter pill to swallow. A privileged person. For them, you don’t exist.

We are left with this: three 14 year-old murderers. Three weirdos among the weirdos. Any expert will tell you this: Murder is a crime very rarely committed by young criminals. It is too serious, it requires too great an effort, people do not just die. Even though that occasionally happens. Everything happens, sooner or later. We humans are crazy. Any of us is capable of anything in the right circumstances. In society, there has to be some forbidden fruit so that the other people, the good, healthy people, can reject it, distance

themselves from it, not allow themselves to be contaminated by it. Relax everybody. 14 year-old murderers are not the norm.

I am an exception. A statistical anomaly.

Sometimes, I wonder what the other two did.

I
SALINGER

1

My parents are a drag. Every night after dinner they get all wrapped up arguing about all sorts of complicated things: banks, the financial crisis, the United States, global security, crime, poverty and so on. They are like those talk shows on TV that go on forever and are about as exciting as watching paint dry. I really cannot understand them. They usually don't argue about each other, but they can go for hours and hours bickering about this stuff. They are so weird.

Take their argument from the other day. The TV news was showing some footage of a tall, blond kid punching another boy in the face while they rode on the subway. An unprovoked, racist attack, they said. The victim was Asian, born in Mongolia. The attacker was caught by the police and the judge sent him to a juvenile detention center. You could not see his face on the tape because they blurred it out. Because the law protects underage suspects, my mother explained. My father frowned disapprovingly. He does not think things should be that way. Mom thinks that minors should be given another chance, that at 17 there is nothing that can't be straightened out. My father asked her which side she was on, since she was now defending delinquents.

"That poor boy probably had no one who looked after him. If he had, he would have known the difference between right and wrong, and not do things like this," she said.

"Come on! A 17 year-old knows full well what's right and what's wrong, and how he should act. And the poor guy who got hit, who is standing up for him, huh?" my father shot back.

"Everyone, of course," replied my mother. "Everyone always defends the victim. In our society, the people who know how to play the victim get rewarded for it."

Blah, blah, blah. Same as always. What a drag.

For mom, "taking care of me" (I am an only child) means a lot of awful things: never letting me go to school wearing clothes I like; bombarding me with a ton of questions every time I go out; taking my phone away from me at ten o'clock at night with the excuse the battery needs charging; not ever letting me text when I'm in bed (not even on weekends!) and, even worse, not letting me

have a computer in my room. Yes, yes, that is the worst: having to do my homework at the kitchen table just because she wants to “check on what I’m doing” when I’m on the Internet. I have to put up with her standing behind me every so often and looking over my shoulder just to see if there is something that she doesn’t like. She really gets on my nerves!

“What do you want, with the endless amount of homework they give us in high school?” I asked her, to see if she would finally get it. “Also, I’m not a baby anymore, Mom, I know what to avoid on the Internet.”

But no way. My mother is not someone who is easy to persuade. It is as if she does not trust me. She won’t even let me use my phone to go on-line! It’s incredible! Dad looks at me, his jaw clenched, like he’s on my side, but he doesn’t know what to say to change her mind. Neither of us does.

Once my father said: “It isn’t that Mom doesn’t trust you, Xenia. It’s that there is dangerous stuff on the Internet that you don’t understand now and that makes us worry. Both of us.”

“I know all about what bad stuff there is on the Internet. I’m not a little girl.”

Dad shook his head.

“In a few years, you’ll understand our position on this better,” he added.

“I don’t think I’ll ever understand you two,” I muttered, and Dad smiled.

Dad smiles easily. It’s what I like best about him. I can talk to him about anything, because he never freaks out like Mom does and because he never treats me like I’m still ten years old. I have no problem sharing my secrets with my father. That night, for example, I almost told him about Marcelo. I was dying to do that, to tell him how everything was suddenly changing and how I felt. Happy, weird, different. For the last several days I can’t think about anything else.

If I had told him, I am sure he wouldn’t have given me any of that standard parent talk. But he would have told Mom, and that would really be a problem. Mom and Dad always tell each other everything.

Luckily, I shut up in time.

Luckily?

2

Mom had already noticed. She always notices everything. I don't know how she does it.

"Xenia! Would you mind concentrating on what you're doing? I don't know where your head is at!"

"Xenia! Where are you going with the garbage? What are you thinking?"

"Xenia! Where are you doing there like a stick in the mud? Why are you being so absent-minded?"

She was right. I was being absent-minded. A lot. I would go to take out the garbage and halfway down the stairs I would stop, hypnotized, thinking. I would freeze in the midst of setting the table with a goofy smile on my face holding the water glasses, not knowing what I was doing.

I also started worrying about my grades for the second trimester. They were going to be a disaster. I hadn't been very focused on school lately, you might say. I even failed two math exams in a row. "It's OK. I can make up for those," I thought to myself. And when Mom asked me how the review tests had gone, I muttered a short:

"Good."

"So, we're going to be glad when we see your grades?" she asked. This was one of her standard questions.

"I don't know," I said, my heart racing.

I knew perfectly well that they were not going to be glad at all. But I still had 27 days left before that disaster hit.

During those days I looked for justification for everything I did. When my parents saw my grades, it was going to be horrible, but for now my head was in the clouds. I had always been a good student, so I wasn't too worried: I could still pull it together. What I didn't want to do –no way! – was get off that emotional rollercoaster that I had suddenly started riding on.

Something major was happening to me.

There might be consequences, but I would accept them. I had already had.

Or maybe when a category five hurricane rips through your life, it leaves something else behind in its place?

My category five hurricane was named Marcelo and he was a ghost. I ought to say that he was not –not yet anyway– a flesh and blood being. He was a virtual being, who lived in my head and in my computer.

I met him in a very strange way, thanks to a book I checked out from the municipal library. It was a recommendation from my philosophy teacher to help boost my grade: *The Catcher in the Rye*, by some guy named J. D. Salinger. The librarian handed me the book together with bookmark that read: "Share what you're reading with other kids in the reading club on our website". It sounded like it was worth a look. I could find out what the book was about or, at least, see what other people thought about it.

I logged on to the library forum that same night. I clicked around here and there, looking for interesting comments. Then I found this:

"Do you guys think that a book can change your life? Before I would have said "no" without even thinking about it. But this book convinced me otherwise. I've read it a bunch of times and each time I ask myself how the author, Salinger, was able to write things that I've thought or felt exactly. Point by point, without leaving anything out. I swear it can freak you out a bit. I'd love to be friends with the author so I could call him on the phone and invite him to have a beer. I'd tell him: 'I'm the new Holden Caulfield. A hopeless case, like him. I also flip out sometimes. I'm also convinced that it's almost always best to never say anything to anyone, because people never really understand you.' I'd also like to ask him a few questions. For example: 'This Caulfield, in the book, is that you? All the things you write about, did they really happen? Because if they really did happened, I could see why they seem so real. If not, I have to say that I have no idea how you did it, man, seriously.' OK, I'll stop now. This book is amazing, believe me guys. This is the only time I'll give you all any advice in my entire life.

That message in the forum sparked my curiosity, and that was before I found out that *The Catcher in the Rye* was a very famous book, one that could roughly be summed up this way: a messed-up guy does a bunch of dumb staff

in New York after being expelled from high school for being lazy and problematic. It's supposed to be the author's masterpiece. He must have been a bit messed-up himself, I guess. This novel made him rich. Now he's dead, but every year thousands of people read the book.

I took it with me to bed and started reading it. When looked up again it was midnight and I had read almost half the book. A total record! I was at the part when Sunny goes to Holden's hotel room, on page 103. I was totally hooked! Probably because it was the most powerful thing I'd ever read in my life up to that point.

The next day I went back to the library's on-line reading club searching for the comment that inspired my marathon reading session. To be honest, I was looking for the e-mail address of the person who wrote it. I found his profile, with some info. Age: 17. High School: Ricard Salvat. E-mail: HoldenCaulfield@_____ . Of course! It had to be him. The name of the unhappy protagonist, just like he had written. I smiled when I read that. I felt I understood him a bit.

I immediately wrote to him:

Hi, Lost Cause. I'm just writing to say thanks for your recommendation. Last night I started reading The Catcher in the Rye *and today I'm completely hooked. I think, unlike you, that I would not want to meet the author at all and that disaster of a lead character even less. I don't like that Caulfield guy at all and I'm already on page 103. And he's also a bit scary. Why do you say that you're like him? I know you said that it's not worth the trouble explaining anything to anyone, but I'd like to ask you do that because I really want to know. I hope you*
write me back Holden.

Sincerely, Xenia.

Isn't that a completely stupid way to start a story? Sometimes life is completely stupid.

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It took a while for him to answer. A week, more or less. And when he did, he didn't write very much:

Hi Xenia. What a cool name. Is it your real name?

Don't you think that everyone's a bit crazy, in one way or another?

Haven't you ever done something insane? By the way, are you enjoying the book? I wasn't sure. If you're on page 103, the best is yet to come. You'll see.

I hit "reply".

I think you're right. We're all a bit less "normal" than we pretend to be, but only a few of us dare to admit it. I liked the book a lot. I took it back to the library a few days ago. I had to do some homework for philosophy (I got the best grade in the class). Salinger is a mysterious guy, you know? He didn't like being famous, never wanted to be photographed, he wrote more but he didn't want it to be published. I don't understand how people can be like that. By the way, yes, Xenia is my real name. And what's yours? I am 16 and a senior in high chool. Do you have a mobile phone? We could talk using WhatsApp, if you want. It'd be more practical.

Send. Sending. Message sent.

Less than ten seconds later, a beep announced the reply. Very short again:

I don't have a cell phone. What grade did you get, nerd? My name is Marcelo López and I'm 17. I didn't know that about Salinger. Thanks for telling me. I like to learn things. But I like chatting with you more.

Reply:

I got an A, of course. What did you expect? I don't mean to be stuck up, but I'm a fairly brilliant student. I have to be, because I want to be a doctor and you need to have excellent grades to get into medical school. So it's study, study, study or I'll let my family down. My parents are dying to have a doctor in the family! Don't your parents go crazy over stuff like that? Why do you write such short answers? And why don't you have a mobile phone? What planet are you from? I think you're the first 17 year-old guy without a phone I've met IN MY ENTIRE LIFE. Are you waiting for someone to give you one? I like chatting with you, too, but it would be so much better to use a mobile phone instead of this ancient system we're using now.

Send, et cetera.

This time there was no answer. I waited, impatiently, for quite a while, until I realized that he had logged off, or maybe he was doing something else. Or maybe he had a mother like mine, who always told him when he had to do something and how he had to do it. In short, another innocent victim of maternal tyranny.

That afternoon I thought a lot about him. I frequently checked my e-mail to see if he had answered. No such luck.

The answer came two days later.

I can't write very much where I am. Believe me I'm really sorry about that. Can we keep writing this way until I get a cell phone? Can you tell me what you look like? I'd like to be able to imagine you.

I answered him right away. Very brief, like him:

Where are you?

I'm not very good with descriptions. You know the saying "a picture's worth a thousand words"? Well, here's one.

And I attached a photo. One taken toward the end of last school year. I haven't changed that much since then. In the photo you can't really see my

buckteeth and I still had my hair long. That is why I chose that one. Also, I was wearing a black sweater that made me look older and it had a sexy neckline.

My heart was beating a mile a minute as I imagined him looking at it. I didn't have to wait for an answer at all.

Xenia, you look amazing. You seem older than 16. I am very sorry, but I don't have a photo of me that I can send you. But I'll try to get one. I feel very fortunate since we started talking. Thank you, thank you so much.

Have you ever thought about how much time it takes to fall in love? A second? Five minutes? Two hours? A day? A week?

All are correct.