

Nov. 7, 1952

Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.

My dear Francoise:- On rereading your letter I see it is exactly one month since you wrote it. At what stage of the game was I when I dispatched the letter to which yours is an answer? Since I wrote from bed and the word Doctor is in the plural, it must have been at the time I had such trouble with the "tournis" and was being scrutinized, at intervals, by various men of science who tapped me on the knee-cap with little hammers and plunged me into a state of terror by asking me to stand erect with my eyes closed ("don't worry: I'll catch you" - a statement that is just about impossible to believe). The plot thickened rapidly from then on and soon reached a degree of density through which no amount of backward glancing and memory-searching can penetrate. The lights came on quite abruptly one evening in the middle of October and I found myself sitting on a high stool in my brother Shirley's kitchen. Behind me stood Shirley's mother-in-law who holds some sort of medical degree and practices a thing called osteopathy, which some people vow has saved their life and others decry as charlatanism. Anyway she was at work massaging my back and snapping my neck and assuring me I'd feel much better. Suddenly the door opened and in burst Phil. He ordered Mrs. Mills to take her hands off his wife, called her a quack and a couple of other things, and she exited in tears, announcing to the world at large that she was a sure-enough doctor and surgeon and had cured hundreds of ailing citizens. On our way home shortly after this ridiculous scene, I had the curious experience of being forced to ask Phil the date and to confess that a three-week chunk of my life was quite non-existent in my recollection - in most legends, such as Rip van Winkle and the Belle au Bois Dormant, it's 100 years but 21 days can seem just as long when you put the thing into your own experience. Ten of those 21 days I spent in a hospital receiving electric shock treatments, which are responsible for the loss of memory. Before that I somehow manipulated the home life and even kept my diary. This is merely a line-a-day affair which, from long habit, I write in a little book, along with "2 prs. socks Jenny, 30¢" and "dentist Linda, Fri. 2.30". The archives of housewifery can make dull reading and the pages that cover Sept 20 to Oct 1 are no exception but they fascinate me and I keep having to peer at them when no one is looking because they make me wonder about the human mind and its ability to continue, despite enveloping fog, to push the human body through such motions as "take children see 'Robin Hood'", "dogs to vet for rabies shot" and "nose drops Linda, 40¢, temp. 101; doctor here for Phil ankle (not sprained)". A faint glimmer of memory illuminates my parents' then unoccupied apartment in New York where I was crossly mopping up some spilled blood and feeling weighed down with shame at the realization that I'd made an attempt on my life (razor blade and the left wrist). Please don't stand in judgment over me for this, which I know to be a sin of the first magnitude. I didn't want anyone to know but after ruining a couple of handkerchiefs I gave up and went to a doctor-cousin of mine with an ineptly-contrived story about peeling potatoes and the knife slipped and so forth. It was he who took me to the hospital, after some delay and confusion arising from an air-raid alarm and the necessity for keeping off the streets. Please forgive me this long dull explanation. There are not many people to whom most of us feel free to talk about illness of the mind, and you'll just have to bear the brunt of this questionable honor. It must have been fear that got me unhinged enough to try to do away with myself. The giddiness and general incoherence were what ailed a former neighbor of ours who finally died in an automobile accident and was discovered to be possessed of a brain tumor. That's what I thought was the matter with me. It's since been proved otherwise. No one knows why shock treatments work the way they do but they're wonderfully effective (and not painful, for you get put to sleep beforehand). Phil and I did get our vacation and, by the way, thank you, my dear, for writing the way you did about the necessity for our going off on a trip. I showed the letter to Phil and what you said helped a lot to persuade him. We drove North, to Vermont and New Hampshire, stayed with Ivy Bacon (now Mrs. Byron Thomas) in the first state and with her sister Martha Churchill in the second. At Martha's place, a vast farm of 700 far-flung acres, we went grouse hunting and I enclose a feather as proof of Phil's success; this correspondent has never managed to shoot a grouse - they have a disconcerting way of exploding into flight from under one's feet and quickly getting ~~between one's feet and the tree trunk~~ a tree trunk or your fellow hunter between themselves and your gun. If you're ever in Phil's company some day and conversation happens to flag (which is unlikely), ask him to tell you how many times he has tried to climb over a fence without having a grouse take advantage of his helpless, broken-gun position. When we got back here ~~nothing~~ we were greeted with a recital of events which sounded like "Tout Va Tres Bien, Madame la Marquise". The maid had departed two hours after our own departure, the nurse got engaged and is leaving in December, the washing-machine broke down,

and so forth and so on. The Doyer history in the field of domestic help ~~was~~ during our fifteen years of married life is a stormy and colorful one, to put it as mildly as possible. Since my return from Europe, however, we've managed to outdo even our wildest stretches of this type of trouble. German-Americans transplanted Finns and even the Irish (that was our last creature, the one who left at the start of our vacation) have walked in and out of this house. Now we have a Negro lady called Willy May David, whose husband Herb, also in residence here, works at a local hospital.

What did you think of the election results? Phil and I got hypnotized by Stevenson's exceptionally intelligent and amusing way of delivering a campaign speech and intended voting for him up until about November 2nd. Then, after much soul searching and lying awake at night, we decided that, in a country which is supposed to have a two-party system, we ought to do what we could to allow the Republicans to take a hand again and cast our vote for Eisenhower. The same process must have gone on in many homes throughout the country, hence the landslide which surprised everybody.

David was for Stevenson, Linda for Eisenhower and Jenny for her "Nursie" with Matterhorn as vice-president. Your god-child is now an untiring walker and chatterer. Her role in the family is definitely that of court jester. It must be fun to be the youngest and so much the object of the whole family's smiles and laughter. Jenny, however, is also getting acquainted with what must be a grave concern of the benjamin - what my mother, in referring to my brother David, called the "Moi Assi spirit". When we have family music: Phil at the piano, Linda wrapped around her cello, David on the clarinet causing everyone no end of transposing trouble because he's in si-bemol, and myself honking out a single, quavering note on a newly-acquired flute, Jenny is quite unhappy until she is given something to do, and so we hand her either the pitch-pipe or Phil's crow-call and she puffs away quite contentedly. She knows where to point when we say "eyes", "ears", etc. She loves to put on her father's shoes and drag them around, delighted at the clomping sound they make. Her favorite expression right now is "no more", which she uses for so many various occasions we realize she doesn't know its meaning and just likes the sound.

My desk looks like the foot of a mountain after an avalanche. A couple of weeks ago two photographs of seagulls drifted to the surface and had me puzzled until this morning when, by dint of shovelling around through the mess, I discovered a letter from Josie and learned (or rather re-learned) that it was she who sent them. Would you please tell her my gratitude for adding to my collection of bird pictures? I'll write her as soon as I've put a few more urgent household tasks behind me. Everything takes longer than usual because I spend so much time worrying about how, when and why I did certain things. This morning, for instance, somebody called up from a shop in Peekskill and said that the blue curtain material I wanted to see had arrived. What material? Why did I want to see it? When did I go to that shop? All I could do was laugh nervously and say thank you, I'll be in.

Please don't think I've become as dry and nasty as this letter sounds. If Phil read it he'd be sure to say "don't try to be sarcastic; it doesn't become you". I'll write again very soon. Give my very best to your parents. I'm so happy to hear your Mother is walking well again. The days I spent with you in Chateaufort, the picnic in Fontainebleau and our meetings in Paris are the only things I remember, out of the month in France, with any degree of clarity or joy.

Much much love to you

I sent you a bundle of New Yorker magazines and added to them a copy of the book I helped illustrate for Phil - it's bright red and called STRESSITEL. If you like the New Yorker please tell me and I'll subscribe to it for you. The Catcher In The Rye belongs to my Mother. I read 3 pages of it and then, not being as adventurous as you, lost the courage to continue.