

5. CHILDREN OF THE DAMNED

Powerful events have a way of shaping our lives. We think about them all the time, and they influence how we think up ourselves. They form an inexorable pattern that connects things together, and this pattern seems to drive what we feel and how we act. Even if we try to resist these forces, they have a mind of their own and carry on to their own conclusion.

If we are lucky, we can figure out that this is going on. My trip to Eddie's or my run in with Vince are two such events in my life. I am sure that Esme must have been affected by some pretty powerful experiences of her own. Each time that she ended back at Eddie's, she was reminded of what had happened. She did everything that she could to avoid going down the same path. Even locking herself at home and watching old movies had that effect. But the numbing only made her more confident that she had conquered the awe-inspiring ghosts. Once they were close enough to her, they started to make their effects known. A couple of drinks and a caress from Tim and she was back on the same roller coaster. She came to expect it, to need it. That's where Eddie came in the picture.

What if none of this had happened? What if she took the film of her life and simply lost a couple of reels. Everything would progress just as it had. Then things would hop to another sequence of events. She would have to fill in the gaps. But she could do it in her own way.

When I was twelve, I thought that I had figured out the key to my freedom. I simply needed to rewrite the story. I recognized that this was going to be difficult. There were simply so many reminders of what had happened in the past. That was why Bill and Hazel clung so vigorously for those tidbits of information from Fox News. But I would have to shut it all out and start again.

I loved the idea of being the author of my own life. If a disaster in the third grade had made me overly shy, I would work to forget that disaster so that my shyness would disappear. In doing this, it seemed more important than ever to try to ignore the zombie world that had been erected by Bill and Hazel. They could prostrate themselves before the electronic Moloch. But I would not make the same mistake. They had attempted to mold me in this reflection of the idol. It was time for me to stand up completely for myself.

The natural course would have been to start writing my own story. But this would leave a paper trail for the very snoops who were trying to direct my fate. This was one of the primary lessons that Bill and Hazel were taught in their re-education camp. They were given license to snoop through their children's stuff. It was pretty evident. Either your child was a little terrorist, or she was a drug lord. Worse, she was a member of a sex ring. You had to stop her before she recruited the other neighborhood kids for her illegal activity.

I needed to work on my dreams. It was a natural recitation that I practiced day in and day out. It made me different than everyone else. I was escaping. I feared that they would be able to discover how I had changed my nature. I was really afraid that I gave off some kind of orange glow that betrayed who I was.

For a few weeks, I wouldn't even look anyone in the eye. I walked with my head down. This had its own pitfalls as I found that I was walking into things. But it was my only hope of avoiding their gaze.

I was at school, still trying to survive my last days in that prison. I walked through the

hall and mistakenly ran into a girl.

“Oh I’m sorry.”

I started to walk on.

“You’re Haley, aren’t you?”

I nodded. I had no idea who she was. I remained in suspicion of this girl. She was in one of the other sixth grade classes.

“Hi, I’m Ginny. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“I hope that it’s good things.”

“Someone told me that you were a very good writer.”

Maybe my plan was working. At least she didn’t bring up Vince. Oh boy, I was making a new friend. I thought that the rest of my days here would be sheer hell, and now I was again tasting the cooling waters.

Ginny invited me to her place. I did what I could to keep out of the way of her parents. They seemed nice enough, but I didn’t want to risk some kind of run in with them. I had enough with Eddie. And I had my own Bill and Hazel.

I could really tell Ginny about my experiences in the land of the dead. I could put my past to rest. The nightmares stopped. I had none of the lingering effects that remained for Esme.

Ginny and I were far beyond the doll playing phase. I didn’t like video games. We did watch movies together.

“My parents don’t let me watch any PG-13 movies.”

I thought that she was going to say R-rated flicks. It wasn’t as if the movie ratings system was handed down by God. It was invented by the movie industry itself and the final rating was always a highly politicized decision. Lo and behold, these crack-house evangelists tried to make a big deal about the whole thing. Now twelve year olds follow the catechism to the letter. Oh my God!

Heaven help us if little Betsy watched a fondled breast. Worse if she fondled her own breast.

“What about the internet?”

“My parents don’t want me to use the internet? They are afraid of all kinds of scientific information.”

What about science class? Why didn’t her parents home-school her?

“There’s nothing really wrong with the internet. It’s like anything that you do. You have to be selective.”

“My parents know what’s best for me.”

Ginny’s parents had bought her a bunch of approved video games. They avoided the violence of the well-known games. “See how many elves the princess can hug.”

“Does it really say that?”

I was not a great fan of video games in general. The idea of killing people from thirty thousand feet had little appeal to me. The mindless killing was the perfect preparation for a career of ruthlessness against your perceived enemies. It was so much easier just to treat all the big problems in life as if they can be resolved by blowing up something and killing someone. “Just give me an excuse. Just find me a terrorist that I can exterminate.”

Ginny’s solution seemed like a grotesque joke about something that was already sick

enough. In the new world order, it was possible to operate a computer in Las Vegas and use a drone to kill someone in Yemen. This was the ultimate in video game.

I saw a movie where they found a bunch of kids to operate killing machines. Many were just playing video games. But the best were in fact operating remote control killing devices. The idea was that enemy could never tell who was really involved since all the kids were playing the game. The game caught on. More and more kids were playing in multiple locations. No one knew who were the real killers and who were simply playing the game.

Ginny's parents advanced an even more advanced version of the same game. The princess could hug the elf just as the drone found its victim. Ginny was taught not to ask questions, to accept the reality that her parents were creating for her. What reason would they have to lie?

It was probably better not to say too much to upset her. I needed to just go along with the world that had been created for her. I was a guest here.

After my session with Ginny, I needed to rush home for some recharging. I scrambled through the cable channels looking for the right movie to get me in the mood. I had to be careful. I didn't want to be reminded of my own bad experiences. Maybe this wasn't a good idea.

I turned off the TV. What if I tried to live like Ginny? I could try it out for a week.

Ginny invited me to stay over on Friday night.

"Are you sure it's OK with your parents?"

"They'd love to have you."

I tried to make myself as presentable as possible. If I was going to change my life, this was the place to start.

Dinner was at 6 PM. I arrived at 4 so we could get ready. Bill dropped me off. I had my bag in hand. Ginny led me upstairs to her room. There was an extra bed in her room.

"This used to be my sister's until she went away for school.."

Dinner was a solemn affair. Ginny and Mrs. Faren brought the food in from the kitchen. I helped Mr. Faren to finish the table setting. We all gathered around the dinner table ready to dig in.

Mr. Faren spoke first, "Haley, it's good to have you over here for dinner. I encourage Ginny to bring her friends here. It our custom to say a blessing before we eat. Since you're our guest, you can do the honor

I was unsure what to do, "Bless this food!"

Mr. Faren impressed on me, "What about Jesus?"

"And bless Jesus too."

He became even more strict, "You may have not been taught proper dinner manners. But you are supposed to ask Jesus to bless the meal. You know it is blasphemous to make fun of the Lord."

I bowed my head, "I meant no disrespect."

"None taken. We have loads of food. Let's get started."

We all ate heartily. There was some small talk about school.

Late in the meal, Mr. Faren seemed inspired, "God taught us a lesson at Sodom and Gomorrah. If we stayed too far from the righteous path, he could destroy his own chosen people. They way that we're going today. He may have to that very thing again today."

“Amen, said Mrs. Faren.

He kept on, “I think that this is the mission of the United States. Someday, we may have to destroy a whole country because it has fallen away from the moral path. Maybe that one act will get America back on the right track. The people will see what the end result is if we fail to mend our ways. And we will have learned our lesson.”

A candle on the dinner table cast an ominous shadow on his face. The fear of the Lord struck deep into my soul.

I was now prepared for an after dinner sermon or perhaps a Bible reading.

“Your father seems like a preacher.”

“He gets very dramatic,” Ginny told me. “But he has to be. The Lord needs his troops to be ready at all time.”

We ended up watching TV before bed. At 9:30 sharp, Mrs. Faren marched into the living room.

“Time for bed, kids.”

After she left, I asked Ginny, “Do you always have to go to bed so early on the weekend.?”

“There’s work to get done in the morning, every morning. Dirt is the devil’s cover. We have to rid it from our home.

I had no idea that I was walking into a maximum security prison. When the lights went out, it was lock down. This was a worse imprisonment than my classroom. I wondered if it was even OK to say anything to Ginny.

“Ginny, are you awake?” I whispered.

I didn’t hear a thing. Maybe she was awake and felt to afraid to answer back.

“Ginny...Ginny.”

I still didn’t hear a thing!

Even if she was awake, she was afraid to say a thing. I lay down and tried to be a quiet as a mouse.

Ginny was tossing in her sleep.

“Haley, Haley.”

It seemed as if she was talking to me.

“Ginny, are you awake?” But she was just mumbling in her sleep.

I had the feeling that the room was bugged. Just like those baby walkie talkies to see what’s going on in the nursery. If the room was bugged, then the parents were probably listening in. What if we were talking about something illicit like having sex with boys.

I could imagine her parents words, “I didn’t let you in my house to pervert my daughter’s morals.”

The mother made sure that her child never had a deviant thought. If she ever talked to friends about evolution or the environment, mother would be ready with an immediate counterattack.

Under the circumstances, it was difficult to fall asleep. Eddie would have loved something like this. The perfect surveillance system. He would have had cameras as well so he could watch his little darlings getting dressed. Was there that much difference between the two ways of thinking? Eddie had probably started in just this sort of environment. He assumed that he could continue to maintain the same attitude towards his victims that his guardians had

applied to him. He couldn't think about love in a caring way. It always implied some form of dominance and ultimate violation.

Just relaxing made me feel more vulnerable to what was going on. If I was in the serpent's lair, then I needed to be vigilant. One slip up and they would use it against me.

The sun was just rising. I woke up and went downstairs. Ginny was the only one up. She was sitting in front of the big TV, the one that they all watched religious services on. She had her video game system hooked in and is playing furiously. There was the princess, a knock off Snow White. And she was being pursued by a vicious Evil Knight.

"If he catches her, he's going to do some really nasty."

The game that she was playing seemed much wilder than the one that she had been playing yesterday.

I asked, "Isn't there anyone to help the Princess?"

"There was. He was her love. But he has gone over to the other side.

I watched as Ginny engaged in bloody sword fights with the Evil Knight's soldiers. I was surprised about how graphic the game was.

"Your parents let you play this game."

"Let me play, hardly. They are asleep in their room. I sneak up early in the morning to play this."

"Where did you get it?"

"It was a special download on the internet. The best part of all is the Evil Knight does these really perverse things to the princess if he catches her."

"Like what? He runs her through with a sword."

"No. These sexual things."

"Really."

"It's like porn. I love it."

"So you play to lose."

"No. I identify with the princess. I don't want these dirty things to happen to me. I have to protect my virtue. But it gets to this point that there's nothing that I can do."

"I think that if I played this game, I would get nightmares."

That moment on the screen, three knights had the princess cornered.

"This could be it," I suggested.

"No way! I live for such confrontation."

Now the princess was armed and beat back her attackers. Just as she was about to gain victory, the Evil Knight appeared. With his help, the three were able to subdue the princess, and take her prisoner.

Ginny's lips were watering, "Do you see that. It's going to happen."

The princess was taken to a dungeon. Her hands and feet were manacled. She shook the chains. I watched in disbelief.

"Is there nothing that we can do to help?"

"She can use her feminine charms to try to play the men against each other."

Ginny knew this game all too well. I was shocked hearing all this coming from her. She had such a familiarity with the perverse. It reminded me of Esme.

"We have to do something. Maybe, we should turn off the game."

“Let me work it.”

The princess seemed to shake her body. She opened her dress partially. You could hear her words, “Is one of you gentleman willing to help me?”

“What do you mean,” one of them asked.

“If you could loosen this cuff, I couldn’t open my dress a little more. It’s hot and damp down here.”

Two of the knights wrestle to help her. The third tries to mediate.

“If you don’t stop, Prince Edward will have you both in chains as well”

Prince Edward? The Evil Knight himself returned just at this moment.

“Getting ready for a little fun!”

“You don’t know what I have in mind,” the princess tells the Evil Prince.

He moves close to her. I could feel the tension. I was starting to feel sick. This was so much like the scene in Eddie’s house. I imagined that it was me who was chained.

“Hold her,” Eddie barked.

The two knights obliged. The third used his sword to rip her dress. She was now in her underwear.

“Ginny, did you hear that?”

“What?”

“Upstairs. I think that your parents are coming down.”

Ginny kept playing.

“Ginny, do you hear that?” She was ignoring me. It was the game. It was too loud for her even to hear me. Her parents were coming down.

The Prince started kissing her legs. You know what is in store. Her buried his face in her dark panties.”

“Ginny, this is so wrong.”

Ginny was in glee, “This is so awesome. Watch what he’s going to do next.”

“You’ve seen this before,” I spoke but she ignored me.

The princess danced passionately.

I could hear footsteps on the stairs. Her parents were coming down.

“Ginny, quick.!”

One of the knights held the princess by the neck. She tried to escape.”

“Ginny, shut off the game,” again she acted as if she heard nothing.

She laughed, “This is the good part.”

It was a shot from behind the Prince. He had dropped his pants, and he was naked. I looked over, and the parents were standing at the bottom of the stairs. They could just see into the living room.

“What are you children doing up so early?” Mr. Faren wondered.

“Just playing video games,” Ginny informed them.

They started to move further into the room so that they could indeed view the screen. I was ready for them to scream out. Ginny took pleasure in this moment of embarrassment. I could see that the Princess was now naked. I could see the scene so clearly; it was Tim and Esme together on the pool table.

I screamed out.

Instead of looking at the screen, Mr. Faren turned to me, “Child, what is wrong?”

Mrs. Faren was looking at the TV. “Isn’t that cute?”

It was the princess hugging an elf.

I was still screaming, louder and louder. Now *this* was real. But nothing seemed to be coming out.

No one heard me. I was alone. I was more helpless than the princess. It was still the heart of night. My nightmare had seemed so vivid. I was overtaken by the absolute silence of the night, I was sweating. I felt chilled. I needed to go to the bathroom.

I was wandering the hall in my white nightie. And I opened the door to the bathroom after I had done my business, and Mr. Faren was staring at me. I was sure that he’s going to try and run his hand up my nightie. Instead, he asks me, “Have you accepted the Lord as your personal Savior?”

“It is three in the morning.”

“I heard a noise. I thought that I’d get up and check what was going on.”

As much as I wanted to hate him, I realize that Jim was just one ordinary sort of guy. And he really did want to save my soul.

“I want to do what I can!”

He looked me deep in the eye and continues “You’re not like Ginny. I could tell that from the first time that you came her. I fear for your soul.”

I knew that he wanted to save me. But I also know that he has no chance. If I was a sinner, then I was incorrigible in the sight of the Lord. I was too far gone. I just loved the touch of Satan.

After his pep talk for Jesus, I shut the bathroom door and stared at my face in the mirror. Did I really bear the mark of the beast. What betrayed my evil ways. I just shivered with the horror. Then back to bed.

He never said anything to me in the morning. And Ginny never tried an exorcism on me. If I really was the devil’s child, then Bill and Hazel must have messed up somehow. Or maybe that was all part of the plan. Make me feel so empty and alone that I felt my only hope was some old time religion. Double Amen!

When I got home, I began to wonder if there was something in my breakfast. I was glad that I had left before they started chores. If I was going to work for them, I expected to be paid at least minimum wage. I now felt more damaged than ever. Mr. Apocalypse had scared the crap out of me. If this was the kind of thing that he did to his daughter, no wonder she was a little mouse.

Maybe I had it all wrong. She too was a committed soldier for Christ. She was ready to maim and torture if that served the greatest good. I just want to live in peace.

Bill saw me, “I thought that you were going to spend the day with your friend.”

“I told them that I needed to get home to work on my computer. I needed to get out of there.”

“Weren’t they nice people?”

“They were very nice. You’d love discussing armed warfare with Ginny’s father. He just freaked me in the middle of the night.”

“He came into your room.”

“Not exactly. He tried to convert me at three in the morning.”

“You have to be more understanding of other people’s beliefs. You’re becoming a little tyrant. And you’re only twelve years old. At twenty, you’ll be a little dominatrix!”

“What’s that?”

“Just a nasty little girl.”

I had had my fill of nastiness. Even wholesome had its down side.

“Want to come with me to the hardware store?” Bill asked.

“I have homework to do. I have to brush up on my science. I’m getting confused about evolution. I had no idea that it could go in reverse.”

Bill gave me the strangest look. They still hadn’t taught this lesson on Fox News.

“I’ll get you some ice cream if you’d like.”

“I’m OK for now. I think we have enough snacks in the house. All I need is something to quiet me down.”

What I really needed was an exorcism from the exorcists.

Ginny cornered me at recess. She wondered why I was avoiding her. I wanted to tell her that it was the perverse video game that she was playing. But I don’t think that she would have understood.

“I’m sorry, but I have so much work to do. I’m studying Charles Darwin.”

“My mother talked to the principal. She said that I don’t have even have to hear the man’s name. He was a child molester.”

“No, he wasn’t. Look it up on the internet.”

“My Dad said that the internet was created by communists to take over the minds of America’s youth. It’s already done a pretty good job. There are all these illegitimate children born these days.”

“The only illegitimacy here is that kind of opinion.”

I could see that I wasn’t winning a friend very easily. But if Ginny was willing to listen to the lies from her jailers, I was not going to contribute.

“You’re becoming an elitist snob.”

“There’s no excuse to avoid learning science.”

“Haley, you like science because you’re not sure if you’re really a woman. I heard about that incident with Vince. He told everyone that you were a lesbian. Is that why you wanted to sleep in my room?”

“Next time you have a friend over, tell your Daddy to stay in his room at night.”

I walked away on that note. I had raised the flag for Charles Darwin. There was no excuse for ignorance. Read, my child; open your mind!

Like Esme, Ginny appeared to be a sheltered girl. But once she felt threatened, her venom came out, and she spewed all her bilious hatred. Deep in inside her lurked a dirty mind that encouraged the most perverse thoughts. For myself, I was afraid that my own curiosity was getting the better of me. I indulged my worst inclinations in hanging out with these girls. I really believed that they could offer me a moment of redemption.

Suizie’s situation was a little different than Esme and Ginny. She was starved for attention. She didn’t know how to exist on her own. Her parents gratified her need for constant entertainment. When her fantasy was interrupted, she went into full swing trying to exercise her

power. But all she really had was this illusion that her parents had created for her.

I wanted friends. I was sure that I was not the only one who see through the shallowness of some of my classmates. It was just that the more vocal ones were so good at making the rest feel insecure. Under such circumstances, it was only natural to accede to the wishes of a Suzie. The teachers were oblivious to what was going on. They ended up rewarding this stuck-up attitude.

I committed myself to doing well in school. But even that route was fraught with its own difficulties. When you were older, you could succeed on the basis of your work. But presentation was often so much of elementary school. And presentation itself was a different kind of flattery. Suzie had learned how to flatter. And Ginny watched from afar and admired her Suzie's diffidence.

Esme was a more bizarre case of the same thing. She understood that she could be rewarded by pleasing men. Ginny and Suzie had not yet experienced such devastating consequences because they still did not have as much to lose. But down deep, they were on the same course. When they were older, they would finally recognize how little they could do about their own situation. The understanding would be worse than any other trauma; it would tear at their being.

I was afraid that I was starting to live in my head. I decided that I needed a different kind of stimulus. I rode over to the pool near my place. I wasn't the greatest swimmer, but the water felt so good. I dove in, and just sunk to the bottom. I held my breath and tried to remain down there as long as I could. I started getting better and better at this. Eventually, I could submerge for way over minute. I was becoming a fish. I could survive like this forever.

I thought more and more about my amphibious evolution. It seemed like the perfect solution. I could become a mermaid. I was totally euphoric.

It seemed appropriate that I followed my submerging with the deadman's float. I let all the bad feelings pass from my body. There was nothing more relaxing than this feeling. I could sense that I was spreading out in the water. My being was becoming so rare. I remain untouched by all these negative feelings.

I started swimming. I held myself up in the water, and I pushed on. I was meant for the water. My arms reached out into the water, and I glided along. I was becoming fluid in my stroke. I had only taken a few lessons, but it all felt so natural.

Why didn't I go swimming more often? I lifted myself out of the water, then I jumped back in. I let myself float to the bottom. As I came up to the surface, I twisted myself around in a somersault. Then I just floated on my back. I looked up at the massive ceiling of the pool, the very smoothness of its contour and the rounding of its edges.

The sun radiated through the windows and reflected on the water. The room became full of light. I let myself slip through the burning fire, let the power extend throughout my being.

I had new resolution. I wanted to live in a way that had nothing to do with the recent events. All that I could think about was talking to Hazel. She was my mother. She needed to support me. She needed to guide though my pain. Why had I shut her out? It had been a most severe error on my part. I would do what I needed to correct it.

As I rode home, I felt fantastic. There was a cool breeze, and it felt so refreshing on my wet hair. When I got to the house, I ran upstairs and towed off my hair. I brushed it over and

over again.. It was starting to dry, and it looked so sleek.

It was time to find Hazel. I had thought about everything that I needed to say. I wanted to explain all the things that had happened to me. I felt that I had been shattered apart. With my new confidence, I was putting the parts together again.

My mother was watching TV. I called her in the kitchen.

“You need to talk to me.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“I was watching this show about some scandal in this high school. I think that it might even have been in Conyers. There were these kids imitating the sex scenes from their parents porno movies. I always told you about the dangers of R-rated movies. We should never let that kind of stuff in the house.”

“Mom, that’s not my situation.”

“We need to talk about these things. They are important.”

“It’s only TV.”

“It’s real They were really kids from Conyers.”

“And I really am friends of those kids. What do you want me to tell you about them?”

“You’re making a joke about something serious that I wanted to tell you.”

“I know kids just like that.”

“If you do, you have to keep away from them.”

I realized that it was going to be difficult to really talk to her. I still wanted to try.

“Haley, what is really bothering you?”

“I’m trying to tell you.”

“You don’t know what it’s like until you have a mortgage to worry about and health insurance. You have it too easy. I do everything for you.”

This seemed like a repeat of a conversation a years ago. She had been searching through my drawers after a story on Fox New about child drug abusers. That time I remember my come back. “That doesn’t give you a right to rifle through my things.”

She had her own anthem, “This is my house.”

From that day, I could feel the trust between us slipping away. I survived amidst the strange balance between the manias of Bill and Hazel.

This time seemed worse. I had come to her.

“Is something really wrong?” she asked.

“I nodded.”

“You can’t always get what you want in life. You have be tough!

I looked away.

She asked again, “Are you doing all right?”

I held back the tears and stared her in the eyes, “I’m doing perfectly all right.

She gave me a hug, “I need a drink. Bill, get me a drink!”

Hazel was hardly an alcoholic. She had just demonstrated too much weakness, and she needed to get back her composure. That was that!

As I fell asleep that night I felt as if I was on a river. I was just floating away from all these things that had brought me down. Nothing bothered me, I gave in to my feelings of relaxation

When I awoke the next day, I made my own breakfast. I was giving in to these feelings of liberation. I hopped onto my bike to go for a ride. The wind blew through my hair. I kept pedaling harder and harder.

I was going up a hill. I would usually slow up here. Today I felt a new exhilaration. It inspired in a way that I had never been excited before. The tension of the muscles extended me to the limit.

As I reached the straightaway, I let out a breath. My bike moved so quickly beneath me. I turned the corner, and then another, and then another. I felt the curves of the road. I was one with the movement. I was free!

The rest of the year seemed pretty uneventful. I had seen movies about this. A convict is about to get freed from prison, and he is trapped into doing something which keeps him in jail. I had my eyes wide open all the time.

Ginny stayed with her class. I rode by Esme's house, and it was for sale. She had moved away. Suzie lived for the last hurrah! She would have more experienced challengers when she started middle school. Fortunately, we would be a different schools.

I wondered if I could really wipe the slate clean. The nightmares lingered. And I'd still get the feelings of panic. I'd go to the pool every so often to get back my strength.

I was hardly sick all that year. But I began to wonder about my health. In the summer, I caught one of those nasty colds. I hoped that this would not be a sign of things to come. Even when I got to stay home from school, I never really got the royal treatment. But I relished breaking up the routine. A little extra daytime TV.