

3. DIRTY LITTLE GAMES

After a couple of weeks of internet dating, I decided to retire my handle and try to integrate into the real world. Suzie's parties sounded a little more appealing. I wasn't really made for her social gatherings, but I could adapt.

Her parents sponsored the parties in the hope that they could offer an alternative to hanging out at the mall or some other ill-gotten gains. And they did what they could to keep a watchful eye over everything. But they had no idea what they were up against. It wasn't just what that things had changed since they were kids. More than that, the neighborhood produced some of the most coddled little brats in the nation. They lived with a sense of privilege that knew no bounds. Even at the ripe young age of twelve, the world was already her oyster, and they would pollute her personal shell as soon as she saw fit. I thought that Suzie's parents might be able to temper this lot. No way!

The parents were outside trying to subdue one group. Inside, the few African American kids were making their own party. A little more adult, a lot more confident, and just as risqué. Meanwhile, Suzie's friends had corralled the closet for a little game of kiss and tell.

I did what I could to avoid the melee. I got a drink of punch and sat near the piano. Before I sat down, Pete tapped my rear.

"Nice ass!"

Thanks Pete.

This was all pretty tame compared to what would follow. A couple of the guys walked past me, and I was sure that I could smell alcohol on their breath. They were a little unsure on their feet.

Things were on the verge of a donnybrook. I guess the game had something to do with shutting the male and female participants in the closet together for five minutes. In many cases, the five turned into ten and became more of an imprisonment. The intentions of the boys were anything but pure. And some of the girls hoped that they could enhance their reputation with a little daring. I did not relish the thought of going in there with anyone. But if it had to be someone, I hoped for Alan Walsh.

Alan had his sights on another girl. And he was going to make sure that he got his way. He wanted more than some random groping. He was going in for some heavy making out. He picked a girl who he thought was equally adept as him in amorous pursuits. Lindsay seemed the perfect foil for a bit of his nastiness.

If Alan was a little touched that night, he hid it quite well. But he must have needed something to fuel his escapades. He closed the closet door like a pro. While inside, he just sucked the life from his victim. He set a strange precedent as Lindsay stumbled out after him.

A number of boys wanted to challenge his standard. Kissing was not going to be enough. They were more into lewd sexual touching. Nothing was going to stand in their way.

As I got up from my seat, I could hear the boys muttering about their plan. It seemed entirely dastardly. I wanted nothing to do with it. I found refuges with the parents outside.

I had just stepped on the lawn of the house. I was wearing black flats and a blue skirt. So some guy dove for me and grabbed me by the ankles and almost tipped me over.

"Is this how you show girls affection?"

He smiled.

“I wasn’t trying to be funny. You’re a loser.”

There he was lying at my feet. He just wasn’t my type. If this was what it was going to be like, outside, maybe I should have stayed inside with the crazies.

Brad Morris was Suzy’s dad. “I hope that you’re having fun.”

“I’m trying to. It’s just that all these guys are grabbing at me. I just want to be left alone.”

“Twelve year old boys can be unbearable. But so can older men. I don’t know what kind of advice to give you.”

“I don’t think that I like boys anymore.”

“We do have our pluses.”

“Like what?”

“Some guys are charming and have manners and care for woman.”

“I’m waiting for those guys. I’m only twelve, and they’re already trying to get into my pants. I just want to lead a normal life. I want to do my school work, and go to the movies, and go shopping. Just simple thing.”

“You have to be patient.”

“Listen, Mr. Morris, I want to make friends, and I want to be left alone. Nothing more.”

“Guys like to tease girls. It’s just because they’re a little shy.”

“This goes way beyond shy. It’s more like harassment.”

Here I was accusing twelve year old boys of harassment, and I was trying to keep a straight face.

“I’m a lawyer. We could put together a case.”

I laughed. “You could take me a little more seriously.”

“You’re laughing too.”

“I know. I’m just trying to hide the hurt.”

“It really is that bad?”

“You don’t know what it’s really like. You have to see it from my point of view.”

“Suzie has never said anything about it.”

“She seems to go along with it more than I did. I guess she’s a little friendlier than I am.”

“That’s why we have these parties. It’s to help her adjust.”

I felt like I was reasoning with a crazy man. I was trying to be nice, but Brad Morris really seemed oblivious to the world. Maybe, one day, he was just like one of these rambunctious little monsters.

“I’m going to go get a drink in the back.”

“Haley, have fun. Your place is our place!”

“Thanks for the gracious hospitality.”

I headed to the back. There weren’t as many boys there. Mrs. Morris was in charge.

“Suzie is expecting you inside. She say there aren’t enough girls to play the game.”

It wasn’t as if they were playing pin the tail on the donkey. It was more like grab the donkey’s ass. I wasn’t up for this.

I found a seat on the patio, “I’m going to hang out here for a while”

Suzie’s cat came on sat on my lap. She was a white Persian. This seemed like more my

speed. This was heavenly. I could remain like this until it was time to go home. Although this was a suitable end to my troubles, I was not being a respectful guest. Suzie had invited me to her party, and now I was ignoring her.

I decided to make my way into the dreaded inside. For the time being I felt like a conquering Cleopatra making her way back to her Alexandrine empire. All I had to fear was the bite of that fateful asp.

The closer that I got to the source of the dilemma, the more my outlook began to change. This was starting to look like one of those faulty rides at an amusement park. You would see loads of kids walking away as if someone has just sucked their brains out. I didn't want to be next. Even though they were trying to include me, I was hiding in the corner of the room.

"Haley, you're next."

I sat there assessing the casualty damage. It was enough to study their faces. None would look me in the eye. Only those who hadn't played seem to retain any semblance of normality. This shocked look was the very stuff of the mall buyer. Colored images danced in her head. She wandered in the haze and soaked it all in. But she could hardly answer a question about what was going on.

"If you come to my party, you have to play the game," Suzie yelled out.

I had thought that she was somehow civilized. I had consulted with her parents for some kind of assurance. They had no idea. They never would. The pod people had invaded, they had claimed the unwilling victims. I was the last holdout. I had retained my sanity with all my might. But the giant vacuum cleaner finally was pulling me in.

"Suzie, I've had a great time. But I've got a dance lesson tomorrow morning. Just let me leave."

"After you play!"

This was getting sicker than I could imagine, If only I did have some kind of lesson in the morning. I ran towards the door, but I got tripped by an outstretched foot. Two guys propped me up and led me over to the closet. Vince was ready as he always had been. He must have been spreading rumors about me before I even walked in. Next thing I knew the closet door was open.

The closet itself looked harmless. But it was the Grand Inquisitor's box from the auto-da-fé.

I could hear Suzie chant his words, "You have tried to stray from the righteous path, and now you must suffer the punishment for your evil."

I should have knelt down at that moment. Some Joan of Arc must have suffered a less cruel fate.

"Stuff the hot coals up her. Let's see what she's made of!"

I jumped.

They spread my arms and pushed me towards my execution.

"Confess!"

"I will not."

I resolved to remain resolute. I would not partake of the poison.

"Confess. Your heart is impure. You have doubted our words. And now you will receive what you deserve."

The panic spread over me. I tried to resist. The boys that held me were surprised by my

supernatural strength.

“This is a sign that she is a witch.”

“Of course I am a witch, and you have no idea what is in store if you make me submit.”

They were all so used to the indoctrination of their parents, that the party offered them the opportunity to continue the same regime.

I imaged that Vince was greasing up some infernal tool to use on me.

“You’re mine!”

The other girls giggled. If I was going to remain little Miss Perfect, they would do everything in their power to teach me a lesson. I looked around for one dissenting voice. I noticed none. Cowards all.

I was at the threshold of the closet, and Vince put his hand on me. I shrugged it off. I was ready for battle. It would be his worst nightmare if he was put in there with me.

As I prepared for the grudge match, I noticed the venom in his eyes. And they acted as if I was impure. How could Suzie have betrayed me.

When they closed the door, the darkness was the initial shock. I never was able to see. But I could feel Vince grabbing at me. This would be his worst nightmare. I began scratching. I wanted to gouge his eyes out. He combined physical assault with an effort to subdue me. After all, he had other motive than to defeat me physically.

I already felt humiliated. Even if I warded him off, he would try to tell a different story. I didn’t want to go along, but I felt as if I was becoming overwhelmed. Nevertheless, I managed to stave him off. My resistance was firm. I gave him a nice kneeing that just missed his crotch. This was war.

As we tussled in the darkness, I made sure that his offense was completely ineffective. I sought to wear him down.

I had not counted on my own weakness. Robbed of my sight, I remained somewhat disoriented. Although I remained victorious, I was battling a ghost. Vince was not my worst enemy. I felt that my insides were burning.

I had almost been on a hunger fast for the past few days. It wasn’t by intention. I had just been on the go. Nervousness in the morning prevented me from catching up. The party only made things worse. I felt a strange anxiety from the moment that I realized what was going on.

I could hold Vince at bay, but my resources were being exhausted. I felt the terrible consequences coming over me. Oh, no.

I braced myself against one of the closet walls. Vince tried to use this as an opening, but I literally knocked him off his feet. The sheer surprise of my attack stung him for a good five minutes. Meanwhile, I was battling my own ghost with renewed fury. I was doing everything to stay erect. Again I sought to keep my balance, but I could feel myself slipping.

Even as he lay there, I’m sure that Vince got some satisfaction when he realized that I was coming down. I had been better than a worthy opponent. I had vanquished him. But now he would take home the spoils. I bundled myself in a ball as I went down. If he was going to pick over my rotting corpse, it would be an effort.

Blackguard!

I had no idea what happened next. I rather doubt how he would later relate the course of events. And he omitted how well I had held my own against him. The coward did everything

that he could cast his triumph in heroic terms. Naturally, this was his style!

I'm not sure how they found him. Or what they had to do to revive me. The next thing that I remember was lying on the couch. There was a cold compress on my forehead.

He not only claimed to have kissed me. He told everyone that he had penetrated my inner sanctum. The villain had his way with the holy of holies.

"I licked her pussy!" were his four words of dastardly resolution.

I had no recollection of any of this. The geometry of the closet after my fall made all of this quite doubtful. He was already down for the count. The way that I rolled would have made it quite impossible for him to work his way back in my direction. I was even told that he had to be helped out of the closet. But the words echoed for all to hear. He had his conniving smile, and his eyes burned with fire as he kept repeating himself.

"I licked her pussy"

Such gross violation bordered on criminal. For the Morris family to allow such behavior spoke volumes about their moral majority. But if they were observing their children, nothing bad could be going on.

"I licked her pussy!"

There was no one to defend my honor. On the other hand, I have to say that the court of public opinion did not entirely break in his favor. Vince Thomas was known as a braggart and was also prone to exaggeration. Even if he had his circle of supporters, many saw him for the clown that he was. Among his own, the words were repeated again and again.

"I licked her pussy."

In my nightmares, I could literally feel his violation. Even if he had failed in his appointed task, he somehow succeeded in the oneiric realm. Such were the ways of a true Prince of Darkness.

What irked me the most was how little the contrary assertion would have damaged his reputation. I had alleged, that I had sucked his dick, it would have been taken as a natural rite of fealty. It would have made him seem like a demi-god among his compatriots. Instead, I was forced to rue the day that I was born. Such cruelty!

I was hardly the weaker sex here. In a fair battle, I would have achieved a just end. But the conditions only made me susceptible to his wile. I thought about the girls who fared worse than me. Perhaps none held the same appeal so there wouldn't have been such extreme satisfaction in doing them in. All I knew was this so-called game was the worst punishment imaginable to the soul.

There were girls who would have found delight in his play. They came from the if-you-can't-beat-them-join-them school of thought. Sex was some kind of dirty game that a boy has to coax them to play. It was only natural if he impressed his will on a girl. In later life they would be the perfect candidates for Fox News where blaming the victim became standard fare while all the time hiding behind a mask of innocence and victimhood. Why are you doing this to me?

They would root Vince on in his tactics. Boys will be boys. And if you were willing to spend your time with a guy, you'd have to accept this kind of treatment. Amen! And then there were those same guys who'd never want to use a condom to have their sacred sperm interrupted in its divine-appointed mission. Amen, again!

I tried to envision the party in a less formidable way. The Morris family had invited a

group of sixth graders over to house in the hopes that supervised fun would provide a safe environment for all. They had refreshments in the living room. There were games set up outside. They even showed movies in the family room. It was all a great setting that entertained a group of well-behaved youngsters. Out of their view, there might have been an incident or two. Although they hardly condoned alcohol for a group this young, a few kids had snuck some in the party. But there was nothing that happened that was of real detriment to any of the kids. Sure there were some harsh words here and there. Kids will have their fun. But there was nothing of permanent damage.

Brad and Phyllis realized how important adult guidance was in children's formative years. That motivation encouraged them to start hosting parties for Suzie. It offered kids the opportunity to get together under the watchful eye of two loving parents. Even though they couldn't watch each kid individually, they could insure that the overall atmosphere would be positive. If one hysterical girl had a problem, there was really nothing that they could do without sacrificing the lot of the rest of the children. They were conscientious in their supervision.

For once, I wish that Hazel wasn't in such trance. This would be a great time for her to assume her motherly role. I knew what her stance would be.

"You enticed that boy in there. It's all those clothes you kids wear these days."

In fact, I was wearing a skirt that covered my knees and a blouse. I could even tell her that I was going to a party. I rode over to Suzie's while it was still light.

"Are you going to get dinner over there?" she quizzed me.

"Yeah, they'll have food." My answer seemed a little evasive."

By the time that I made it home that night, it was past nine.

"Where have you been?" she was adding insult to injury.

"I told you that I was over at Suzie's. I was talking to her parents for a while."

"They should have given you a ride back,." Hazel pressed on.

"It's just around the corner."

"It's dark out."

"I had my bike."

"It's dangerous. They should have put your bike in the car."

That was the least of my worries

"Do you want something to eat?"

"I'm OK."

"Well, you know where the food is. If you take anything out, clean up after yourself. I'm going to go watch some TV."

How surprising! I thought that I was getting off pretty light. No interrogation. I wished that she could comfort me, just offer a kind word. I didn't think that she knew how. She could almost sense trouble, and she was just letting it be. If my life just resembled one of the models from TV, then everything might be fine. But I was already veering off the path.

I poured myself some juice and sat at the kitchen table. If Hazel was lost in the flashing blue light so was Bill. It was the electronic tether that held the both of them together. The protective bubble kept them in Roswell hardly ever venturing down to Atlanta.

How would she have reacted in my situation? I know. She would have been one of the girls egging Vince on. She learned about status from watching TV. And morals were always for

someone else.

For herself, she would have surrendered to the Vince's of the world. Then as a mother, she could condemn that behavior. No wonder I felt confused. No wonder I was becoming my own parent.

When I woke up on Sunday, I could hear my parents planning their weekly visit to church. Each Sunday they would pester about going with them.

"You know that kids who go to church with their parents do better in school. I heard that on Fox."

I muttered, "And adults who don't question what they hear on TV do better in life."

I guessed she should have known. If I had followed her advice, I wouldn't be facing such a disaster now.

Here I was on a Sunday morning by myself. I needed to reconcile myself to the solitude. It wasn't as if I hung out with Suzie all that much. We had been friends when we started school together. Then your world was something that was fed to you by adults. As we grew older, we learned how to articulate our corporate allegiances. A sandwich from Chick-fil-A. A sweater from Old Navy. A computer from Dell. We could vet our friends based on their commitment to the strict party line.

Bill and Hazel had learned the game early in their childhood. And they achieved their success by submitting to the revised script as it was read to them. The kids of future Bills and Hazels would be more uniform and toe the corporate line. Even the lines of protest were set out for them. A little sexual deviance. A lot of ruthlessness at school and work. The rebel was just that. She was even more devoted to the corporate line. After all the system allowed its own version of diversity.

The party was no different. The kids stood in line to make fun of the last person in the closet. The social hierarchy imposed itself without any help from the parents. Everyone had learned so well.

And I was the odd girl out. I was objecting to being boy-handled. And they were taking his side. This was only the beginning. This was why us girls needed guys so much. They could remind us where we digressed from the well-worn path and return us to our rightful direction.

Bill and Hazel weren't praying to God. They were making their offering to Fox News so that they would be well-accepted when they headed off to the world of work on Monday. They were praying that their view of the world, the empire of Starbucks and Cinn-a bon could be exported to every inch of the globe. And even if we were vacationing in Thailand, it would look just like a mall in Roswell. This was the freedom that we wanted to share. It was all about convenience and immediacy.

At twelve, I could see the cracks in the vision. I still wanted to belong at that point. And that made me all the more vulnerable. I still wasn't ready to fall off the side of the world. I'd still ride my bike over to the mall for French fries. I'd still get my clothes at chain store. I just wanted to be a part of action. Just in a different way. Maybe a different shade.

Monday at lunch, I sat with Suzie.

"I found the behavior at the party utterly despicable."

"I'm sorry if it seemed out of hand, but it was good-natured fun. No one will remember it in a couple of weeks."

One of Vince's passed us and flashed an obscene gesture.

"What about that?"

Suzie tried to console me, "He does that kind of thing all the time?"

Suzie wasn't in that closet. She had no idea what happened.

"I kissed boys before."

"That isn't what happened."

"You weren't the first girl who's been felt up."

"You're making light of this. Vince is a pig."

"It was a party. He was having fun."

I had enough. "Suzie, this is bull. I don't have to take this."

"You have to face the truth. No girl can make her way in the world without a bruise here and there. You remind me of some kind of goody goody. What do you think the other girls say about you?"

"You're the one who acts holier than thou with her Bible thumping. I'm sick of all the phoniness."

I was treading on hallowed ground. My unorthodox approach challenged her righteousness.

"Let her without sin, cast the first stone."

"Stop your martyr complex. You're insufferable. It happened to me, not you, you." I tossed the remains of my lunch in the trash vaguely in her direction. It barely missed her.

She looked at me and mouthed the word, "Bitch!"

"You'll rot in hell, girl."

For the time being, I wondered if I had any more friends. Suzie tried to exercise her prerogative as the class social director. But I refused to give in. I couldn't let myself be intimidated by a hypocrite.

In lunch period on Tuesday, I sat by myself. I simply enjoyed the sandwich that I brought from home. Ellen, one of Suzie's friends, came over to me.

"Suzie says that you're acting the bitch because you feel guilty that you did something naughty with that boy Vince."

I stared her in the eye, "You can tell that hussy friend of yours to mind her business."

They had me locked in a game of attrition. I needed to stand my ground.

As I worked on my homework, I thought about the party. It was one little day in my life. If I made too much of it, I'd be giving Suzie more power than she deserved. She never was that good of a friend, more the fair-weather type, and, now, she was proving it.

Next year, I'd be in middle school. I'd probably never see Suzie again. I couldn't wait for that day. It was a big world. If Suzie wanted to take Vince's side, she could marry him and be cursed with a brood of rotten little monsters like herself.

At twelve, I also held out hope that my teachers were willing to throw a life-line to the drowning souls. Ms. Samuels could see that I was suffering,

"You haven't been your lively self in class."

I told her my story. I was sure to paint a lively picture as I could. I didn't want to leave out any detail. Most of all, I wanted her to be certain about my viewpoint.

"Boys just get a little active. Twelve is a crazy time in your life."

I wanted her to say more than that.

“He forced himself on me.”

“Don’t you think that your exaggerating. Haley, you have a way with words. You can create an image that just seems so real. But in fact, it’s probably not like that. If I brought Vince in, he’d probably have his version of things. Not as colorful, but just a valid.”

“If you think that, bring him in. He’ll give you a story that you could shoot holes through with a pea shooter.”

“I can’t really do that. The event didn’t take place at school.”

“But the reaction has continued since then.”

“What do you want me to do? Say something in class. That would only embarrass you more. You have to put the incident behind you. It was just a party game.”

“I think that it’s more than that. I trusted you, Ms Samuels.”

“As well you should. And you need to come to me if this gets worse. But a little teasing is nothing to bother with.”

“It’s not just teasing. It’s nasty and perverse.”

“What did your parents say?”

“I didn’t tell them. They wouldn’t understand. They’d do just what you’re doing. They’d blame me.”

“They could take you to see someone.”

“Like a psychiatrist? There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“You’re yelling in my classroom.”

I wasn’t yelling. I was emotional for a reason. But she was using the intensity as an excuse not to deal with me. This was almost worse than the party incident.

“Doesn’t teaching mean something more than showing up?”

“Haley, that hurt. You just can’t speak your mind if you know that it’s going to hurt someone.”

“Quit being phony! You have to be honest. Sometimes you have to think outside the box.”

“That’s what I teach all of you.”

“So you do.”

I had nothing more to say. I kept wondering how I was going to survive the rest of the school year.

Outside of class, Shane Pearson was waiting to talk to me. Shane was a shy kid. He always sat in the back of class and never said much. In retrospect, we probably would have been great together. He wore a cute black hoodie and struggled to keep his jeans on. He just picked the wrong week, the wrong day, the wrong hour to speak to me. All the wrath that I had been saving up for the male gender, I just dumped on him

It must have taken him a lot of nerve just to talk to me. What’s more he was trying to keep his wits about him. He wanted to leave a good impression. He wanted to be as friendly as possible.

“Would you like to go to a movie? I could meet you at the mall.”

“If you were the last boy on earth, I wouldn’t even give you the time of day. No, never, not in my wildest dreams could I imagine us ever being together. That goes for now and forever.

I never want you asking me anything. I never want to get any notes from you. I never want to be your friend. I never want you to even look at me.

I destroyed his world with one fell swoop. He probably never talked to a girl again. I ruined his sex life for good with my nasty words.

Shane didn't deserve it, not in the least. But those things happened. What people said to us might have nothing to do with anything. But it still had its effect.

I wished that I could have given him a second chance. There was really no going back at that point. I don't think that he even went to Roswell High. I don't know what happened to him. But for that one moment, I really was the devil's child, and I shared my dire legacy with him.

So I slid home with my head down and not friend to call my own. I felt a little desperate. I wanted my TV station to give me the answer.

I didn't do my homework that night. And I didn't want to go to school the next day. Hazel forced me out of the house.

"I have a meeting at the hospital. I can't spend my day nursing a sick daughter. Get up and go to school."

She was firm. I took my shower and dressed.

"What are you moping about? You have nothing to complain about."

I guessed that she was right.

In class, I didn't say a thing. Even when I was called on, I refused to speak. At lunch, I again sat by myself.

After school, Ms. Samuels called me over.

"If you don't behave more sociably, I'll have to call your parents in."

I challenged her, "Are you laying down the law?"

"You can't just do what you like in my class. There are rules. I should talk to your parents."

"If I don't comply, you're going to call the secret police."

"Where did you learn to talk like that?"

"Where did everyone else learn to be so accepting? Is this what we call freedom? Is this what the Declaration of Independence says?"

"It says that you have to act responsibly. And you're being a brat. Jefferson would have never accepted such a thing."

"He would have recognized it a rebellion."

"I'm warning you. One more incident, and I will talk to your parents."

"I came to you for help, and you turned a blind eye."

"Haley, the world is not so black and white. There are shades of grey. And sometimes, we just have to let things be."

I wanted to raise the flag of the Boston tea party. I recognized that my new Grand Inquisitor was even more threatening the last. "Anathema on me!"

She could dampen my enthusiasm, but she could not dim my intellect. For the rest of the school year, I made my silent protest. I met all my assignments. I answered when I was called on. But I no longer volunteered information to the authorities. I would not be coerced to reveal my sources.

Bill and Hazel remained in their trance as the TV blared in the living room. The image

had gotten bigger, but the song was still the same.

One day I stood up to Vince in the hallway.

“If you don’t stop your lies about me, I’m going to come to your house at night and pull you out of bed and beat the shit out you.”

He tried to face me down. But I pushed him down in the hall for everyone to see. Everyone around just clapped. One of the teacher was watching and naturally assumed that he was the one starting the trouble. He got dragged to the office. I just sauntered home.

As I walked home, I imagined how he protested his innocence. All his mischief had caught up to him.

I could hear the lecture, “You have to quit grabbing girls in the hallway. Do you want us to call your parents?”

He did all he could to escape punishment, but he finally realized that he was paying for his past offenses.

That still wasn’t enough for me. I never talked to Suzie. And most of the other girls on her cue ignored me. That didn’t bother. It was as if we shared that much in common. They were all becoming something unrecognizable, evolving into some kind of lizard mutation. They had no idea what was going on since they all had been convinced of strict creationist doctrine. They couldn’t recognize the monkey inside until she was hopping down the street with the breakfast banana. I was skipping breakfast this morning and opting instead for a cold dish of revenge pudding.