

2. THE BEST POSSIBLE WORLD

What am I going to do?

There may be no use crying over spilt milk, but when you've got a bowl of Cheerios and your last quart of milk has just fallen to the floor, it could be a matter of some concern. I wish I was a cat. I'd just throw the Cheerios on the floor and slop it up.

It's first period honors Math and the kid in front of me is passed out. I know that partying takes its toll, but don't slobber in front of me. I've already had a bad enough morning, and it really hasn't started yet. I spent all night trying to figure out these x and y rotations and I don't need this clown messing with my daylight clarity. How did he even get in here?

"Oh, he used to be a genius before he adopted his crack habit."

"So that's what his problem is."

The teacher doesn't seem to notice a thing. This seems like a great preparation for college. I feel like jumping in my car and just going off to a park and crash. What a brilliant idea! It beats trying to figure out the cosine of three pi over four.

"Minus one over root two!"

"Thanks!"

I wish that I knew who was the voice that was giving me all the answers. I just wish that I had this kind of providence in a real disaster.

I look up and slobber boy is quickly writing down all the answers to the problems in the remaining three minutes of class. I wish I had whatever he did! Smart pills.

"He was dreaming the answers."

Any excuse to sleep through the rest of your life.

"Did my butt get bigger over Labor Day Weekend?"

"Rachel, you look great. I just have to get to second period English."

Now's my chance to run out that door and hop in my car. But this is going to be the day that it doesn't start and the cop starts asking me questions.

I accept defeat. With my head down, I drag myself to English class. We are discussing *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood. This is another one of those dystopian novels that argues the hell that the author creates with her imagination is well-prepared by the hell that we now live on earth. I have no doubts that we live in the best of all possible worlds. I take my cue from Leibniz. Sure Voltaire tried to make fun of him. But he never had a chance to make it to a super-mall. This is something way beyond his childhood dreams. Each floor raises the ante and forces you to open your wallet wider. And they're worried about pick pockets and identity theft. After you're finished, how could you possibly have an identity left?

All these dystopian novels offer the same stupid vision about liberation from a puritan society through sexual desire. It makes our frustrated teachers feel as if they are liberating their poor students from a life of romantic emptiness. If sexual desire is so liberating, then why do my fellow students live in a world of zombies? I think Atwood got it all backwards.

I reflect on the circumstances that drove me to this conclusion. I would love to share my experiences with my classmates. But I'm not sure that they would be so sympathetic. Worse, they'd learn nothing from my story.

I had hardly put away my dolls while some of peers were already contemplating

becoming sexually active. I couldn't keep up. I was twelve years old, still in elementary school and Jill was lecturing me, "If you don't start now, you're going to be left with the loser boys. No one wants a girl who doesn't know what she's doing. You just get left behind, and no one will want you."

Her argument seemed to make sense. I imagine scoring my dream date with Paul Cepeda only to be rejected for my inexperience.

"If you can't get me off, I'll have to get another girl."

For a couple of weeks, I jammed hip hop on my ipod trying to get the right feeling for the jimmy. I was ready to show my thong and let the chips fall where they may. But the moment that some rough dude asked me if I wanted to get busy in the washroom, I knew that I was out of my league. I had to go back to the drawing board and realize what I was up against.

Chat room seemed more my speed. I could create a sexy alter ego. When things got too heavy, I could jump off line. No one would be the wiser. I needed the perfect handle: Sherry Baby. That was too good.

Sure I was a little afraid of perverts, but I had a little perversion on the brain. In my world, anything sexual was dirty so I was already pretty far out there. Way out in space!

I set up some ground rules. No pictures! No meetings! No phone numbers. Nothing real. Just old-fashioned virtual contact, one soul in cyberspace reaching out for her a mate. Too unreal.

"Hey, Sherry!"

I was ready to play. My heart was racing. I felt that I was on the clock.

"Hey, Mr. Debonair."

I had made contact. This was too easy.

"What are you doing home on a Friday night?"

"I'm painting my toe nails?"

"Wicked!"

It all seemed so routine. It was as if I was munching on a bag of potato chips, and I was supposed to make the whole thing sound sexy."

"They're looking great!"

"So what's your shade?"

"Devious Scarlet!" I smiled as I typed the words in.

"I bet your legs are smooth."

"They sparkle in the light."

"You've got the lights on?"

"Just a night light. And my legs still have that sheen."

"You're getting me hot already."

"Slow down, cowboy. I hardly know you. You have to get accustomed to the ride."

"And you're wearing?"

"It's more like what I'm not wearing. But I told you that you need to slow down."

"How slow?"

"If you want to last all night, you got to do a little bit at a time."

My confidence already surprised me. This was so easy. For once in my life, I felt in control. And it was easy. I was sure that I had an adult on the line. And I pulled that hook until

it caught good and deep. Hang on! Hang on for dear life!

“So what have you been doing before you got online?”

“You aren’t worried that I’ve been chasing other fish before I connected with you?”

“I just thought...”

“I was reading a book.”

“Some dirty lit.”

“I’m more a high brow sort of girl. I hope that you can keep up.”

“If you can dish it, I can take it!”

I wish that everything in life could be planned so intricately. Most times the excitement of the moment takes over, and it all gets out of control.

I had enough for the time being. It felt so powerful. Everything started to make sense in the grand scheme of things. I understood what motivated men. How to make the game work for me. The next day I sat in the food court of the mall sipping on a milk shake. All these men buzzed around me. I could have any one that I wanted. And each one would lay his empire at my feet. I just needed to be clever. Make him play my game. This was all the wisdom of a twelve year old. Nothing to fear. No nasty consequences.

My milk shake started to taste inadequate. I was thinking more like the ambrosia of the gods. Or a vodka tonic! Why not?

That evening I was ready for round two. I had started the contest, but I needed to learn how to extend my endurance.

“How is Sherry Baby tonight?”

“I’m very pensive!”

“A little heavy for a Saturday night.”

“Well, sailor, if you’re looking for another ship, maybe you better roll on.”

“I think that I’m ready to give this one a ride.

“Perfect. So are you ready to take to the high seas, or are we just going to stay in port.”

“I could try a little rough sailing.”

“So what’s your pleasure?”

“You’ve already whet my imagination.”

“So I have.”

“Yeah, with that curious mix of pleasure and pain!”

“So you’re one of those.”

“I’m a novice. That’s why I came to you. I thought that you’d be more the pro.”

“This is all fun for me.”

“Me too. But you know what they say. It’s not really fun unless you hurts a little.”

“They do say that. Pain had a way of hardening the psyche. Helps you prepare for the worse.” I was trying to sound intelligent and witty at the same time.

“Or make the best of something bad.”

I knew that we were on dangerous ground. But I needed to keep going. I felt that I was breaking a barrier, making my partner more honest. I just wasn’t sure what he wanted from me. I needed to get the upper hand. To crack the whip!

“We are getting a little abstract, aren’t we, honey”

“I think that you have to when you’re living in your imagination.”

“Or in yours.”

“My fantasy girl.” Did I want to take the bait. I’d run with this one a little longer.

“It’s more like you’re my fantasy boy.”

“There is a difference.”

“We’re talking about who’s the dominant one, and who’s submissive.”

“You sound like you’re an expert at playing this game.”

“I protect myself.”

“As well, you should. But what are you risking?”

“If I told you, I’d expose myself.”

“Aren’t you going to give me a hint.”

“Not so early in the contest.”

I needed to prod his imagination. I needed to create an image in his mind of what he wanted, what I was like. Otherwise, he might try to shift the interaction to something real.

“Paint me a picture!”

“I’m lying on my bed. I’ve been reading a book.”

“Some light reading. Something to get you a little hot and bothered.”

“More like the classics. I’ve been trying to read some Jane Austen.”

“You sound like all the snobby dames that I meet.”

“Cutting a little close, aren’t we?”

“You’re telling me that you’re not a little stuck up.”

“I am when I need to be. As I told you, this is all about protection. I’m doing what I can.”

This wasn’t turning out right. He seemed to eager. I thought that I was going to get intimidated by the game. But I felt that my partner was a light weight. I needed to dump him before things got more intimate.

“Well, I’ve got to take a shower before bed.”

“You’re not looking for company?”

“I am. But I want something a little more sophisticated. Maybe some champagne and flowers.”

I could almost hear him tripping over his PBR. I started laughing.

As I made myself ready for bed, I felt no remorse for my rough treatment of my date. He didn’t know how to make the perfect comeback. I could hardly feed him a script. My first contact had been so invigorating. It was already late. I really wanted a shower. I wanted to put the fun and games out of my mind,

On Sunday, my parents were trying to get me to go to church. It was weird. They spent all these years immersed in self-indulgence. Now they wanted forgiveness for those lapsed years. They wanted someone to bless all their worldly acquisitions. The whole faith-based reality thing. I wasn’t going to help the process. I stayed home and contemplated all the sins that I could commit. What would it be like to go through life with this guilt complex and no hope of forgiveness? The computer beckoned with its little game. But I didn’t want to become addicted to the play. I had learned enough from my initial experiment. I could wait a week until it all made sense. For the time being, I could take it at my own pace. I didn’t want to become a victim of the virtual world.

While my parents atoned for their wrong-doing, I'd keep reading my Austen. After all, how sorry were they really?. They could speak the words. But they believed in no sense of restitution for their past offenses. I was up on theology. I knew my Aquinas. In a sense, they subscribed to the devil's mantra. They could chant the Lord's Prayer, but they were devoted to the demon's work. I turned the page of my book and stared at the ceiling. I was looking for some divine patter that could make sense of it all, something to liberate me from the Victorian order of Austen's nineteenth century. I dove back into my book. If my parents had abdicated my moral teaching, I would have to do it on my own.

The sixth grade boys hardly appealed to me. All their video games, skateboarding, and adventure movies. I could try to play along. Be the queen of the mall. But for what. Grunt, grunt! Squeal, squeal!

"Do you want to come to a party Saturday?" asked my friend Suzie.

"I'd love to. But I have something a little more serious to strike my fancy. More Austen novels to read. And then there was all the time with my admirers on the internet. What better could I do to preoccupy myself?"

"I think that someone is going to bring alcohol," Suzie informed me.

"Oh boy, elementary school alcoholics."

And that was that. My fate was sealed, at least for the upcoming weekend.

This time I found a little more literate chat room. I could discuss more than what I was wearing under my skirt.

My Friday night excursion turned into a bit of a bore as we started talking about Austen and colonialism.

"After all, Austen seems to accommodate for Victorian life by endorsing the predatory nature of the British Empire. Until its abolition in 1807, Britain served as one of the leaders in the slave trade. Even after 1807, some Brits served illegally in maintaining the routes for other countries."

"Really."

"Britain took the abolition as an excuse to board the ships of other countries, simply an extension of its empire. In *Emma*, Augusta Hawkins family fortune derives from the slave trade, one of the secrets of her suspect lineage."

There was little that I could say. This was becoming a history lesson, and hardly seemed like the fun that I expected.

"So does this diminish the romantic impact of the novel?"

"I think that Austen pays only a small debt to the romantic appeal. She is more held under the spell of morality."

I knew that I was in the right place. My sexual desires could be curbed and redirected in more productive activities.

"The novels revolve around the ability of the woman to achieve a dowry and find themselves placed in an appropriate situation for marriage."

For myself, such aspirations seemed a long way off. If this was to be the admission cost for a little Friday fun, I was way under funded. Maybe I should have gone to the party. Or corralled ten bucks from my parents to see a movie. There was still time to catch something on cable.

I guessed that my fantasy had runs its course, and there was no further exploits for that legendary courtesan Sherry Baby. But I still wasn't ready to give up. Saturday night promised better play, and I needed to make ready for the contest.

Suzie called me about eleven Saturday morning with a report on the party. She said that she played a kissing game with Ronnie Shelton. I had barely any interest in her mischief.

I finished my math homework around three, then I rode over to the mall. I need more grounding in reality before I ventured off in the virtual world. As I ate my fries, I watched the men as they walked through the courtyard. They were trying to catch the eyes of the attractive women. The girls knew the game and avoided eye contact. I was learning what I had to do online. I had to entice and then attempt to withdraw from the scene. I had to engage the hunt and let myself be pursued.

The fries didn't cut into my appetite for supper. I needed the energy to stay up late, the strength to outlast the hunter.

Hazel wondered if I was going to watch TV.

"I have some work that I want to do on the computer!"

"Doing homework on Saturday night. How ambitious. Remember, church tomorrow."

"I'm going to have to pass again. I'm really busy with school."

"The Lord is never too busy for his children."

"Her children, Hazel!"

"Whatever. In my days, kids never called their parents by their first names."

I wasn't even sure if I was really her daughter. I was doubting it by the minute. If she and Bill weren't going to establish me with an adequate dowry, they could be a little more conscientious with their moral education.

I am about to sneak in my dinner when I get interrupted.

"Sigh!" I type quickly.

"A cry of passion."

"My passion for food. I just finished a bowl of pasta."

"Late dinner?"

"Exactly!"

"And now the cream sauce is all over your face."

"Right on!"

"You're a mess."

"Don't you know it."

"And we haven't even started a thing!"

I have my match without a doubt.

He is quicker than I am, "I could lick it off."

"That would give you other ideas. I'll use a napkin."

"Hope it can sop up all the liquid."

"It does a good job for now."

Maybe it was time to change the subject. Although he was having a blast with the food metaphor. I put down the empty bowl and committed myself to my typing.

"I'm excited already."

"You're moving too fast for me."

“HA! HA! I didn’t know that there was a too fast.”

“Too fast is dumping your ass before you even get going.”

“And I thought that you were a nice girl.”

“If you want nice, you should head over to a hospital.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Not after I’m finished with you.”

I felt that I’m coming on too strong. The conversation was losing some of its wittiness. I wanted to keep this going for a little while. Maybe I was not as good as I thought.

“Are you still there?” he wonders.

“I thought that it was your turn.”

“I just never thought that it would get this far.”

“How far has it gone?”

“It’s hard for me to tell. I can’t really see what you’re up to.”

“Is that an invitation to get together. Somewhere safe. You want to meet for coffee.”

“We definitely are moving too fast.” He is breaking one of my rules.

“Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s not that. This is fun. Let’s leave it for what it is.”

He was persistent, “It would be more fun face to face.”

“Let’s just say that I have some complications to deal with.”

“Your old man won’t let you out of the house.”

“I answer to no one!” I loved my confidence.

“So let’s share a little one on one.”

“We are sharing.”

“Let’s add some java to the mix.”

“If we meet for coffee, then you’re going to try to convince me to go back to your place. Who knows what might happen there? You could drug me and take advantage of me.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you took a little advantage of me.”

“I came her for some stimulating conversation. Now we’re descending to the gutter.”

“We’re getting the stimulating conversation. Don’t you feel stimulated?” He was trying to set me right.

“That’s not the point.” I was losing him as I typed.

“If you’re all tied up, why not have a glass of wine. It will help you calm down.”

“I was thinking about something a little stronger.”

“An after dinner liqueur to get you in the mood.”

I was trying hard to create the mood. I just wasn’t feeling it.

“Whatever you say, darling.”

“You’re trying to get close again.”

“I thought that this is what it’s about.”

I wanted to know more than the fact that he was hot to trot.

I jumped in again before he had a chance to reply, “So who am I getting close to?”

“A wandering soul like yourself.”

“And you’re single?”

“I’m alone and lonely. Not a good combination.”

“Are you difficult to be with?”

“No!”

“Difficult to stay with?”

“No!”

“But you’re some kind of freak who makes children run away.”

“I didn’t think that this was about children..”

“It’s not. It’s about who you are.”

He tosses a comeback, “Who are you with all the questions all of a sudden?”

“You were the one who was so insistent on getting together. I just wanted to know a little something about you.”

“You see what you get”

“Exactly. I can’t see. So I want to know something about you. You’re a lonely guy who’d rather be sitting at his computer than out on the town.”

“Most of the girls that I meet there are all the same. They’re great with the presentation, but behind the mask it’s all empty.”

“Maybe you have these glorified expectations. You want a goddess not a real girl.”

“Perhaps. But then everyone I meet is so conscious about money.”

“People want security and comfort. What’s your complaint? Are you the same?”

“I’m not so desperate.”

“You’re the one pouring your heart out to a stranger on a Saturday night.”

“It all ends up that way anyway.”

“So why are you different? Why should one of these Cinderellas hop into your royal coach.”

“I’m real. I’m honest.”

“But have you ever told a girl something just so she’d go home with you.”

“We all do.”

“See. How can I trust you when you admit to being a scammer?”

“It’s not how I want to see myself. When I was in college, things were different. I was more serious about life. Now I’m just serious about money.”

“You are what you make yourself.”

“It’s not that simple. I wanted to major in English. But there were no jobs. I didn’t want to go to graduate school.”

I was giving career advice to an adult. I had my own troubles, and I was helping someone who seemed more messed up than me.

“You could have become a teacher.” As if I could take my own advice. One moment he was licking cream sauce off my face, , and the next I was telling him how to get his life together. He probably never thought these things through when he was younger. That was what got him in this pickle of a predicament.

“I don’t see myself as a role model.”

“So you spend your time picking up girls in bars. Looking for validation.”

“I’m just looking for the right girl.”

“Kissing a lot frogs until you get a princess.”

He confesses, “You seem to know me pretty well.”

“I feel as if I should be charging by the hour.”

“You could come over and give me a treat for free.”

“That isn’t going to happen!”

His technique was good. He was already playing the part of a wounded puppy dog. I needed to play along a little if I was going to score some points in this game.

“I could make my offer a little more appealing.”

“What do you have to offer?”

“What do you need?”

“Probably a little more than you can offer.”

“I could make up for that with a lot of enthusiasm.”

“You know what they say about enthusiasm: it seems pretty impressive until it just peters out.”

“I’m not that Peter.”

“That’s what you say.”

“It’s not just hype. It’s what I really can bring to the table.”

“You’re looking for a little action on a table.”

“I’m good pretty anywhere that I work.”

“You make your bed, and you’ll have to lie in it.”

“Whatever you say.”

“No, it’s what you say. And you seem to be all talk.”

“That isn’t what my last girl said.”

“And she charged by the hour.”

“Why are you teasing me?”

“Who said that this was teasing?” I needed to throw him a bone.

“So we are going to get together.”

“To talk?”

“Just to talk. Make sure it’s somewhere safe and public.”

“That’s a good beginning. And what do you have in mind?”

“Some good clean fun.”

“Sounds like some fun in the tub.”

“Mine’s a little small.”

“I could make room for tow.”

“You’re giving me ideas.”

“What kind of ideas?”

“I really need to go and wash my hair.”

“I could help. I could get my hands in there and make it good and foamy!”

“I’m sure you could. I’ll take a rain check. I need to hit the books.”

“You’re still in school.”

“Yeah.”

“I wish that I was still in college. So what kind of books, do you have there?”

I was ready to play the endgame, “I’ve got a dictionary.”

“I know some words that aren’t in the dictionary.”

“I’m sure that you do.”

“I’ve got an anatomy book and a big imagination.”

“That could get you in trouble.”

“And I don’t have enough trouble.”

“What are you doing now?” He reminds me that it is almost time to go.

“What do you have in mind?” I was serving him up a slow curve. Would he be able to knock it out of the park?

“You’re the one with the agenda!”

“I’m just playing along.”

“You’re trying catch me being naughty.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“If you have to ask, you really don’t have what I need..”

“If only I could touch you, you’d understand.”

“You have to touch me with your words.”

Where was the poet that I needed? No wonder he failed as an English major. He couldn’t read between the lines.

“You’re not going to sign off.

“Maybe another night, lover boy.”

My experiment wasn’t working out well. It had so much promise in the beginning. I could taste the fruits of my labor. But the more that I continued, the more that it all seemed like a dead end.

Each time I pass a computer, I think about the power that it has to draw me in. And I believed the magic for a while. The key to surviving in America is to learn in your teen years that all forms of social rebellion are easily accommodated by the delights of a consumer society. Whether it’s a daring hair style, a skin-tight revealing dress, a mysterious adventure in Asia, an intricate druid-inspired tattoo, or just a new pair of shoes, all desires can be satisfied within the palette of the enlightened shopper. Under such conditions, it seems like a true act of defiance simply to opt out of the whole game. To do nothing. To just fade away.

Computers have become the mall of the world. No walls. Just let the long cybernetic arm reach out into infinity to grasp the desire of the moment. Lost loves can be tossed aside for the newest rage. But be sure to hold on tight, or you’ll lose your grip on the promised land.

“Haley, do you have any insights to share about the novel.”

My teacher catches me fading out. I guess that I haven’t become invisible yet.”

“It teaches you that the only way to survive is to get off the grid. No credit cards. No fixed address. No attachments.”

I could see the other students giving me the weirdo look. But what could they expect? They had their credit cards hard-wired into their GPA’s. It wasn’t up to me to be the prophet of doom.

“Thanks, Haley. But what does this have to do with the novel,” my teacher didn’t appreciate my philosophy. I should have headed for the door when I had the chance.

It has everything to do with it, you wide-eyed cunt! If only you could read between the lines. On the other hand, that lug that you met on the internet is about to propose to you. And if you can’t learn a thing from the books that you teach in honors English, maybe you should head back to Iowa. On second thought, even the great state of Iowa could dispense with your genius.

“I beg to differ. The society of Gilead was all about surveillance. No one had a private identity. It’s the same for us. We all have ID numbers. And we think that the only way to escape being a robot is to act like a fool. But that’s all part of the programming.”

“Haley, you’re a freak.”

“I’m not the one who lights up before he comes to class.”

I am trying to be patient with my comrades. We are all working together for the betterment of all.

Miss Hopkins probably think that I am hopeless. I am sure that when she achieved her degree that she had high hopes for her students. When she applied for the job at Roswell High, she had no idea that she’d be ministering to so many burn outs. In some ways, I count myself as a casualty. It’s not the drugs. It’s the sense of knowledge overload. I can see the machine is not working. But I don’t know how to slow its path. Tossing a wrench in the mechanism only excites it more.

It was so much easier when I was trying to entice horny old men on my computer. At least, I had a clearer plan. And I still found enjoyment in observing people at the mall. Now I am afraid to close my eyes because I might flashback to that past vision. I have seen the avarice, and I am filled with the fear of the Lord.

Hazel turn off Fox News!