

## 10. DRIVING ME CRAZY

When I'm older things will change. I'll have a job and my own place. I'll understand reality and be able to accept my sense of responsibility. I'm just waiting for someone to put the keys in my hand

I guess the first person to steer me in that direction was my driver's ed teacher Phil Robbins. He was my driver's ed teacher. He took me out with two other students. I had problems parallel parking.

"We've got to get back."

I didn't want to give up yet, "Let me try a few more times."

Angie Wallace was chomping on her gum in the back, "I've got math class. We've got to get back."

As Angie and Jim Simon got out of the car, Mr. Robbins asked me, "Do you have class now?"

"Yeah. I have math class with Angie? Why?"

"I'm off next period. I could help you with your parking."

I wanted to pass my driver's test. I needed to drive just to get away from Bill and Hazel. Mr. Robbins was almost encouraging me to skip class for extra help.

As we worked through the parking maneuvers, I was holding my breath.

"It's nothing to worry about," he tried to reassure.

"That's easy for you to say. You're not behind the wheel."

Every time I thought that there was part of the car that I wasn't seeing. I just imagined the collision with the other parked car.

"I know how we can relieve some of that stress."

I first thought that he was making a pass at me. But that was the first time that he took me for a drink. And it became a habit. At lunch he'd take me to a bar and get me a little sauced. There was this bizarre understanding. I'd day nothing about our escapade. And he'd just let me be. I'd let him stare at me while he got a little flushed. And the cocktail waitress would slide by with an approving glance. I figured that he had done this so much that she didn't bother checking my ID. And that was good enough for me. Maybe she had once sat in this seat.

I know that my friend always told me that he was going to eventually want more from me. But for the time being, it was what it was. And I accepted the benefits of my precocity. He helped me develop a taste for good scotch. If he wanted to plop down his hard earned money for a little fun, I guess that was one of the perks that came along with added responsibility.

I'd stare straight ahead with a little buzz. Then I'd just beam. I never had to say too much. But I just had this feeling that we were coming to some kind of deep understanding. More than anything, this is what it meant to grow up. Just when I had my doubts, I'd take another sip from my glass. After all, this was miles different than getting stoned in your room alone or getting smashed on wine coolers with your friend in a parking lot. This was sophistication.

In my own way, I'd oblige by wearing short skirts. I wouldn't let him get too close. But he would have his eye full. And he'd drink it in like the aged scotch. I'm sure some girls would have told their parents. What was there to tell. And Mr. Burns had a way of finding which girls

relished a little adventure. This all seemed natural in the prison camp environment of high school.

I'm sure that this had become routine for Mr. Robbins. He did everything that he could to pretend that I was somehow special. But was I really?

Some guys like Mr. Robbins might have spent their lunch time in a strip bar. He never had to go that far for intimate entertainment. He only had to get a willing student a little sauced. He got off on the attention.

I thought it rather ironic that it was a driving teacher that was introducing me to such dedicated consumption of alcohol. We seldom would get drunk during our escapades. He just helped me jump start my mornings.

That being said what was that interesting about my teacher taking me out for a liquid lunch. Sure he could stare at me for the good part of an hour. But what else was there that was that unusual in this pursuit of ours?

"You might not realize this, Mr. Robbins, but I am not like the other girls my age. I am not sexually active. And I'm not quite ready to go down that road."

"I had no interest," he protested. I was just wondering what were your intentions for your automobile once you obtained your license."

"I thought that it would give the opportunity to cruise the bars of this fair city and hit up horny old men for money."

He gave me a strange look, "Haley, who are you kidding?"

"Why you, of course!"

We both laughed.

I added, "I think that we are a little more sloshed than usual."

"I don't think that I'm going to make it back to class."

"I'm off for the rest of the day," he informed me.

"Thanks for telling me. If had known, I might have gotten someone to pick me up."

"I thought that you told me that you're too trashed to go back to class."

"I did. But I would have at least liked to have an option."

"Like another round."

I didn't want to make this a habit. It was one thing for a sixteen year old to indulge now and then. And I did like a good drink on lonely afternoon. But I could see the script, and it was one thing that I needed to avoid.

There was another piece to this puzzle. I had little fear of succumbing to Mr. Robbins. That was probably why I felt safe drinking with him. But what about some other boy. I didn't want to lose control. I knew enough girls who let liquor write their story. I was not going to be one of those.

Years of studying had made things easy for me now. But I didn't want to lose my edge. I didn't want to spend the tenth grade with my head slumped over my desk.

"What's your excuse?"

"I'm going to tell them that we got in an accident in driver's ed."

"No, you're not." I was angering him slightly.

"No, I'll say that you ran out of gas."

"Quit teasing me."

“I thought that’s why you buy me drinks.”

I looked at Mr. Robbins. He wasn’t married. He didn’t look half-bad. What was he up to by taking girls to bars at lunch? Perhaps, he had a thing for younger girls.

“Mr. Robbins, did you get on with girls when you were in high school?”

“High school was the best part of my life. I had my own car. It was this really nice yellow Plymouth. And I played football. I was a defensive end. I set a record for interceptions. I had my sights set on playing professionally.”

“What happened?”

“I just didn’t make the grade in college. I made the team. But I just didn’t have that zip. All these kids were bigger and faster. As I got older, I was running out of ideas. I just backed into this job. There wasn’t much else that I could do.”

He continued to tell the story, “I could still play sports star in my first few years as an instructor. The girls weren’t that much younger than I was. We’d sneak off at lunch. Sort of hush, hush. I think that a couple of teachers knew what was going on,. But they admired me. Or the women had their crushes. I tried to feed them as much as possible.”

“Then what?”

“There’s not much to tell. I became an adult. The girls were no longer that old, and I was. I had to curtail my game to what it is now.”

He still wasn’t completely clean. But I wasn’t ready to bust him.

“You should have got married when you had the chance.”

“I couldn’t really settle on one girl. I liked the chase.”

He was lucky that he never got caught. Or maybe he did. That was the part of the story that was interesting. The part that he hid from me.

I was too much of a wise-ass to get caught up in his scheme. So nothing really happened to threaten him when we were together.

A couple of days later, we skipped drinks, and he took me out for lunch. There we were eating hamburgers in his car. Flies danced on the greasy McDonald’s wrappers. That sight was probably one of the things that turned me into a vegetarian.

We talked.

“What are you going to do for college, Haley?”

“I have time. I want to write novels. Maybe teach.”

I didn’t really want to be a teacher. It just seemed like a good thing to say at the time. I was thinking that Bill and Hazel were preparing a trust fund for me. After all, Bill would have to do something with all that money that he was making. He couldn’t just bury it when he died. And I had no brothers and sisters. Praise the Lord.

It was as if Mr. Robbins was reading my mind, “Do you know what would really mess up your life? If your parents had another kid.”

“I’ve told you over and over again. They’re my guardians, not my parents.”

He really did freak me out. I thought about what would happen if there was another child in our house. I even asked Hazel, “You’re not going to have another kid, are you?”

“Why do you ask? Another kid might give my life purpose. They’re always talking about what you can do for family on Fox News.”

“For family? Doesn’t the word come with an article like *the* or *a*? Or maybe a

possessive adjective like *your*, as in *your* family.”

“Why are you always so negative?”

I didn’t want to correct her about Negativity Cable News Network twenty-four seven. All I could think about was a bouncing baby boy running in the living room.

“Shut up, Ronnie. I’m trying to hear what Bill O’Reilly is saying about rebellious kids.”

“Bill, he’s only a baby!”

Oh Jesus!

“One child is enough!”

I was thinking about my ample inheritance. I could waste it all having drinks with Mr. Robbins at lunch every day.

“I could buy you a fish sandwich.”

“I don’t want to go out for lunch. I have to study for an Algebra test.”

Mr. Robbins was being a little pushy. I knew by the way that I felt that the lunch would turn into drinks. I didn’t want to walk in sloshed to a math test. I could do these problems in my sleep, but not in a stupor.

After our initial conversation, Bill and Hazel quit talking about the kid. They had enough to worry about with the upcoming congressional election. It seemed that the Republican majority no longer seemed that safe.

“Brit Hulme says that we have nothing to worry about.”

I didn’t want to hear a peep about what was being said inside the Rose Garden. The Zombie in charge was losing his grip more and more every day. Maybe he needed to come out for drinks with Mr. Robbins and me. “Seems like old times.”

The child scare was enough to throw me off for a few days. I was scared straight. I didn’t take drink all that time. The starkness of the reality hit me harder than it had in a long time. It wasn’t so much that I felt privileged in the house. I thought about what might happen if Bill and Hazel were able to completely brainwash another person. If I was going to rescue the child from them, it would be a constant task. I was separating myself further and further from the orbit of the house. I didn’t want something to draw me in.

Since I had my own car, I had to work to make payments and cover the other expenses. I thought about the trade off. I no longer had as much time for school. Even with the more advanced classes, things actually seemed easier. I feared that I was taking things for granted. One day I would face these super exams.

Worse than my fear, I wondered if my school was selling me short. I was no longer in middle school. I had expected to get slammed. But this was just a little trickle. If I went to college, would it be so difficult that I’d be overwhelmed.

I got a job in a record store. CD sales were tailing off as a result of the internet. But things remained fairly brisk. I liked being around music. I wasn’t the most knowledgeable employee. But I brought a lot of charm to the position. My intelligence was a plus. The manager recognized how good I was with numbers.

“You can help with the inventory.”

I learned how to order new CD’s. I got a good idea what we were able to sell and how much we needed to keep on hand. I learned about new bands on the internet. I understood the trends and made suggestions. It was difficult taking too many chances in Roswell. There were a

few kids who wanted to be hip. But even then, the numbers were limited.

Some of the people who worked with me had been in college, never finished, and didn't have any other job. They liked the easy lifestyle with few demands on their outside time. But it seemed a little depressing for this to be the end of their dreams. To console themselves they became obsessed with minutiae of detail about particular bands. They became more snobs about their taste. It made them feel as if they were more involved in the record industry, and that this knowledge was all the more significant in influencing their future.

Kevin asked me one day, "You want to go for a drink after work."

Why not?

He played guitar and wanted to start a band. He had almost received his Associate's degree at Georgia Perimeter College and had plans to go on to Georgia State. He just hadn't motivated himself to take the next step.

"I do have plans."

He told me how each couple of steps forward implied a few steps back.

"I'd like to move into the city. Some of my friends live in Little Five. But the rent seems like a lot. I live with my parents now."

I questioned him about how long it would take to escape the confines of Roswell.

Kevin was still young. He had none of the bitterness of Mr. Robbins. But some of the bloom was already off the rose. He didn't drink a lot. But these nights out had replaced the actuality of his plans. He knew that he had the security of the job in the record store.

He took me back to his parents place. His room was in the basement and had its own entrance. He had loads of CD's. He played some new stuff. Some band from Baltimore. And another from Tampa.

"That's great stuff."

"They're my little secret. We have to go to a show together sometime."

There was a lethargy about his life that frightened me. He had given up completely. But his dreams had no connection with his everyday life. It was difficult to chart a straight line from today to a day in the distant future.

Even as I sat there with him, I felt that I was somewhere else. In some ways this was worse than being with Mr. Robbins. At least when I was with Mr. Robbins, I could tell myself that his life was completely different than mine.

I felt that Kevin was more contagious. If I spent too much time with him, his life would rub off on me. Mr. Robbins made me feel more adult. Kevin had simply prolonged his childhood.

The more that he talked about college, the less that it made sense. He had taken courses, but nothing seemed to excite him. I felt a little like that at sixteen. But I kept up my thirst for knowledge. If I hung around Kevin all the time, I figured that all that I'd know about was music.

We tried to discuss politics once. He had a good basic understanding. But he really had no idea what the various cabinet positions did. He really couldn't distinguish between the Defense Department and the State Department.

Kevin was in his early twenties. I liked hanging out with an older guy. But that was that. This would never be more than it was. In some ways, he had escaped the uniformity of Roswell. But he was living in a box with little hope of escape.

If I worked in a clothing store, would there be such a mythology about the product. There were girls at school who had jobs at the mall. That was why they became even more obsessed about clothes and make up. Sure, you could tell a great deal about a person based on how they dressed. But that view remained extremely limited. And the only options were to buy a new wardrobe or get a make over. And the lucky ones pushed their bodies in the gym so that they could fit into the trendiest fashions.

Kevin pulled a couple of CD's out of his collection and rearranged them on the shelf. He thought about band that he had seen before anyone else. His knowledge was special. He could be a record executive or a journalist. He had thought about writing on bands. This would be the most exciting thing that he did.

Monday afternoon, I was again sitting with Mr. Robbins. I didn't have to work and I needed a little pick me up after spending time with Kevin.

"You found a guy?"

We were sitting at our favorite bar. They had hired a waitress, and he was gazing at her.

"If I'm going to sit with you, you could at least take your eyes off other women."

"You're not going to give me any play. I need to enrich my fantasy life."

"I thought your whole purpose in drinking with me was to inspire fantasy."

"It is. I'm thinking about a threesome."

"That will never happen."

"You never know. I could donate to the college fund."

"That might work with some of the other girls. I'm doing too well in my classes for it to matter."

"I hear that the eleventh grade separates the men from the boys."

"Exactly."

"So what about the new guy."

Was it wise to talk about Kevin with the Mr. Robbins?

"I think that he was in my class five or six years ago."

If I was going to get into it, I needed to freshen my drink.

Mr. Robbins looked at me, "You're picking up my bad habits."

"Next thing, you'll be smoking too."

"I hope not."

I seemed to be avoiding the subject. It wasn't as if Kevin and I were dating. So I wasn't revealing anything intimate.

"We get together after work. I've spent some time with him on the weekend. But I have to say that he doesn't hold a candle to you."

"Does that mean that he makes you pay for your own drinks?"

I smiled.

"Kevin's a nice guy. And that's that."

I felt that I was talking about the guy who does my lawn.

"So have you made out with him?"

"I've been to his place, at least his parents' place. But there's no chemistry between us."

"When you get older you'll understand that a few drinks does a lot for chemistry."

"I'm understanding that now." I again smiled.

Mr. Robbins was giving me advice on guys. I needed to prepare myself for this.

“Don’t take any of this lightly.”

“I’m not. I just don’t want to end up engaged to some guy after a few wild benders.”

Talking about Kevin convinced me more than ever that nothing would ever happen with him. If I couldn’t make him seem more attractive to Mr. Robbins, I could hardly do anything to enhance his reputation on my own.

“Maybe you should take up with the cocktail waitress,” I advise Mr. Robbins.

“She’s a little like your Kevin. I get her in my car, drive her a few blocks, and I realize that she’s not as attractive as she was in the light of this bar.

“That’s a sad commentary on manners.”

“You know what I’m saying. I don’t want to share my failed dreams with someone else.”

“Are you ever afraid of getting in a car accident with the students while you’re under the influence?”

“I only come here after my last period. I’ve told you that over and over again.”

I had gained the freedom of my car, but I exchanged it for a new imprisonment. Between Kevin and Mr. Robbins, I was charting a course that was skidding to a quick start. Drinking with Mr. Robbins gave me an excuse. I could even distance myself from Kevin in the process.

At work, I watched Kevin putting CD’s on the shelf. This was pretty much the same things that he was doing at home. Maybe the categories weren’t of his choosing, and he worked a little faster, but the effort was pretty much the same.

“Haley, you’re still a little stuck up because you’re in high school. You still think that you’re special, that your dreams mean something. Your future is really no different than anyone else’s.”

“Who’s being negative today?”

“I know that you look down on me because I haven’t finished college. But things happen.”

That was what I was really afraid of. I was being hard on poor Kevin. But I wanted to be a lot harder on myself. I couldn’t even imagine six months of the same thing.

“You don’t know what it’s like. In high school, you can coast. You get your major in partying. But in college, they hit the ground running. If you’re not ready to play the game, you’re a dead duck in the first week.”

I had this image of college movies that I had watched in the past. All these drinking games and sports rah rah.

He became more pensive, “I was excited when I started. And I did well at first. But it took me a while to really accustom myself to college. I was pretty good at writing papers. But not so good at math. All these required courses just took the wind out of my sails. Before I knew it, I was just muddling along.”

This seemed a revelation better suited to an evening at a bar. In a lull at work, it only reinforced his sense of frustration. It made it harder for me to share in his dilemma.

I didn’t want to end up like the characters in one of those slacker films in the nineties like *Reality Bites*. There seemed like nothing worse than living off Bill’s gas card and trying to score food at the BP.

“Kevin, I’ve got to get that customer. I’ll be back in a few minutes. After the customer, I

took my break. I was sitting in one the benches in front of a fast food place and looking over at our record store. I didn't want to go back. All this was to feed my car. And gas prices were going up. It was much easier when I could ride my bike everywhere.

I needed to move into the city where I didn't have to drive all the time. Kevin told me that he wanted to do the same thing. I could never share a place with Kevin and his friends. With Bill and Hazel, I could always hide in my room. With them, I'd feel as if I was always on a sitcom set. The bong would be on the living room table, and I'd have to scream at them to take out the garbage and ante up their share for the bills.

I didn't want to grow up that fast. Math class was enough of my worries. As for expenses, it was enough worrying about my car. I did want to deal with health insurance and rent and utilities. I was nowhere near as cynical as Hazel. I just didn't want life to happen to me so quickly that I couldn't adjust.

Mr. Robbins had his own take, "We all think like that when we're in high school. We're going to make the world different. And then one extra night in a bar sends us over the edge. From then on everything goes wrong. And it just becomes an endless cycle."

"I'm glad that I finally met Plato the driving instructor."

"You may joke about it now, but how different are you than Kevin and I."

"Well, I'm a girl for one."

"For that reason, you think that you can avoid the pitfalls that have hit poor Kev and me. But you're going to take your own cuteness to mean more than it does."

"I'm not that sort of girl."

"I told myself that I wasn't that type of guy. But in life, there really aren't types. Just individuals. And we all are tempted, and we all go down that road."

"You sound like a blues singer."

"I am singing the blues. But it strikes a chord for you just as well as for Kevin."

They both made me want to drink more. I wasn't living their lives, but my immunity was wearing thin. One bad night, I took Mr. Robbins to heart.

I was driving on Roswell Road inside the perimeter at the edge of Sandy Springs. I saw a sign for a fortune teller on West Wieuca Road. I was enough of a sucker for this.

It was a sunny day, but her house was dark. I tried to adjust my eyes.

"You seem very young, my dear. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"I usually don't like to do fortunes for girls your age unless you're with your parents. It's not really legal."

"I spent all afternoon drinking at a bar with my teacher. I think that I'm old enough to hear my own fortune."

Esther did some mumbo jumbo with cards. She studied my palms. But mostly she talked with me. I hadn't had a conversation with that kind of warmth in a while. I hated the fact that I had to pay for this.

She knew details of my life. She could describe my run ins with Eddie. The party with Suzie. A lot of these things I wanted to forget. She was bringing all of it up again. She was trying to discover the deeper currents in my life.

Still nothing significant seemed to emerge. She warned me to be careful driving. She



talked about some mysterious lover during my college years.

“You have to prepare. Your life will not always be a bed of roses.”

I could sense the storm clouds gathering.

She honed it, “It’s hard to do a fortune for someone so young. You have so many options. It’s not my job to tell you what to do. It’s like a river going downstream. It meets tributaries along the way and the course is slightly altered.

I’m here to tell you about the currents. But you have to decide how you want it all to go. You have that power.”

She warned me about Mr. Robbins and Kevin. She warned me about everyone that I was working with at the store.

“What about Bill and Hazel?”

“You know what to do about them.”

I wanted to ask her if they were really zombies, but Esther would have laughed at me.

“You’re going to eventually move away from all this. You’re going to miss your life here. But you’re going to have to get away.”

“Am I going to face some catastrophe?”

“Perhaps!”

I needed certainty.

I thought about quitting my job. I needed to get away from Kevin. I need to pay for my car. I needed to quit drinking in the afternoon. I needed to get a new ipod. I needed to buy clothes for school. I couldn’t quit my job.

I started to get a glimpse into the world of Kevin and Mr. Robbins. Maybe I should try to work in an office. It was going to be hard to get a job because I was only sixteen. But I could type well and was good with the computer.

I spent the rest of the evening learning formulas for Physics. I found this stuff really easy. A bunch of kids in class needed help. I could charge them for tutoring. But that would be a little mercenary. That was like kids in middle school who’d dupe a CD for a price, then they’d buy dope with the money. When I had time, I’d go over the Physics problems with friends. It helped reinforce the concepts for myself. I had a knack for teaching. I just didn’t want to be stuck in a dead-end life like Mr. Robbins.

I saw myself as more of an artist. I was losing touch with that side of myself. Partying was cutting into my creative edge. When I started drinking, I’d be excited about my plans. But the effects of partying slowed me down. I couldn’t get inspired by much when I was coming down.

I figured out some tricks on how to buy and sell stuff on Ebay. I had a little money in the bank. I’d go around to store liquidation and buy all this stuff. Then I’d put it up for auction on Ebay. I spent less time on that than at the record store. I made more money, and I cut back on my hours. I felt more in control of my life.

“How do you know what to buy?” Mr. Robbins asked me.

“I’ve got a good eye.”

“You could become a buyer at a clothing store.”

“I’m a student. That’s enough for me, now.”

“You’re right.”

He ordered another round. I told the waitress that I only wanted water.

“I don’t think that I want to meet like this anymore.”

“Were you thinking about something more serious?” he smiled.

“No, I just want to end it all together.”

“You’re not breaking up with me!”

“Don’t you get tired of the same thing.”

“But your conversation is so scintillating.”

“How many girls have you said that too?”

“Not that many. Really no one else.”

“You’ve said that to everyone.”

He looked at me with a deep stare, “Haley, you really are different. I have never known anyone like you. I may never know anyone like you again.”

“It’s not as if we’re going to get married.”

He didn’t want to let go. But he saw the inevitable. I really wished that I could have offered him more. My experience with Esther had shown me something that I had never seen before. I felt a little older and a little wiser. I was also more careful when I was driving. Maybe she was wrong. I had to bet the odds, just make sure that everything was in my favor. I wanted to go back to renew myself. But that was the same thought that I had when I first drank with Mr. Robbins.

Mr. Robbins and I got together a few more time. One day, I went down to meet him, and there was another girl in his car. I didn’t get close so he wouldn’t see me.

Instead of going with him, I got in my car and went to the park. This seemed a lot more relaxing than sitting in a dark bar during the afternoon. I watched the rain clouds come in. I wonder how difficult it was to predict the weather. I was certain that it was going to rain.

The house was empty when I got home. The rain had just started to fall. It was perfect weather for a nap. I checked my items on Ebay. I finalized a few deals. Then I went to bed. I’d have to bundle up some packages in the next few days. But I wanted my time to be my time.

I finished my homework early. I started to read a book.

Kevin called me, “I’m getting off soon. You want to go for drinks.”

“This is a school night. I’m reading a book.”

“What are you reading?”

“A Henry James novel.”

“I’ve seen some of those movies.”

“Very cool.”

I fell asleep with my light on. It stayed on all night. In the morning, it seemed a little strange. As if I really hadn’t slept at all.

I wanted my classes to be really stimulating today. It was all the run of the mill. My new resolution was still sharp. I didn’t want to fade out in the midday sun.

I still needed to work after class. Kevin wasn’t there. The rest of the crew didn’t seem entertaining. I muddled through.

At dinner I was tired. My nap lasted too long, and I needed to rush through my school work.

I was liberated from my afternoon routine with Mr. Robbins. He had taught me a lot

more than how to drive. He taught me how to appreciate good scotch. For the time being, I'd have to depend on men with deep pockets if I wanted to indulge that taste.

I never really had a crush on Mr. Robbins. I did like to flirt with him. It wasn't perverse or anything. Nothing would ever come of it. But for once, I felt that I was really sitting at the adult table. Bill and Hazel never gave me that feeling. I know how Eddie must have provided that illusion for Esme. But he wanted her to stay his little girl forever. And she would never be able really to grow up.

Most of all, I learned from Mr. Robbins when to walk away. And when I closed that chapter, I had no regrets. Kevin was a little harder to say good bye to. But he never affected me in that way. I saw him as more of a brother.

Mr. Robbins also opened up for me the temptations of teen-aged partying. This was all the more lethal that I was driving. I had to deal with this strange association of driving and going to a bar and getting trashed. But I tried to make sure that there was always someone there who wasn't getting blitzed.

I didn't want to drift into a new crowd. Kevin's fate was enough to scare me. If something bad was going to happen, I hoped that I would catch the warning signs before it hit me. I hoped that I would be the perfect meteorologist.

"There's a storm brewing in Haley's head today. If she doesn't take care, it's going to swirl into a full scale hurricane."

I needed a weather channel just to give me my early warning!