

## 12. THE PRINCESS IS DAMAGED

So many of the people I know have had their personalities shaped by the traumas in their lives. Beyond the selves that I see, there is a hollow that protects them from the events that have torn apart their lives. To fill up the emptiness, they have committed themselves to a living hell. They adopt this pose as the only way to accommodate themselves to their daily lives. Such an uneasy truce only drags them deeper into the morass of their own making. They are like dolls with an arm missing. Nothing can make up for the loss. But that does not stop them from pretending.

They reach in the darkness of their souls in the constant hope that they can touch something solid, something that gives substance to their daily tears. Teen alcoholics, drug users, sex fiends, risk takers, the self-destructive—I know them all. They cloak themselves in their own melancholy and project their darkness against the noon-day sun.

I have never wanted to think of myself as that caught up in my own dilemma. Hazel and Bill may predicate their existence on just such expectations about youth. And there are times that I have walked the line. But I hope that I am not a damaged princess.

Esmeralda and Virginia were both noble souls who would always be haunted by formidable demons. Even Suzanne's sense of self-importance spoke to the same shattered circumstances. I did everything that I could to escape such impositions.

As things were, Candy and I ran with a rough crowd. And I tried to stay one step advice of her. Still I took her advice to heart. I plunged myself into a world of revelry. I just tried to surface now and then. There were times that we would try to replace a more extreme urge to have fun for real intimacy. But perhaps that was better than getting caught up in a more vain form of mutual admiration.

It was hard not to find some humor in someone else on drugs if you were completely straight. I was sorry if I couldn't be a little more sympathetic. Even with a couple of drinks in me I still can't help laughing at a room full of kids on mushrooms. The very sight of someone staring at his navel and imagining that he was in touch with the deity was enough to give me fits.

Daphne was a fellow traveler tonight. Like myself, she was one of the few people at the party who had not swallowed the dreaded champignon. In contrast, Candy was running around making silly faces.

"Is it really affecting you that intensely?"

She looked at me and laughed, "It's really not doing anything for me. I just want to act stupid."

I turned to her, "You're doing a great job."

"I don't like you judging me."

Daphne had her own take, "If you can't beat them, join 'em. We can probably get some for ourselves."

"Daphne, the last thing that I want to do is to be falling over while I'm trying to keep track of two other people."

Candy interjected, "I'm fine one my own."

Daphne added, "Maybe you have a point, Haley."

“Of course I do.”

The party really got no better. I wasn't about to console myself by getting drunk.

The next day, I met Candy for coffee.

Candy chided me, “You have to learn to mellow out. That judging eye is always glaring at me. I'm always feeling as if I'm doing something wrong.”

“I could wear dark sunglasses.”

“That would almost be worse. I'd just be reminded that you were staring behind those glasses.”

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do to make her feel more at ease.

“Haley, it's as if you're expecting something terrible to happen.”

“You never know.”

“You go to a party to get out of yourself. Not to be reminded of every little depressing thing in your life.”

“I'm not sure.”

“Haley, you've got to recognize that this is exactly the sort of thing that Hazel does all the time.”

“How is it the same?” I wondered.

“Isn't she snooping on you all the time? Turning on the pressure in the hope that you'll slip up. It's like a cop who's riding your tale.”

From this point on, I started to follow her advice, almost to a fault.

“Why are you wearing the damn sun glasses? It's night time. We're going to a party.”

“I'm hiding my gaze.”

We both laughed.

I kept the sunglasses on all night.

“Who's the weird girl with the sunglasses? She's kind of cute.”

“She's my friend, Haley,” Candy was telling everyone.

I had finally escaped my programming.

That night both of us were too zapped.

“How are we going to get home?” I asked

“One of us could sell her body.”

“And who's that going to be?”

“I think that it's got to be you. You've got the best one hands down.”

“All you have to do is shake a little, and you're pretty hot stuff.” I smiled. “You don't think that I'm gay because you told me that.”

Candy and I both giggled.

“Who slipped you mushrooms?” asked Candy.

We both fell on the ground.

“We still don't have a fucking ride.”

“We don't even have a fucking clue.”

Was there no one who would take pity on two hapless ingenues?

The hostess of the party found us almost passed out in her living room.

“Sean can give you a ride home. How far do you have to go?”

“Roswell!”

Sean had his own solution, "Maybe one of you ladies can put me up for the night."

He had his appeals. But all this seemed a little sudden. I was afraid that this was the price of the ride, and that it wasn't going to be me who had to do the dirty work.

On Saturday, I talked to Candy after work, "What happened with that guy?"

"He gave me a ride."

"That was all? He looked hot to trot."

"I gave him some hay, and sent him on his way."

I was perplexed.

"I gave him some money for gas and sent him on his way. That was that."

We both we're evidently playing too close to the vest. But we had our own solution. If any guy was trying to take advantage of our weakened condition, then her sister in crime would come to the rescue.

Girl power!

One guy might try to challenge either of us individually. But together we were invincible.

One particularly boring party night Candy mused, "Maybe we're running interference on each other's party action."

"I think that if either of us made a rare catch, we'd back off."

Candy summed it up, "I hope that you're right."

"I'll drink to that."

"Make mine weak."

Tonight the humor was the thing that really seemed rare.

"Candy, I've got some exams coming up. I need to back off a little."

"I keep forgetting that I'm in college. I need a rest as much as you do."

School work was a good tonic for my restlessness. There's nothing worse than a bad party to spoil a string of nocturnal triumphs. I recognized where my real school lay. And after a rather exhausting session of studying, I perfectly understood the need for some crazy partying. I needed again to test my skills in social observation. After all, I was a scientist, and this was my laboratory. A couple of weeks of recharging meant that we were finally ready to take it up a notch.

I recognized that one of the consequences of my new approach was that I was becoming more and more compartmentalized. I had these moments of off the hook partying. Then I became the devoted party girl. There seemed to be nothing permanent in my world. Everything was temporary, just an entertainment for the moment.

If this was how it had to be, maybe I would have to push it to the edge just to make sense of it all.

"Haley, you're making excuses"

"I want to get good and trashed tonight."

"You have things to forget."

"Down deep, I have thing to remember, But I don't think that I can get close to them unless I make my party experience really worthwhile."

I really felt as if I was on the verge of a breakthrough. I guess addicts call this rationalization. I was readying myself for a whole new round of partying.

After one of our excursions., Candy turned to me, "Don't you feel that this is the same

thing night after night?”

“Yeah, but we’re always different. There’s always something new that is affecting us. A math exam, trouble at home, something at work.”

She thought about it and then turned back to me, “That’s not enough. If there are new burdens that we need to counteract, then I went to be super-stimulated at a party.”

This sounded like a sure recipe for disaster.

After English class, my teacher pulled me aside. Ms. Emerson had my last essay in her hand.

“Haley, I can tell that you did a lot of work for this essay. I gave you an *A*. But the writing seems a little forced. Your development is very mechanical. What’s been going on?”

“It’s something that I’ve been working out. You might call it research.”

“What are you talking about?”

I was reminded of the ideas that Mr. Walker first introduced to me. “You know how the Romantics sought out new kinds of experience to help open them up to inspiration. And the Symbolist poets took things one step further. Rimbaud and Baudelaire used massive amounts of alcohol and sleep deprivation to elicit mystical experiences.”

“Is that what you’ve been reading?”

“More than that. I’ve been trying to explore the same kind of alteration of reality. I’ve been staying up late. Trying to push the limits of my experience.”

“You haven’t been using drugs, have you?” She seemed interested. But there was a touch too much of parental concern.

I shook my head. “But I have been drinking some. It’s all intended to stimulate the soul in new ways.”

“I know that’s your hope. But it doesn’t always work out that way.”

“If it worked for the poets, it might work for me.”

“It would be different if you were producing great poetry.”

“I’m not really working on anything, but I’ve had these great ideas.”

“That’s not the same as actually writing things down. Haley, you’ve got to realize that a lot of the poetry written under the influence is pure crap. Rimbaud and Baudelaire had great influences.”

“I read a lot.”

“It’s still hard to write good poetry. Have you tried?”

“Sort of.”

“I know you like having fun. But you can’t go overboard. You’re deluding yourself if you think that you’re creating great art.”

“You can’t say that for sure.” I was becoming frustrated talking to her. It wasn’t as if I asked for this conversation.

“If you keep on like this, you’ll just deplete all your energy.”

She wanted to talk more about this. I agreed to talk to her more after I had thought about it. I intended to make some notes so that I would be better prepared next time around.

When I told Candy about it, she seemed a little sympathetic to Ms. Emerson.

“We’re having fun! Admit it. But we can’t make a religion out of it.”

“I’m not. I’m just saying that there’s more to it than just hanging out and getting drunk.”

“Like what? Hooking up with guys?”

I could tell that she still missed Chris. But it wasn't as if she was going to start up with him again.

“I'm doing all this because I'm dealing with a broken heart. And when I'm over that, I'll settle down again.”

I hated the sense of resignation on her part. I didn't want to pretend that these silly drinking parties were the same thing as a great Symbolist poem, but for me there was something deeper going on. If Candy didn't understand, that was her problem.

Somehow Candy snuck me into a bar in little Five Points. “Just look like you know what you're doing. I always told you that you look like my older sister. Here's her idea. It will be easy.

Red Snow was playing on the stage. I had never heard anything like it. It was a little like Joy Division. I had just seen the movie *Control*. But it was a lot more rocked out. The lead singer's name was Jez. He was amazing. His hair was dyed black. He was exactly what Mr. Walker would have been if he was in a band. He was a friend of Candy's.

“This is Haley.”

“Charmed to meet you.”

Jez told us that he was trying to clean up his act.

“There was record company that wanted to sign us. But they felt that I had too many problems. So I got away. I took some time off.”

When he found out that I was still in high school, he lost it.

“I could get arrested for just talking to you.

We all laughed.

“I guess that I better call my dad right now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He's a cop.”

He looked at me twice. Then he turned to Candy, “Is he really?”

“I think that he's really an insurance investigator. I heard that those guys are worse than cops.”

We went downstairs where it was more quiet. He asked about what I was studying. I told him about my theory of partying.

“That's what I'm all about. I've always thought of myself as a poet. And this whole thing is a little like a religious ritual. That was what messed me up so much. I just believed things too much. I just kept pushing and pushing. My body couldn't take it anymore.”

He teased me by nibbling on my ear.

“You're too young to kiss. But a little bite here and there is OK.”

This was seeming too easy. I wasn't sure if he was right for me at all. I figured that he was giving me shit about his poetry.

“Haley, this is all real. I studied English in college. I was working on Coleridge. I am all about theater and mystery.”

This was too freaky. It was like we were meant to meet. We were meant to discuss these great ideas.

“Are you drinking? I thought that I saw you with one.”

“I’m way beyond my limit. Remember that I’m just a little girl.”

“You’re not that little.”

He got close enough that he could kiss me.

“I really ought to give you my number. We can talk more about this.”

“Cool!”

“I’m going to have to pack up.”

I thought that he was totally awesome. But I feared my age was showing. I was so giddy around him.

Jez and I had these great conversations. It seemed that we talked for hours. I wanted to hang out with him. But I felt that I could really get hurt.

Candy egged me on, “He’s cute as hell. Sleep with him, and then dump him. It will be good for the soul.”

“I’m not like that, Candy.”

We met one afternoon for coffee. He showed up at my school on his motorbike and spirited me away. It got everyone excited. One teacher wanted to ban motorbikes after that.

“Who was that guy? Some kind of gang member!”

We talked some more about poetry. We got on so well together.

“You know what I told you. Call me any time.”

Maybe I was being too hesitant. Daphne had a different view of things.

“He’s in a band. He’s on the road. He’ll tell you one thing. But you know that he’s going to fuck every skank that he sees.”

Daphne was direct and to the point.

“He might not be like that.”

“And he might not have a dick. But if he does, it must be in some girl right now.”

Daphne’s vulgarity was a little much to take. She was definitely messing with my head.

Ms. Emerson again stopped me after class, “You seem a lot happier the past few days. And it’s showing in your writing.”

“It’s not as if I’ve cut back on my partying.”

“Then what?”

I felt armed with more evidence, “I met this guy, Jez. And he studied literature in college. He agreed totally with me. He talked about the visceral side of reading poetry. It only made sense that this is the way that it happens.”

“But it all comes down to your analytical skills.”

I felt that she was losing touch with the true font of creativity.

“Literature just doesn’t exist in books. You can’t just work and shop for nice shoes at the mall and pretend that it’s the same thing as taking a real risk.”

“Taking a real risk is getting drunk on a Saturday night. If that was the case, then we’d be listening to the muttering of some guy in the drunk tank.”

“We would if he was a poet. The problem is that our conditioning closes us off from our real feelings. We lost touch with the rhythms of the world. The poet sounds the lyre. He gives voice to our longing. He speaks for the twisting river that feeds the soul.”

“That’s why I teach English. But it’s not all super-intensity of feeling. It’s about learning the nuances.”

“I’ve been doing that all the time. I just need to add a little spice. I need to really live things.”

“That may be great for your personal growth. Just don’t pretend that it’s art.”

“You’re sounding all phony about this. You need to get out there again.”

Ms Emerson was about to get married. She had just bought property with a guy that she knew.

“It’s one thing to sit with a glass of wine and read the *New York Times* book review section. It’s quite another to get all messed up and go to a concert.”

“They are simply different facets of the same thing.”

It seemed impossible to explain it to Ms. Emerson. She could see the color, but she no longer understood the fire. Maybe things would be different when she recognized how boring her new life was becoming. But by that point, she might be so busy that she’d just give up.

Candy now tailored her advice to me, “You have sex with him. He’ll dump you. Then you’ll realize that he’s like all the shitheads that you meet.”

Daphne offered a more profound view, “Do him, and then dump him. Erase his number from your phone. Block his calls.”

It all came to the same end.

I needed to figure out what was Candy’s angle. Her advice had been so pointed. What made her the way that she now was?

I think that the reason why my ideas seemed so vague to Candy was that she had made this temple out of her body. I just had to look how she walked to sense that. If I studied the definition of her muscles, or how she wore her clothes it was all so obvious. She wanted guys to worship her. She just expected it. If they didn’t, she thought that there was something wrong. She just seemed more than human. She was pure light.

For a guy, the idea of touching her was sheer magic. To go any further was a trip to paradise. That was the be-all and end-all of everything. Just to be around her, I sensed that glow. And she wasn’t afraid to show off what she had. She worked at it all the time.

Behind the mask, there wasn’t much else. It wasn’t that she was shallow. She had just projected so much effort in fostering her image. She knew that the glare was always on her. So she drank to cool things down. That’s why she talked about the eye of my conscience watching her. She did the same thing to herself. It was the same thing that most people do to celebrities when they watch them on TV. If they change their appearance slightly, if they gain an ounce, it becomes a matter of life-changing import.

That was why sex seemed to be this spiritual thing for her. It was the ultimate recognition of the power of the body.

Daphne took it the opposite way, “Candy is a cheap whore like all of us. She uses what she had to get any guy that she wants. But you know what she wants from them.”

She made a vulgar gesture.

Daphne hated to be alone. She’d drink to feel a sense of camaraderie with those around her. That would make her extra-friendly. Guys loved that tender affection that came so easy to her.

I wanted so much more. In a way, Daphne was right. I may have pretended that I was different. But I was adopting their habits.

After hanging out with Candy and Daphne, I called Jez. It was three in the morning.

“Come on over, dear, and I’ll give you a massage.”

“Are you alone?”

“Of course, I am.”

I didn’t go over there, but we talked for hours. I really did like him. I was getting afraid about what Daphne said.

“I’m a one-woman man.”

“You already have that woman!”

“Don’t be silly,” He tried to coax me over to his place.

“I’m already home. I don’t want to piss off Hazel and Bill anymore than I have to. Besides, you’re just looking for a booty call.”

“I’m trying to know you better, my sweet.”

He seemed persuasive, but I would have to postpone my visit.

Whatever Candy and Daphne said, I resolved not to pass up on an opportunity like this again.

Red Snow were playing on all ages show. I rushed down there to see them. Loads of girls surrounded the stage. I could see all these rivals who wanted their time with Jez. He was giving me the eye. After the show he was sitting on the stage. I was in the back with Candy and Daphne. He was laughing as he made these lewd gestures at me. There were a couple of girls in short skirts and boots who really gave him the eye.

“Where did those ho’s roll in from?”

“Marietta trash,” said Daphne. She wasn’t going to be pushed around.

I ended up going back with Jez. The two girls did their best to come along. They didn’t stand a chance.

Jez didn’t waste time when he got back to his place. He offered me drinks. He offered me smoke. Anything that I desired. I wanted to keep a clear head.

The next thing that I knew I was making out with him. It was just crazy fun. I could tell that he wanted to go further.

“I’m not ready for this.”

“Don’t worry, hon. I just love what you got.”

I was so ready to sleep with him. I was glad that I got out with my life.

The next time that he played was in East Atlanta. He told me that they really didn’t like his band at the club even though they drew a big crowd. They weren’t indie enough for them. They had a very strict door code: no one under twenty-one, NOW WAY!

“Baby, it’s going to be impossible to get you in.”

I wanted to use Candy’s sister’s ID, but she had taken it back.

Daphne had a report for me.

“I’m sure that his girl has come back from San Fran.”

“He told me that he was a one woman man.”

“He is. You just ain’t the one.”

I waited around the club trying to get in. I even tried the back door, but I was chased away by a bouncer.



I saw him drive away. I had no chance. I just drove home. Daphne and Candy went to a party. I didn't want to bother.

When I got back to my place, I needed to call him. The number rang and then I heard a weird sound as if the voice-mail was on the blink.

I tried again, and it rang. A woman answered.

"Hi, I..." I paused. I couldn't ask for Jez. I just hung up. I could imagine her asking if I really was a wrong number. She wanted to know if I had called before.

He took the phone back before she had a chance to check.

One night he was alone and a little blitzed. He called.

"Yeah, we are together. But she went back to California."

"Jez, I'm not that kind of girl."

"I never said that you were. Just come for a drink.

"You've had enough drinks for the both of us."

I thought back to the time that I had been out with Chris. If I had had a couple of more drinks, we probably would have slept together. Candy would have never stayed my friend.

Now I was completely sober. I had this image of Jez. But it was so easy to resist him. That was the last that I heard from him.

I didn't want to give up on my theory. But guys like Jez just used ideas as excuse. I thought about what Ms Emerson had said. I didn't want to give in to her. I just wished that I was as good a poet as Jez.

I was reminded of my sense of emptiness when that girl had been on the other end of his phone. Her voice echoed inside me stronger than anything that he had ever said to me. At that moment, I understood that there was nothing that I could do to make him be with me.

My feeling of emptiness was something that I had glimpsed before. It was disquieting how this isolation felt. I was a comet hurtling through space just trying to find a resting place. I continued to drift further and further with no respite. Faced with the dark abyss of self, I was reeling. But this was the core of what I was looking for. The poets searched for the moment of crisis when these enormous forces rent the soul. The more that I meditated about the experience, the more that I realized how I could invoke this feeling on cue. I needed to push to the other side, the accompanying rush that would carry me out of the nightmare.

I could only imagine guess what Ms. Emerson would tell me. My heart had been broken. Rather than admit to my pain, I was trying to pretend that I was different than everyone else. But this was not a broken heart. I had already reached beyond that point. I could sense a majesty that out-reached the most intense sadness of the heart. It was as if I was looking at a mountain peak. I could touch the sky.

Paula Emerson and I continued our dialogue. I was sitting on top of one of the student desks. She stood by the board.

"You are confronting one of the limits of the Romantics, their Idealism. They made a world out of their mind."

"I have surpassed that point. This is real."

"How real? It doesn't do your homework for you. You can't make money with it. You can't cover your doctor's bills."

"That's reducing true magnificence to a TV quiz show. If you don't reach for something

more, you're never going to find out who you really are.

"I agree that you have to test the limits. But you need something to ground you."

I had contemplated the next step long ago. It was all about cutting the cord, working without a safety rope. The risks were magnified. But that was the only way to leap into the void.

The haziness of my speculation was dominating me. I needed to get back with people. I needed confirmation for my ideas.

It was a Thursday night. I would usually stay home and do school work. Candy coaxed me out.

"I can get you into a bar."

"This is crazy."

She dazzled the night. This was a new stage for both of us. We had been at that one bar to see a band. But that was mostly about college. These were adults.

A couple of investment bankers were buying us drinks. They weren't that old themselves. They were just starting out. But they had none of the worries of most of the students that we met. I was only sixteen, but I seemed to be holding my own.

When Candy paired off with one of the guys, I realized that things were getting tricky. This wasn't what I was about. I wasn't sure about my options.

"Yeah, I studied literature at Penn State. It gave me a great perspective on understanding the market."

I listened to what Tom told me. It sounded really interesting.

"Tell me more."

I acted very interested. Everything that he said made sense to me. I was even able to add my own perspective. Ms. Emerson was wrong. The Romantic ideal did have its real counterpart. He talked about the rise and flow of numbers in the same way that I had observed the Romantic adventure. And the dark abyss was the very panic that awaited investors as speculation was raised to a fever pitch.

Tom confessed, "I wish that I could escape all this nonsense. Maybe go back to college and teach."

He was revealing a lot about himself. What was he expecting? His buddy Rich was playing nasty little games with Candy in the corner. I couldn't be so casual with my emotions.

When Candy talked to me about sex, it seemed so much like the poetic transcendence that I had observed. She entered a space without language where her body took over. It spoke its own language.

"I find it so much easier when I drink. Otherwise, I get all stiff. It's strange. I exercise. You would think that I had more control over my body. But this is something different."

We were supposed to watch out for each other. I was supposed to make sure that she didn't head home with strangers. Sometimes she just became too friendly without much of a pretext.

Rich looked too good to be true. And he also made not no promises. If he could win her so easily, what would remain in his bag of tricks. I had my hands full with Tom.

I took a long look at myself. I was sixteen years old playing in the adult world. I could follow the game. At times, I could even outplay the adults. But this was too much. I just wanted to go home.

What was wrong? Why couldn't I adopt the same pose as Candy? Everything came to her so effortlessly. She sat there with her drink so nonchalantly. I just stiffened up when a guy expressed interest in me. What was I afraid of? I needed to let go. I had passed by one obstacle in my search. Now I was facing another more threatening impediment to my own growth.

It wasn't about Chris or Tom or Jez. It had nothing to do with these guys. Or maybe that was what it was all about. They couldn't be trusted. They all knew when to pour it on. Just let the complements flow. Like a fool, I would sit there and listen. For all my intelligence, I was a novice when it came to their bull shit.

The worst part of all, these guys believed themselves. It all came with the rewards that they received for their real work. Girls were just hobby. Every guy that I met wanted to be an artist of some type. The stock broker who was in a band. The engineer who loved poetry. The accountant who wanted to be a film maker. They all harbored a hidden creative side. That was their front. It only made them better at their game.

That night I needed to rescue Candy from Rich. I enlisted Tom to help. I wanted a clean break in this round. We could come back another day for more.

"Haley, I wasn't going to sleep with him. I was just having fun."

"Aren't you afraid that's all there is? Fun."

"What's the problem. Enjoy yourself while you can. You'll be settled down and married before you know it."

This really was everything for her. I had nothing more to say.