

13. WAKING UP FROM THE DEAD

It's a cloudy day. For weeks, we have been beset by the after-effects of hurricanes. No doubt the Lord is telling us something. It doesn't take a Fox News anchor to tell us which way the wind is blowing. It's blowing in a circle.

Yesterday, it looked like rain. We only got a sprinkle in the evening. We are becoming a pocket of desert amidst these water-filled clouds.

I have been having trouble getting to sleep. It is nothing special. But we've hardly started the school year. I don't want to deal with more problems than I can handle. Sleep is golden. It is everything to me.

I am working to define a new clarity for myself. I got an email from my friend Candy today. She transferred to North Carolina in Chapel Hill. She's just getting settled in. But she thinks that she's going to have a great time. I still miss hanging out with her.

She felt that the best thing for her was to get away from Georgia. Ever since the breakup with Chris, nothing had been going right. She was lucky that she was able to do so well in school. That was her ticket out of this place.

I have been living in my past. My present has simply been a pale reflection of these past events. So I have been reliving them with the idea of seeing a clearer pattern. I do this at the beginning of every school year. I'll finish most of my classes this semester. Next semester, I'll be lucky to take some college courses. This will be a good start for me.

I am waking up from the dead. Waking up in the eye of the storm. The turmoil has subsided, and there is the illusion that the demons have been kept at bay.

I am ready to pull the mask off the monster. I have a break between classes. I head into the bathroom. I am adjusting my makeup in the mirror.

"Haley, you look grand! yells Megan.

I guess that I look OK.

The storm clouds are gathering outside. I can hear the rumble of thunder.

Megan works at the frame shop next door to the furniture store where I now have a job. Megan is a thrift store Rita Hayworth. Her make up is impeccable, but muted. Her hair is cut in a black bob. And she bounces when she walks to go along with her sprightly fashion sense.

She whispers in my ear, "I'm going to teach you the beatnik way."

What does this involve, some kind of amputation?

I have already tried pretty much of everything. And what I haven't tried is better saved for the next life. What can the beat poets offer compared with Keats and Verlaine? If there is more to offer, then show it to me.

Megan says that she has a passion for Sartre. She likes be bop jazz. And she is an aficionado of free love.

"I try to become engaged in my life. To risk it all in a second. Push beyond the will into the territory of pure being."

Whatever that means sounds pretty cool. It's a change from yuppies and fashions and the mall.

Megan invites me out for coffee after class. I'm going to need something to keep awake. And I've finished all my chemistry homework during my free period.

There's this new coffee shop in a mall near school. It's not a chain. All Megan's best friends have already adopted it as their own.

All that Megan talks about is her cat Roland.

"I think that I like animals better than people."

Since I am sitting right across from her, I am not sure what to make of it.

She adds a tidbit of wisdom, "It's better rushing home to pet my Roland than it is to do some sweaty boy any day."

That hasn't stopped her from exploring the spicy charms of a few men now and then.

"I just think that I was born to heartache."

She relates it back to an incident when she was in the eighth grade, "I knew this guy Franz. He was a little terror. A few years older than me. But I really like him. So we were riding bikes home on this narrow street. This car comes along. He tells me that we have to block the car. We start riding in this zig zag pattern. The driver is getting so pissed. He's honking his horn. He starts to drive at Franz. He's just trying to make Franz move. Rather than get out of the way, Franz goes crazy. The driver is beyond mad. He can't jump out of his car because Franz will take off. And he can't drive any faster, or he really will run over a child. All the time, I'm riding along the side, and no longer playing the game. Franz realizes that he has taken it as far as he can go. Besides the driver may be more psychotic than he is."

I ask, "So what happened to Franz? I thought that this was a love story."

"Let me finish. Franz takes off through this parking lot. And the driver corners me. I start crying. He calls the police. They make me reveal Franz's name and where he lives. The police go to his house to talk to his parents. And Franz never talked to me again. He put a curse on me from that moment on. I have never had luck with guys."

"I feel as if there is just such a story in my past to explain my bad luck with guys."

"It's the same for you. All these guys screw me over."

"Maybe I'm more choosy. I just haven't found the kind of guy that I like."

"Haley, you've got to kiss the frog."

"The frog gives you warts."

We both laugh as we take a sip of the lattes.

I wonder what Megan has in store for me.

Megan drives us to a coffee bar in Midtown. I have never been to anywhere like this. It seems so exotic, almost like another country. There are large pillows tossed everywhere. People are reclining and reading. Others are curled up in conversation. This is almost like Morocco.

Megan and I both order espressos. I look around. The guy in front of me has definitely overdosed on coffee. He is talking to a friend.

"An idea can't exist if it doesn't live in someone's mind. If all the people were dead, then there'd be no ideas."

I jump in the conversation, "There had to be things that existed before people."

"What makes something exist is that it is observed to exist. If there was no one to observe it, then it wouldn't strictly exist. Sure there would be processes influencing each other. But strictly, there would be no things." His friend drifts away. It is just the two of us talking.

I can handle this guy. I have a good argument to counter his, "Everything that we could say about a thing could be related to some inherent property that the object had. Even a rock has

a unity. You pick it up and throw it; it holds together in your hand.”

“Listen to what you said, ‘If you pick it up.’ Someone has to pick the rock up to recognize that unity. Otherwise, what made up the unity is entirely something else.”

I am not going to give up, “You accord such a primacy to the observer. It’s sheer idealism. We can construct a whole set of experiments that could measure the integrity of the objects described. We could pinpoint the rock.”

“Listen, you still have to set the experiments into motion.”

I figure out a new way of describing the situation, “But we could do the same thing for a time when no one was around. Like a million years ago. We could calculate what was going on at this exact place on earth one million years ago.”

He is relentless, always a comeback. I feel as if I am playing ping pong against a machine, “That would depend on the traces that were actually left from that time.”

“It’s the same thing at this moment. You’re effectively denying something that you can’t perceive. It’s literally idealism as you only consider what ideas are in *your* head.”

He smiles, “What’s your name?”

“It’s Haley.”

“I’m Ralph. So what’s in your pretty head?”

“Loads of ideas. Some that I can’t even put into words.”

He puts his hand on my forehead as if he is checking to see if I have a fever, “You’re sure that they’re really there.”

“Ralph, do you talk like this all the time.”

“Not all the time.”

“But you do worry about things that were happening when there were no humans around?”

“And I worry what might happen if humans don’t take a stand about the world right now.”

I look down at myself. I need to make sure that all of me was here at this moment.

He begins another one of his lectures, “If the environment was the same thing as the propagation of light in space, we wouldn’t be sure if we were still here right now. Because all the damage that we’ve done to the environment would have so many consequences that would eventually render human beings extinct. And we’d be observing that fact right now. We wouldn’t really exist.”

I try to wrap myself around what he has just said. Even the words are hard to follow. I go back to Megan.

“What were you two talking about?”

“I think he has a hard on for himself.”

Megan replies, “That isn’t all that he has a hard on for. I think that you’re the one who’s spoken to him the longest. Everyone else is afraid of him.”

Megan decides that she’d like to get out of this place. She has the keys to a friend’s apartment not too far from here.

It’s a nice place full of books.

“Who lives there?”

“Some guy. He lets me stay here now and then.”

We head over there. The furniture is sort of funky. A mix of garage sale antiques. I ask Megan, "Fair queen, I wonder what new challenges do you have in store for me?" "You could help me open this bottle."

"You're a wine drinker," I ask her.

I really wish that Megan had been around sooner. She is really a breath of fresh air compared to most girls that I have met at Roswell High. Even since she first arrived from Connecticut, it has never been the same.

"So are you going to hook up with that guy that you met?"

"He's not really my type."

"Why did you give him your number?"

"I was being nice."

"You never know what might happen!"

I had given Ralph my phone number. He calls me and wants to get together. Megan offers her advice, "He's a dork. We all know him. But he is sort of cute. You just have to do him."

His place is a little messy. He's a student at Tech in physics.

"I thought that we were going to do something. Maybe go to a movie."

"Let's just hang out here." I can tell what he has in mind. On Megan's urging, I figure why not.

We spend some time talking in the living room. He won't stop yapping about existence or whatever.

"Do you want to come into my bedroom? There's something that I want to show you." I'm not that inexperienced, but I am feeling out of my element.

He takes his shirt off and starts to prance nervously around the room. He's looking for his stash.

"I need to smoke some dope when I have sex. Otherwise, I can shut off that voice in my head. I just engage in this silent monologue. Do you want some?"

"I'll pass. You have been with a girl before?"

"Many times." He looks in the mirror for a moment, and then he smiles. "Around here, some people think of me as sort of a stud."

The smell of reefer is already filling the room. I cough.

"Do you have something to drink?"

"Just some beer."

He gets me a beer from the kitchen. "Sorry if it's a little warm. It's the fridge."

"No problem!"

I console myself with the beer. It's going to take a bit to give me any kind of buzz. I drink it quickly.

I lie down on the bed. I am still dressed. He looks over at me. He doesn't look half bad. Maybe a little like this actor. If it is going to happen, I might as well enjoy it.

He comes over the bed and sits next to him. I sit up and he pulls me in his arms. I kiss him. It is a lot more passionate than I expect. I just met myself go. I am feeling warm all over.

I had envisioned being sucked up by some robot by some robot. Instead, I am enjoying myself.

He lies down on top of me. He tries to move his body along with mine. I'm not quite ready for this.

He tries to put his hand down my pants. This is progressing too quickly. I immediately push him off and jump up.

"What's wrong?"

"I can't do this. I can't do this at all."

"You can't do this. Not to me. I'm all ready."

"I can't go through with this."

He is trying to fit me in his rules. Simply put, I don't fit.

"Ralph, you may be a very nice guy. But I can't have sex with you. I'm not like that."

"Every other girl who comes up here sleeps with me."

I detect a little anger in his tone. I am not going to give in, "I'm not sleeping with you. Ralph, this isn't some math problem. It's not interplanetary space travel. I'm just not going to have sex with you. I don't feel it. I never will."

"Have you ever had sex before? Have you ever really been with a guy?"

"Ralph, put on your shirt. You're a loser!"

I slam the door behind me.

Candy and I realize early on that every doorman knows that a bar's revenue depends on the number of woman who are actually in the room. At the same time, there is the very real risk that a club can be shut down if an underage drinker is caught inside. Together, both these factors provide an excellent opportunity for an innovative girl to pass through the forbidden portals.

I have already had many opportunities to explore the varied pleasures of night clubs when I accompanied Candy to bars. But my adventures with Megan open up a new chapter in my life. I can no longer use Candy's sister's idea so we need to become very creative if we hope to actually be successful in our quest. Candy had such a dazzle that everyone just wanted to be around her. Doors just opened for her.

Megan brings her own cleverness to the game. Just looking at her, you would swear that she is at least twenty five. She retains all her youthful exuberance. But she is so good at using makeup that she can entirely create her own reality. This is way beyond any idealist. Her fans pay real tribute to her art.

If Megan is to be successful at her game, we still need actual ID's to get us through the door. I am always nervous. At any moment, club personnel could invalidate our entire experience by simply asking us to leave. Of course, the most intense pressure occurs when we are actually waiting at the door. Each of us nervously clutch our ID's and all the time fear the focus of the dutiful bouncer.

On some nights we end up passing the same set of ID's among a group of friends to get each in one at a time. Tonight I hold this one ID that is clearly dog-eaten and this makes me more frightened than ever. The pit bull is waiting behind the manager's office door, and he is ready to dig his teeth in me the same way that he chewed up the ID.

What's the big thrill? I'm finally in a bar filled with haggard faces drooping down over their meager drinks.

Megan turns to me as she leads our troops into the action. "Haley, we are the stars her."

I can see us walking as group when I observe us in the mirror on the far wall. It's almost

as if we're being led together to the firing squad.

"You four girls over there! You're all under arrest."

I do what I can to blend in with the crowd. Fortunately the place is crowded so I find it easy to blend in.

Why should I even care?

Some guy glances over at me, "Who's buying you drinks tonight?"

"I've got a job. I've got my own money."

He is holding a PBR. "What would you like?"

I want to order a scotch but I don't want to impose on his finances. I just can't see drinking a PBR with him.

I compromise, "Get me a Jameson's."

Robbie does design work for the cartoon network. Everyone in this bar is a little bit of an oddball in his own way. However, when they strip away the quirky facades, I am still surrounded by a bunch of guys on the make.

Megan wants to defend her *friends*. "You head to a bar in Buckhead, and it's girls in prom dresses performing for guys bidding at an auction. This place is different. It's more like people trying to live their lives as if they're in a book."

"Megan, that is so pretentious. These guys may even be worse. In Buckhead, you know what you're up against. Here the guys act sensitive. But they'll fuck you over in the same way. Then they act totally helpless about what happened. Even the songs that they write portray girls as these harpies trying to seduce these helpless souls."

"And what are you about? Your skirt is probably shorter than any other girl here. Why are you showing off?"

"I'm not going to wear jean and tennis shoes. What about you?"

"I made this dress."

"Exactly. You want people to look at what you're doing."

"You just can't come here and impose your idea on what's going on in here. You have to work with what's here. But this is different."

I wonder if she is right. There is something that is so raw about this place. As a girl, I feel somewhat unprotected. Since I am more concerned about how I look, that only makes guys gawk at me more.

After a few trips into Megan's world, I am starting to see a few people who seem to stand out. They are particularly the shining stars among this drab contingent. I am particularly attracted to Ray.

"He is cute?"

"After that last show, he asked about you by name?"

"Really?"

June offers me some friendly advice, "He just doesn't seem right for you."

I feel as if June has offended me. What does he know?

"He just runs in a faster crowd. I don't even know if you want to keep up."

This is exactly seems the same thing that had transpired with Jez. I ended up chasing his image. The phantom finally got away from me.

Tonight, Megan does all the work for me. When I go over to talk to him, he seems to

know everything about me.

“We need to go out for a drink sometime.”

“Are you buying?”

“Of course!”

“I only drink fine scotch.”

At school, I am so excited about what happened. He has such an appealing hair cut. I love the way that it curls. It is almost like Megan’s.

When I finally meet him, my heart is beating so much faster than usual. He kisses me on the cheek. I am all aflutter.

“Get me that drink,” I need to settle down.

I am not going to drink PBR tonight. It’s Glen Livett or nothing.

“Did you have a rough day?”

I dare not tell him that he is the reason that I am freaking out so much.

“Megan told me that you have a lot of friends.”

“I go out on loads of dates. Girls just pester me. I barely have time for my painting.”

“This isn’t a date.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

He looks in the mirror to adjust his hair. Then he smiles.

“Haley, you like your date.”

He begins to tell me about his new painting.

“It’s part of this series that I’m doing. It’s all about my trip to the Southwest.”

“Very cool!”

“Can I borrow your compact for a second?”

He pulls out the mirror and hold it a little way off.”

“Ray, the hair looks great.”

“Does it now?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry. I haven’t complemented you, have I. Well, I was going out with this one girl. And then we broke up. Not really, but we’re not going out anymore. And I met this other girl. We have a thing. I sleep with her now and then. But we’re not really going out.”

“I guess not,” I reassure him. “So you are free to see other girls.”

“Something like that!”

I need to tell Megan about this guy. He’s more worried about his hair than I am. And I thought he was cute.

“Please, Megan, you need to send me another guy.”

It’s been a hot day, still more after effects from these tropical storms. After school, Megan invites me back to her house. Her mother is a lot more mellow than most of the people in Roswell. Perhaps, it could be that she is not from around here. She grew up in New York and moved to Connecticut after she got married.

She offers us chips and soft drinks or juice. I opt for the juice. We head up to Megan’s room with the snack.

Her room is clean, but a lot more cluttered than mine. There are piles of notebooks everywhere.

“Those are my writing. You have to read some of it.”

I’m really interested to see what she has been up to. It’s fascinating hearing her talk. I hope that her writing backs up all her ideas.

She also hands me some incomplete stories and poems. Everywhere there are these tidbits. Projects started but left incomplete. She chews on her chips as I flip through the volumes of material.

I am getting an excellent sense of who she is, how she writes. Next to the bed I notice a couple of bottles of wine. She is trying to make them into candles.

Megan is so good at creating the surface. Everything glitters with that shine of her character. But I want more. I work to get inside, to catch a glimpse of that other side. Everything is so chaotic. I can’t find any unified voice. She is the dreamer in the dream. Once the story has begun, she can follow it along and make choices. But she can’t paint those initial images. She just can’t get things started.

I feel that I could do as well as she could. Perhaps, this is my inspiration to get started.

“Does your mother ever go through your things?”

“She doesn’t have to. I read her what I write. She encourages. We’re friends.”

“This is so different from Hazel.”

I explain what it is like living with the secret police.

“Every second, I am waiting for something to blow up.”

“My mom is completely different than that.”

“I’m not sure that Hazel is really my mom. Maybe I could move in with you.”

“We have space.”

I need to figure out what to say to Megan. Like me, she is only seventeen. She has a long way to go before she has to step up to the plate. And this is a great beginning. On the other hand, I wonder if this will ever be anymore than musings while she’s a little tipsy.

I keep avoiding the subject, “So your mom lets you drink in your room.”

‘I don’t think that she wants me to drink. But she’s never makes a big deal about it. I probably could bring a guy home if I wanted. I’d just rather go to his place. I want to keep my room safe for my writing. No bad memories.’

For all the benefits that her parents offer her, there is something wrong. Maybe she is so too satisfied. I don’t think it is a guy. What is it?

When I am with her, I have none of that fear that I had with other friends. Even Candy left me a little edgy. The only thing about Megan is that she seems a little ambitious. She always has these big plans. And a lot of what she promises never comes through. When I am with her, I never notice her smoking a lot of pot. But maybe she is different when she is with a guy.

I am going to have to face the music. I need to tell her what I think about her writing.

“Everything that I read reminds me so much of all the things that we do together. But it’s like we always get caught up in the moment. You need to step back from things and see them from another point of view.”

I am ready for her to get defensive. She’ll try to tell me what I am not seeing. She’ll fill in the details that really need to be on the page.

She surprises me, “No one’s really been that honest. I don’t think most people get it.”

“What about your mother.”

“She’s like most mothers. She likes to compliment what I do. But that’s really not enough.”

That is a lot less painless than I thought it would be.

Megan wants me to meet her at Lenox Square in Buckhead.

“I’ll see you at Macy’s,” she says in her text message.

I wonder what are her intentions. I see her sitting just in front of the store inside the mall. She is wearing a bright yellow skirt and a big yellow hat.

“You look like you just walked off a movie set. Where’s Fred Astaire?”

She does a little tap dance in front of me.

“Fred is coming later. We have some business to take care of.”

As we slip into the store we are surrounded by the perfume zombies who all want us to try the wares. They each spray their signature fragrance around us.

Megan takes it to the next level; she tries to dance with them. I know that I am in a nightmare.

“Megan, let them alone. They’re doing their jobs.”

“I want them to reveal the secret of beauty to me.”

“If they did that, then you’d have no need to buy their elixirs.”

She tells me the hidden truth, “The answer is in the elixirs.”

“If I was a doctor, and you were my patient, I would definitely have you committed.”

“If you were my patient, I would make you impatient.”

Where is this going to end up?

“Haley there is so much light here. Chrome and mirrors.”

“I live to shock the world.”

“It doesn’t take much to shock this world. These poor things can’t take a free spirit like me.”

“You may act so felicitous at a moment like this, but if you had to work here, you might act a little more reserved.”

“I just want to dance! Let’s get a make-over,” she suggests.

“You mean a once over. I don’t want the zombies rubbing my face off.”

The zombies are still hovering over us. We get led over to the Clinique counter.

“Haley, this is our opportunity.”

As they start to paint our faces, we are drawing a crowd. We are the store’s true celebrities. After we are finished, everyone claps. We both take our bows.

“Let’s get this stuff off now.”

“Haley, you look cute.”

“I look like a Dunwoody wife,” I confess dourly.

“That may be your aspiration,” Megan teases me.

“I hope that my education counts for a little more than that.”

“Let’s get some chicken tenders.”

“I’d prefer some frozen yoghurt.”

“You always try to be so healthy, Haley. Sometimes you just have to live a little.”

“We could go upstairs and get some sushi.”

“It’s almost happy hour. We could get some businessman to buy us dinner.”

“We look absolutely radiant after our make overs. We probably could get whatever we’d like.”

“Haley, your date can buy you your single-malt scotch.”

“I’ll go for that!”

The restaurant is fairly deserted. I wonder how we are going to effect our plan.

“I have my mom’s credit card.”

“I don’t think that she’ll appreciate you charging a hundred dollar credit card bill.”

I’m not a big eater of sushi but Megan wants to initiate us to some of the more exotic delights.

“Where’s my scotch?”

“We’re waiting for the arrival of your gentleman caller.”

As the men gather, we try to look for some willing victims.

“It’s a wonder to see you pretty ladies sitting by yourselves,” the first suitor makes his way to our table.

“We’re waiting for our husbands.”

“You girls must have married quite young.”

We both hide the magnificent diamonds that adorn our fingers.

I step forward, “You can sit with us while we wait. But you have to buy us drinks.”

We make way for a third at the table. The only trick will be to get him to pick up the check for all our festivities.

“So what are you girls celebrating?”

I try to come up with some excuse for our revelry.

“It’s Megan’s divorce.”

“I thought that you were waiting for your husbands.”

“We are,” I tell him to compound the fib.

Megan whispers, “He’s never going to pay up if we keep lying to him.”

I am staring at his starched French cuffs with shiny silver links. He’s all about the sheen. We are safe.

I stare Walt in the eyes. He doesn’t seem to notice much else.

Walt and Megan laugh about the sushi. After a few stiff drinks, he is feeding her with his fork. Need I say anything more.

I’m still getting used to the meal when I look over and see that Walt has his hand on Megan’s knee. This is quiet daring for a woman who is waiting for her husband.

Walt has a big smile on his face, “So where are the husbands.”

“I think that they found other wives,” Megan risks a terrible lie.

“That doesn’t sound so terrible to me,” Walt avers.

She got us into this little mess, how is she ever going to get us out.

The next thing I know is that we are in his high-rise condo looking down on all of Buckhead,

“Walt, what do you do?”

“Currency arbitrage.”

I announce, “You’re a Mafia hit man!”

We all laugh. I realize that three’s a crowd.

“I’ve got to go. I’ve got a lot of work in the morning.”

Walt corrects me, “Tomorrow is Saturday. No one goes in on Saturday.”

If he tallies up all our inaccuracies, we’re both going to be spending some time in jail.

When he goes to the washroom, Megan tells me, “Whatever you do, don’t let him know that you are in high school.”

“If you sleep with him, Megan, be sure to take something as a souvenir.”

“If I do sleep with him, I’m going to tell him that I’m fifteen, and if he doesn’t give me money, I’ll get him arrested on a morals charge.”

Walt comes out of the bathroom, and he is positively beaming.

“The cat has your tongue?” I ask him.

“What would you ladies think about a threesome?”

I guffaw. Megan lets off a scream as if he has just attacked.

“Sorry, ladies. It’s just a joke.”

“Not really,” I tell him.

“Please, don’t go,” he begs us. “I just wanted to play fair.”

The insult gets us out of a sticky situation. We again have the truth on our side.

“I told you that the make over would pay off.”

We both open our purses. All our money is still there. What could be better?

“I just want to know how to get back to our cars.”

“I could see my car from his window,” I inform Megan.

“In which direction.”

When we walk out the door, I point us the right way. We start walking.

“Megan, tell me about the beatnik way.”

We both start giggling. We keep laughing all the way to our cars.