

14. GOING ON THE OFFENSIVE

I guess this is the part of my life where I come to the deep revelation that there really is something fucked up about me, and I just need help to put it all back together again. And I finally admit that my parents are such great people to have made all these sacrifices for me. I only wish that Bill and Hazel really knew who I am. If he could make sense of the slightest thing in my life, the same way that he seems to know the most minute detail of his investment portfolio.

I guess that I would be a lot more sympathetic if Bill was some guy who used a floor machine to clean department store floors, or if he drove a diesel rig across country. But he isn't. If I took the time to explain it to him, it really wouldn't make that much difference. For all that Bill and Hazel have given me, it's going to take a fortune to undo the mess that they have made. I'm truly sorry, but there is no reconciliation in the works

Some things just can't be forgiven. Like the smugness of Hazel, as she gazes on the plight of others. The deadly consequences of methodical carpet bombing isn't going to disappear in the blink of an eye. It's not the time for us to ask for us to all be friends.

The political climate further emboldens Hazel in her role as enforcer.

"What the hell are you doing coming in at 5 in the morning?" she interrogates me after a night of committed partying.

At this point, it's much harder to intimidate me. I will soon be going away to college. I probably will be able to get scholarships to cover my expenses. So it's really not time to start playing the good girl. I await the day when I never have to look back on my life in Roswell. I've met a lot of great people here. But I've also run into the zombie colony that is growing by the second.

"Are you going to start cracking the whip all of a sudden?. I've been coming and going pretty much as I please and you haven't said a thing. Why start now?"

I know what has got her started. I have heard the alarm sirens blare over TV. At this point, she would have confronted me if I had walked in from class at 4 in the afternoon.

I just want to go to bed. I've dealt with enough shit tonight. I wouldn't feel the need to run away so much if this was a more hospitable place. I've given her chance after chance. It's not as if she's locked me in a closet to stew in my own waste. But she's done a pretty good job of creating the inescapable prison in the back of my mind.

I know all the lessons that Fox News and Rush Limbaugh have taught Bill and Hazel. The prime directive has always involved waging psychological warfare on the offspring. And the beauty of such a campaign is that it leaves no real evidence. It is so easy to blame the victims, the unappreciative little brats. John McCain bears the after-effects of his captivity. But the right has learned to effect those same results on the restless youth. The rebellion must come from within.

I prove a too-willing opponent for Hazel this morning. She doesn't have a leg to stand on. While I have manned the home front, I have helped lessen her work here. Bill doesn't do all that much of the same. And for what it's worth, she has made much of time unbearable here. So I have done everything that I can to hide from her wrath.

She thinks that she can finally pierce my armor.

“What’s made you such a cold bitch!”

I’m not sure. I’ve tried not to follow her example. I only hope that I don’t wake up one day with an ungrateful daughter ready to fight a household revolution against me.

I know the story that most people have awaited. I see the body of my dead sister staring back at me through a pool of water. And it scares the living daylight out of me. Finally, I commit myself to a life of sobriety. I scorn Mr. Robbins for condemning me to a life of addiction. I accept Hazel as my mother. She too weeps for her missing daughter. The two of us reconcile in an ocean of tears

I just wish that I could play the part of the damaged princess. It just isn’t so!

There’s no antique hair brush that was the last thing that touched my sister’s hair. There is no way to revive her memory by running the brush through my hair because there was no long lost sister.

I can’t relive those noble nights of Americana as Roswell High clawed tooth and nail in football against rivals such as Chatahoochee and North Springs. There is no female phantom blocking my path with a true revelation from Hades. This just ain’t my story.

I wish that I could place more faith in adults. I could admit that the trauma in my early years prevented me from ever having a normal childhood. And my psychic exile was the source of my bad behavior. The only problem is that I’m not the worst little girl that I’ve ever met. And a coming-clean on my part is not going to expunge the plague that surrounds me.

And there is a plague.

I know the story of mythic proportions. My hubristic challenge to the authority of Bill and Hazel set the universe on its head. Only the final arrival of a true champion of liberty could assume the heroic proportions to expiate the blood crimes of Roswell

“You must accept Bill and Hazel this blood as your own!”

I fear some sphinx-like prophesy that is supposed to freeze me in my tracks. But it is not going to materizlize. I have accepted my mission. Nothing is going to get in my way?

Bill and Hazel cheered vociferously as bombs rained down on Baghdad. And they have gleefully accepted the blood trade which has sacrificed young Americans for Iraqis at a rate of a thousand to one. My fellow readers might protest that we have only been defending the homeland. I never knew that the homeland was so far from Roswell. And simple historical knowledge would reveal the strategic fallacy of such mis-informed beliefs. But we can’t forget that there is some new Brunhilde ready to assert that every present ill is the result of the terror menace. I’m glad that your sacred surge can answer for the lies that initiated the slaughter in the first place. Just as long as the ghosts don’t keep you up at night.

If we are going to track the curse back to its source, I am ready to follow along. I’m glad that you think that democratic protest might have gone out with the sixties, but a little real information might put us in better stead, than all the garbage excreted by the cable new organizations. And that doesn’t include the drivel from the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times*.

My life has not been one devoted to mere personal entertainment. And I am not going to surrender at this moment. My excursion has been going on from day one. I don’t need to expound any further on our collective guilt. I just know that I am going to have to deal with rising gas prices and the consequences of a trillion dollar deficit. So I hope that I don’t insult

your intelligence by wanting to crunch some real numbers with you. But if you're going to act like a God damn phony, then you're going to have to wear the mantel of a phony too.

There are pundits who wish that everyone in my generation were mesmerized by video games. That they would just remain in the somnambulance create by their ipods. But we have gathered at anti-war rallies. We have supported the rights of Hispanic workers. We have committed ourselves to environmental causes. Politics is as much part of our blood as it was for Franklin and Jefferson. This is what Megan means by the beatnik way. There was Jack Kerouac down in Mexico recognizing what havoc the Bomb had wreaked on the world. He was overcome by the guilt that no amount of merriment could erase. Even as we bop to the jazz-bos of our generation, we see that the shaking is revealing to our brains a new light. And we're seeing where adults have tried to lead us astray about what has been really going on.

Megan has a friend Sam who goes to Roswell, and his band is opening for one of the coolest bands from Atlanta. We have to use our fake ID's to get in the club. We all stand in the front as they play. We pretend to swoon. It's a blast! After Sam is finished, we decide to stay to watch the main band. They throw themselves into their set. The sound shakes the room. It is as if we are being led through a giant cavern, so ominous. Ray is hanging by the bar. Megan and I look over at him, and then back at each other.

"What ever happened with Ray?" Megan asks.

"I told you how it didn't work out."

She can barely hear me over the noise. I pull her downstairs to talk about him.

"He was so into himself. All he did was look at himself in the mirror. He even borrowed my compact. I knew that he was a little vain, but I thought that I could turn his interest towards me."

"I should have fucked him that night that I introduced you. I could tell that he wanted me."

"Megan, why are you being a bitch about it?"

"I'm not. He's just that kind of guy. He thinks of you as a good girl. He can just smell it. He wants a girl who's been around the block. That way he doesn't feel that's she's going to get possessive on him That's why I say that I should have fucked him. If I knew that he was going to treat you like a dog, I would have done a revenge fuck on him. He would have been begging for more. And I would have laughed at that limp dick of his. He's not as good as he thinks."

This is getting a little vulgar for me. I like Megan's candor. But I could never pull it off with such a lackadaisical what-the-fuck! I can't imagine my life turning on second hand of the likes of Ray Porter. I have such a fragile heart. I don't think that I can ever take that one big break. That's why I'm ready to jump off at the first signs of trouble. I don't think that I could have lasted another session with Ray.

I wonder if Megan is really as hard as she seems. Candy had that invincibility so she could seem to ride out the turbulence. And as things got more choppy, she tried harder to anesthetize herself. Behind the facade, she knew how bad that she was hurting. She could never figure out what she had to do to make things right again. That's why she left. Megan's approach is so different. She's a lot more cynical. And she seems better able to take the brunt of what is thrown at her. Megan can retreat to her room and wipe away all the heartache that remains.

Down a bottle of wine and that tough-talking sweetheart is ready to take on the world.

I walk back to my car amidst the chirping of the crickets. A lot of the humidity of the daytime has dissipated. The darkness seems to roll in waves and I am struck by the very starkness of the moment. I pass one yard and smell the intoxicating fragrance of the grass. Everything is so still. I covet the serenity that eludes me.

Even if I evade Hazel, I will continue to sense that her watchful eye tracks my every step. She has been conscientious in her counter-insurgency. But her reign is only short-lived. And she has bankrupted what good will that might be owed her.

I pause before I get in my car. This is my everything.

The next evening Megan and I are sitting at her favorite coffee bar.

“Why are you laughing so hard?”

Megan is holding her phone, “It’s Holly. She’s sending me a text message.”

Holly gives Megan a running commentary of every detail of her life.

“What is she up to now?”

“She’s having sex with the drummer from Sam’s band, and she needs some advice.”

“Tell her to hold her breath, and keep on the flippers.”

We both go crazy.

“She can’t really be texting you at a moment like this.”

“She can’t put the phone down.”

I’m just trying to imagine a sexual position that would allow her to text in comfort. If we could figure that one out, we could write a book explaining our technique and make a million.

“I just want to lead a comfortable life,” I tell Megan.

“We all do! We all hope it’s a life of our own doing. Not one handed to us by some guy.”

“Maybe Hazel started out that way.”

“So you’re going to use your superior abilities to finally figure out what makes that woman tick.”

I remind Megan, “You haven’t been attending Roswell High all this time and still haven’t figured out the secret of the Druids.”

“Are you sure that Bill and Hazel stay in when you’re romping around the city?”

“They have to watch Bill O’Reilly. They can’t go out.”

“Don’t they repeat that shit three times a day.”

“Yeah, and the catch it all three times.”

Megan asks, “Didn’t that guy used to be a teacher?”

“That’s what I hear. I guess he was the one who got *Catcher in the Rye* banned from the library.”

“I think that he also took on *Winnie the Pooh*.”

“Lewis Carroll was a pedophile.”

Megan adds, “I guess that he left *Alice in Wonderland* alone.”

“I think that he takes that one on next week.”

“I wonder what it would be like if he had a book club like Oprah.”

“All the books would have black censor marks through them just like the documents that they release from the Defense Department.”

Megan maintains, "He wishes that he was that important."

Megan stands up to go to the washroom, "Get us two more espressos while you're up."

"So now I'm your servant. Is this all part of the get-touch Haley?"

"This is part of the helpless girl who just wants to stay up all night!"

As I look around, I realize that there are only a few of us left in here. We're going to have to find somewhere else to hang out pretty soon.

Megan comes back with our drinks, "We're going to have to get out of here pretty soon."

"Time to turn in early."

"Time to turn into pumpkins—no way. Let's go raise some hell!"

I jokingly tell her, "Call up Holly. Tell her to come along. She's probably done with that schmuck by now."

"I think it's a little like getting a suntan. She has to turn over to do the other side."

I give Megan a look, and we both smile.

True to form. Miss Holly sends another text.

"It only takes one hand!"

We're taking my car. We can't stop talking about Holly.

"Doesn't she go out with some guy?"

Megan explains, "I think that's her game. She goes to a club. She's in a short skirt, and she's showing loads of cleavage. He tries to make contact, and she just starts text-messaging her guy. He's drooling, and she makes a fool of him. If he backs down, he's done for her. If he approaches her, she gets him to buy her a drink. She plays with him and then she has to answer a text from her guys. 'This is urgent!' If he still doesn't get the message, she gets him to buy her another drink."

"Get the message? I don't get it. How does the guy ever get her out of the bar?"

I catch on, as we both chant, "You can take the bar out of the girl, but you can't take the girl out of the bar."

Megan finishes her explanation, "I think that he has to be a pretty nasty guy if she's going to go with him. He has to be quick. He needs to blind her. It's beyond logic."

Maybe I learned how to drink too well from Mr. Robbins. But even when I'm super-sloshed I can't let down my guard the way that Holly does. There's always that one moment when I tell myself, "Get out of there, girl." Maybe it's Holly's confidence about her body. She likes to show it off like that. That's why she has her own guy. It helps her to deny that's the way that she really is.

I joke about it, "If I showed that much cleavage, I think that I'd fall out of my dress."

"I'd trip over myself."

We are both in a rage of laughter. Poor Holly! She should have stayed at home with her two wicked stepsisters!

When we finally arrive at the club in East Atlanta, who should be standing at the bar but Holly. It was simply inevitable that we were going to run into her. But she actually made it here before us.

Megan asks her, "Have you finished your little business?"

"And I took a shower afterwards."

"So what are you out for now?"

“A little sloppy seconds never hurt. It wasn’t as if he was going to be able to give me anything more.”

They both titter! They are a little too literal for me. It’s giving me the creeps. Megan uses Holly to make up for her own deficiencies. She lets Holly go off and be the superheroine and revel in her exploits. But in the end, she only makes fun of her friend

Holly admits that she’s lifted something of value from her most recent conquest.

Megan whispers to me, “What did I tell you, Holly?”

“What if he tries to get you arrested?”

“If he objects, I’ll just go to his wife.”

I’ve met Holly a few times before. She attends Georgia Perimeter College. And she works at a clothing boutique in Little Five Points. Her red hair is graced with strategic blonde highlights, and her body is decorated with a few random tattoos.

After Holly gets up to go the bathroom, Megan outlines Holly’s philosophy, “She’s always holding that cell phone with the knowledge that her guy is on the other end of the line. But on weekends she’s a free agent. She always ready to trade up for something better.”

Holly is locked in high stakes poker. She is ready to gamble everything for that absolutely perfect moment. She recognizes that if she that if she fails, she will ultimately be on the street with nothing. But for now she sees the promise of an eternal celebrity. Candy was crushed under the weight of this pressure. She couldn’t maintain the drive to reach that pinnacle.

I am looking in Holly’s direction. I ask Megan, “Don’t you ever feel intimidated trying to keep up with Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons?” Holly’s long legs are propelled even higher by her six inch heels. “Just imagine what it would be like if she plunged those things in some guy’s heart.”

Holly’s most recent pursuer lets his eyes slowly travel up those gentle stems. He hands her a new drink.

I do everything that I can to take a listen to *Holly at work*.

“If your boy’s so great, why isn’t he with you right now,” the guy taunts her.

“You can go now,” she boldly tells him.”

“What?” he is completely confused.

“Just get out of here.”

“I’ve been buying you drinks all night long.”

She turns away as if she has never seen him before. She shake her tush ever so slightly as the legs go into full gear. He stares into space as if she has just fleeced him of his inheritance.

The music blares throughout the club. It is an obnoxious mix of top twenty dance hits. Before we know it, we are caught up in the action. I’m trying to keep up. Megan is imitating a dance that she’s seen on TV. Angel is one of the more outrageous representatives of Holly’s posse. She traces a risque narrative with her provocative bump and grind. When Megan dances, it looks as if she wants to have sex. Angel leaves no doubt. She looks as if she actually is having sex, as she gyrates for all to see. Her dance obliterates every remainder of a soul. It is all now or never.

I feel a little like a celebrity gossip columnist when I pull her aside to ask her what would be her ideal man, “A man who could fuck me all night long like a porn star.” Little do we realize, but her ideals surround her in spades.

Holly and her crew leave no margin of error. Do or die! The club is full of their victims. I contemplate the ultimate mystery of the universe. “And what are they going to do when they run out of men?”

Megan replies, “Take a look. Half of Atlanta is going to end up in this place before they’re done.”

There are loads of imitators trying to do as well as Holly’s girls. And the guys realize that the quality has improved a thousand-fold. We’re almost to the point that there’s a light outside the door.

“Megan, what kind of contest are we involved in.”

“I think that it was a friendly game of badminton. But it seems to have progressed to a rather violent version of bumper cars. Is it getting too rough for you?”

“I feel like I’m going to vomit up my dinner.”

“You’ve really drank that much?”

“No, it’s just a feeling. Don’t worry.”

I am wondering if there is any sentient life in this place. The zombies have definitively spread to East Atlanta.

I wonder what is all that different between Holly and her cohorts and Candy’s entourage down at Georgia Tech. For Holly, everything is about the moment. It is totally about her lifestyle. Candy and her sorority pals use the trappings of privilege to prepare them for a more intense match of one upmanship.

Holly relies on that eternal gaze to confirm the same sense of admiration that she notices as she observes herself in the mirror. If they aren’t looking at her every minute, then she has clearly done something wrong in her preparation.

After spending time with these sweet things, I commit myself to a strict fast the next day. To eat anything would be an act of gross self-indulgence. Anything that I could do, would only add to a pattern of excess. I hope that I might make some offering that would serve to negate all this muddle around me.

I am beginning to grasp the utter frenzy that surrounds Holly and her friends. Maximum stimulation and minimum reflection. This is beyond the delightful offerings of Macy’s. This is a make over of the soul.

In class on Monday, I am not sure what to make of it all. If only I could derive some math equations to make sense of this abstract physics. While I am working on calculus, Holly is struggling with some basic algebra. I guess that it’s a simple trade off for a little too much fun on the weekend. You can either you can live it rough, or you can just read about it in books. Maybe it would be better for me if I simply made it all up! Bingo! From that point on, I’d have to live up to my supposed reputation. Isn’t that how it all gets started?

I could never be an understudy for Holly. I’d wonder if I was successful in my first operation while she was moving on to number five!

Megan offers me a simple saying, “If you can’t become like your enemy, then your enemy will destroy you.”

“I imagine myself in super-ho’ heels. This is getting to be much more difficult than I thought it would be.

I need to explore Holly’s vision further. I feel that it is something that is so separate from

what I am. But I don't want to seduce myself into believing that I am really that different than she is.

"There are men who would offer her a small empire just to say that they possess that thing that makes her what she is," Megan starts off her explanation of what is the basis of Holly's charm. She has asked me to meet her after we exhaust our energy in talking on the phone.

We both order coffee to perk us up. I continue the discourse on Holly, "In a way, her body is her prison. She doesn't know how to escape the expectations that men have of her. Every little success is actually a failure for her. She can figure out how to really do things on her own."

"But she may not have to worry about that. It takes only one guy with a fortune."

"Or she has to settle for whatever approximates that thing in her proximity. Like a good fuck. And she's going to take it for way more than it means."

"Haley, can you really say that good sex doesn't mean that much?"

"You may feel that it does. I do. We all do. But if Holly really can command an empire, a good roll in the hay with the neighbor boy is never going to amount to the same thing. But in her state, she's going to confuse one for the other."

Megan still wants to hold out for that million dollar hand. She herself has been plotting her endgame in just the same fashion.

I imagine what it would take to model Megan in Holly's image and likeness. First, she doesn't quite have the same height. But she is already living as a starlet from the fifties so it won't take that much to repackage her as another person.

Holly's costume has always been her skin. She wraps clothes around her. Megan lives through her wardrobe. She knows how to wear clothes. But she is not at good at effecting a striptease. Even if Holly doesn't spend every spare minute in the gym, she walks with that confidence. Megan is doing everything that she can to let that magic rub off on her. But it just doesn't fit her era.

A few adjustments and Megan might exude a trim Marilyn. We can go from there. Get her to adapt to the seasons more. Offer a bathing costume as the foundation of an outfit.

I believe that I am getting the idea.

I need to take some time off. My project for Megan has reminded me how I used to paint. I actually stretch out some canvases and pull out my oils. I have always been drawn to abstracts. I realize my new inspiration. I work out my understanding of color insofar as it reveals the elements of form. The palpable energy of Holly's body is the foundation of one structure. Every line is sleek.

Megan suggests something a little softer. I try to capture her contours. There is something of a denial in my depiction. Perhaps, I am straying from representing my own frailty. My outlines are much more delicate. I am somewhat envious of Holly's explosive nature.

Megan wants me to go to some parties. I beg off for a couple of weeks. I begin to read more. I start off with some Joyce short stories. I read *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. I drown in her impressionistic sense of color. Then I look at *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Something about the book really makes me afraid. I can have never noticed the tear in my own being. I am coming apart.

I welcome this sense of disassociation. I am floating away from myself. I pull up anchor

and float away in the mist.

I wish that I could discuss some of my journey with Megan. But I need to follow my commitment. It is as if I have submitted to a religious order. There is such a strict asceticism that governs my search. I have begun my fast again.

My body now reflects the rigid nature of my program. Is it possible to attain such control over the physical form? It is mind over body.

I finally agree to sit down with Megan. For the time being, she ignores my physical transformation. She simply wants to confront my ideas.

“I’m not admitting to any need on my part because we’re getting together.”

“Haley, you seem weird.”

She is a little miffed.

“Haley, in the end biology is going to take over. It’s like at a party. At the end, every one pairs off.”

“You’re idea of biology is no less reductive than the creationists. You just can’t claim that biology say this.”

“You haven’t become a new species.”

“In a way I have. That is what it means to be a woman. You have to branch off. Man has already deformed things with his ideas. It’s already a step beyond the biosphere. Now, woman has to take the next step.”

“You’re not becoming gay.”

“It’s not about sexual preference. This is something else.”

“You’re still denying the basic idea that you need a man.”

She is impatient with me.

“Haley, you can’t stay out in the cold forever. You’re going to need to come in eventually.”

“What about the beatnik way?”

“That was a game. A kid’s game. It’s done.”

“Why is it done?”

“Even Jack Kerouac had to come in. He couldn’t stay on the road forever. He had to stop living as Sal Paradise.”

“Megan, the road is still out there.”

We could argue forever. But we need some kind of real action to give substance to our argument. We need to make our game more entertaining. Megan is only tempting me to go bar hopping with her. I agree to a few drinks. I believe that it’s a good way to continue on with our discussion.

At the bar, things are always so distracting. There are guys trying to interfere.

“Megan, I’m getting all messed up. I had a train of thought. It just got derailed.

I try to work it all around in a circle so that I can get back to the same point. Everything seems a little hazy.

“Haley, where did we leave off?”

“I don’t think that either of us know.”

I wonder if Megan has found a guy in our time apart. That would make her more resistant to our little game. I had been contemplating redoing her image. But she seemed to preempt me.

She really does resemble Holly more than I know.

I look at her heels and how well they draw attention to her smoothly shaped legs. She offers a more accessible version of Holly's marvel. In that way, she may satisfy her pursuers more immediately.

"Holly always has that guy Paul as a fall back plan. If he's away for work, she's on the prowl. When he's back in town, she's at home making cookies."

"It's not as if he's any empire maker."

"But that's what she's looking for. That's why she spends all those nights out. She knows that guy will appear."

"She goes to dive bars. She's never going to find her Prince Charming there."

I fear Ms. Emerson is making her point. There is nothing artistic in my search. I refuse to give in.

"Haley, you are going to be the last hold out."

Megan hasn't written that much in the last few weeks. I am beginning to doubt that skill. There is a guy who's behind it all.

I tease her. She laughs as if she is betraying her secret. But if there was a guy, he certainly isn't around these days. Maybe that is her secret. She fell hard, and then she got dumped. And now she is all ready to do it again.

Megan reveals, "I talked about it with my mom. Sex is that kind of thing; it just makes us according to its demands. You want to deny that it's part of you. You make it your enemy. But in the end, you fall in love. And it's all glorious."

Megan's sense of reconciliation seemed too pat. I guess Ray could find a girl who accorded to his dreams. But I imagine what it would be like talking to her. At least, she'd always have a mirror with her.

"I don't know why we keep coming to this place. Even after a few drinks, it's still shit."

"Haley, we're hoping that some guy will turn to us and tell us how much he hates it too."

"But everyone loves it so much here. They all sing along with the music. This is their family. However, I have again been orphaned."

"You're such a drama queen."

"Hardly. When I see drama, I run from it. I'm not waiting for some guy with whom I can fight all the time."

"We've had our fights. We're having one now."

"No, we're not."

"You know that I'm right. Everything that you run from, you will end up embracing."

"Megan, you're too soft."

Megan has become more than a little like Holly. She is Holly. She just can rationalize better. Like Holly, there is a part of her that is now opaque. I can't get through this thing that is tough in nails.

In young women, this is the key to her seductive power. But in Hazel, the same quality makes her such bitch!

I know how the fairy tales would tell it. Megan, the Meek Princess, battles with Holly, the Evil Queen over her birthright. In the end, Megan uses magic to become identical to Holly.

"She wakes up in some stranger's bed, and she has to tame him before he again becomes

a monster.”

“Megan, that is such a shitty version of *Beauty and The Beast*.”

“I’ve got a better tale, but it’s a little more raunchy.”

And after giving in, Megan is going to complain that it used to be better.

“Haley, what do you have to complain about?”

“We’ve already gone through this?”

“Give me the short version.”

“I’m just trying to figure out how we ended up drunk in this bar,” I admit.

“I think that Prince Charming is waving at you over there with the explanation.”

“I know what his explanation is. He asks what are such cute girls doing in a place like this, and he can help us escape. And no one else has talked to us all night. So the moment that he sits down, we tell him every detail of our lives. And he realizes that we are damaged. But in his own way, he is too. So maybe we can work together and repair each other together.”

I need to finish before last call, “Only we wake up next to him and realize that this is our life for the next fifty years, and we scream as loud as we can. And the volume of the scream finally awakens us from the nightmare. He just not that good. And he hates art. And he only like sports. And we don’t have to take that shit.

“Last call!”

“Who said that, Megan?”

“The bartender. He’s just doing his job.”

“I need to get home. I promised that this wouldn’t happen again.”

“You’ll keep saying that until your twenty-one. And then you won’t want to come here anymore.”

“Is that a prediction?” I ask her.

“No, Haley, that is a promise.”