

15. DOUBLE OR NOTHING

It is only a few months until my eighteenth birthday. On November 6, 2008, I will be able finally to exercise my right of majority. I wish that I could project into the future so that I could more clearly divine what the final result will be. Between now and then, anything might influence the voting public as to the final outcome. The only thing that I am sure about is how I will be voting. John McCain has played the poor man's rival to the god Mars. And his bellowing pronouncement have all the air of farce. I particularly detest the smarmy attempt of this Washington insider and benefactor of the lobbies to portray himself as a maverick. How much closer does he have to come before he's kissing the ass of the corporate fat cats?

As much as I truly fear the ascendancy of a McCain presidency, I am not that enthralled by the alternative. Barack Obama has groomed himself to become the consummate politician. I know that some Democrats try to portray this as the election of a lifetime, but who is really pulling the strings? I have no obligation as a citizen to vote for the mainstream parties. Such abdication of the rights of the citizen are predicated on the belief that we are only free at the moment of our vote. But if we fail to engage our other rights, then we remain an unformed populace, and we have no influence over the actual state of affairs that give the government its authority.

For all the silliness that surrounds my idle pursuits with Megan, I do not base my life on mere frivolity. I recognize that my political assertiveness may be the first step in reclaiming my body from the forces of evil. Every quirk of my personality is part of a bigger picture that is put into motion by my political awareness. Your literary heroes may be so overwhelmed by their personal struggles that they can never assert a personal independence through their politics. But I realize the very real nature of my declaration. It puts me on a footing with Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau. I am ready to state my case.

Is the world ready for Haley's viewpoint? I feel a little like Abraham Lincoln preparing for a debate. I have my notes ready. But I still have butterflies. The facts may be on my side, but my opponents have shown a wilful disregard of the facts. Why should we listen to a seventeen year old girl?

The marvel of the prodigy impresses us. When a youngster has cracked the code, adults are actually far more flattered by their own encryption techniques. Imagine their utter surprise when the child who has figured out how the machine works wonders, "Now why can't I run it?"

"We already have this other group of adolescents who are in charge."

And we still can't make sense of this admonishment to *act like an adult*.

I've been given this body to mess up on my own schedule. At sixteen, I was given driving privileges and now own my own car. If I can finally admit that the world is my oyster, then I am ready to assume the chain of command. How it troubles the powers that be when a child is actually able to reproduce an edict from the Department of Defense. The little angel has finally arrived at her rightful vocation.

Will the wonderment progress any further? How seriously do we consider the right of the individual. Or have we reached a truly perverse measurement where the citizen is only accorded a billionth of a right to accord to her apportionment within the total. For simplicity sake, I am

rounding off to the closest billion just like they do in the lottery.

What about a noisy individual like myself? Am I get any closer to one girl one vote? I hope that I will by the time of election day.

Do you have something else that you want to toot your horn about?

Megan has been even more unforgiving than usual with me. She hasn't stopped her persecution of me. I feel as if I am on trial. What have I done?

I know that I am the last hold out for free expression.

"There's time when a girl has to know when to shut her mouth. Guys are stupid. But sometimes we just have to let them talk on. Let them dig their own graves."

Her choice of metaphor is highly inappropriate. But I will tolerate that gaffe. I am more concerned with her other offenses.

"Megan, did your hair not fall right after your perm? What's got into you?"

"I'm telling like it is. Is there any other way to slice a lemon?"

We can hardly talk about the *beatnik way*. She has already dismissed that aspect of her past.

"I didn't know that you needed glasses."

"It's more for the look," she admits. "But I do like the fact that I can see thing clearly now."

"So that's the cause of your enlightened state."

Who is really putting her up to this? I imagine a room full of friends and professionals, all who are trying to render a judgement on my character. The zombies believe that they have finally caught up to me.

Megan has taken some pleasure in playing the role of the randy librarian. It is already replacing Holly's as the most likely to win an Oscar in this year's voting. It is so easy for a guy to approach her, and ask if she can show him where to find a missing book.

"Dear, this is the call number. Maybe you can show me where to find it?"

And it gets a little more tricky when Megan has to stoop down to get the book.

"I think that I've found it!"

All the while the guy is getting a full view of her panties. Oh my God!

I want to explore the details of this scenario: "I know that you have committed to the Holly way. But you don't you feel a little ridiculous dolled up like a Christmas tree. You're practically inviting a guy to look up your skirt."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Not at all. You really look great in that figure-hugging dress."

"You want to touch my butt." She laughs.

I have finally deduced the mystery of the *Holly way* that has eluded me all this time. The guy is only secondary in the game. It is more evidently about naked self-admiration. She would rather enjoy a little tap on my part. Nothing sexual, you know. Just a bit of needed attention.

"Megan, tell me about your guy."

"There really isn't one. That's what I learned from Holly. You have to spread your desire both as widely and as thinly as possible!"

Her desires have more in common with Angel's. However, Holly's friend tends a lot more towards the naughty. Holly prefers the tease.

I recognize how Holly conducts her brinkmanship. Megan is entirely too obsessed with conscience to manage with any real facility. She's going to fall totally for the first guy who takes her for a real bounce.

What am I going to make of this? She is trying to entrap me in the very game to which she has fallen victim. On the other hand, it is going to take more than a kiss to get me to adopt a damsel-in-distress act.

I can tell that Megan wants me to accompany her while she tests her new look.

"I thought that you've already filled your black book with a list of red letters."

"Only in my imagination."

"So you are raring to go."

Now, there seems so little mystery left. All the years of preparation have come down to something this faded. I'm not totally inexperienced with this strategy. Candy and I knew how to tear up the night. For the time being, Megan has just accelerated the pace.

Even in her heels. Megan is barely taller than I am. I feel that she is challenging me even though she can never win.

She'll never get taken if I detail the terms of my plan. This is high stakes. But she should realize that she is betting against herself. I only let her set the terms of the wager. If she is going to take the bait, I need to let her go all the way. Megan is forcing me by her little scheme. I don't want to embarrass her in front of a new love, but I really have no choice. Holly would never leave herself this vulnerable. She would never try to expose me.

"So how did you meet Megan?" Luke has so many questions. He wants to learn all about Megan and her friends.

"We're both at Roswell High together."

"Really. You both seem so mature."

He is staring at me. I try to avoid his gaze.

It'll be a real boost for his ego if he thinks that he can have both of us. I need to play along. How far do I need to take this to make my point? How would Holly handle this. Megan needs some her own medicine.

Megan has me meet her and Luke at his apartment. She is making dinner. She realizes that she needs fresh basil.

"I have to go to Kroger."

While she is gone, I want Luke to enumerate chapter and verse all about his hook up with Megan. It will make him believe that he can get closer to me. It will be his first betrayal and make him more susceptible to further treachery.

I get him on the defensive, "Megan said that you had some trouble last night."

"With the car?" He is already embarrassed. He is trying to make light of it.

"She told me that you were a little naive."

"You really are a bitch."

"I hope that Megan didn't insult me that way."

This is the second act of betrayal. Things are going better than I expected.

If I get him to be a little more daring, I can win the final round. I excuse myself to go to the washroom. While I am in there I have some problems with the lock. The door is slightly ajar. I catch him looking. He notices nothing on my part. But I have him for the final round.

Now I need to cash in my chips.

He is not going to fall for the bathroom trick twice. This time needs to be something more spectacular. She needs to catch him in the act. What is my preference?

She comes back with the basil. She is nervous about the dinner, and she indulges in the wine a little more than I have. She has optioned the advantage to me. I need to strike while the iron is hot.

As we are carrying the dishes into the kitchen, the large salad bowl slips from my hand.

"I can help," he tells me.

He bends down to help me pick things up. He is close enough to kiss myself, close enough to smell the intoxicating spice of my perfume. He has been corrupted. She knows that something is up.

"What's going on between you two?" she asks Luke.

"Your friend Haley. She's been taunting me all night. I don't know why." He is making every effort to hide his actual desire for me.

Megan is showing more skin than I am. But he feels that he has already indulged in her sweets. I am more an elusive prize.

I have done my work. Luke's interest in her fades. Megan is ready to confront me for my devilry.

"Are you trying to get revenge on me for what I said to you?"

"Megan, you're a little late to this realization."

Holly would have made quick dispatch of Luke. The real question is if Holly would have had anything to do with this kind of situation.

"Where did you meet this guy?"

She is too sheepish to reveal much else to me. I feel that if she wasn't so stylish, she'd be little more pathetic. I couldn't tell her that. But she is on the make.

If I found school more challenging, I probably wouldn't be locked in these kind of games. I contemplate what would have happened if Luke had truly been my target. He had tripped over his own desire. But I would have awakened from that mistake with such a heartache.

"No one knows the demons that we face on our own."

I have heard Megan's observation so many times. As that imp of the perverse gathers its forces the dark afternoon can let loose its storms on the most innocent soul.

They say that the greatest thing that we do in our teens is that we learn how to confront death. It is with the comfort of a Nineteenth Century novelist that our society observes adolescents behind such trite observations. I am sure that Bill and Hazel have both endured such eloquent soul-searching. If they are not already dead, they epitomize a state of affairs where the brain has been rendered inoperable. I guess this would qualify for a walking death.

The critics no doubt have in mind some grim reconciliation with the Maker that prompts the first realization of our finitude. These same commentators disparage kids for believing that they are invincible. I guess that youth really is wasted on the young.

When a teen finds a deep contradiction in the needless slaughter in military conflict, she is often told that she barely understands the strategic complexities of the world. In America, growing up means accepting such absurdity. Does it really take bringing death into my inner circle of friends for me to understand the brutality of the world? I find such a belief barbaric.

I'm sorry, but I can't accept growing up on these terms.

For Bill and Hazel, death is up close and personal. It is standard fare in the living room. Fox News is precise in delivering these events in a way that they never really touch the viewers. Death is used to invoke the viewer's helplessness. And death is also used to engage the viewer in a cycle of revenge. That is what it means to be an adult, to know how to respond appropriately. How far is this carnage from senseless cartoon violence? What about video games?

I understand the psychological experiment for which I am being prepared. Hook me up with electrodes, and shock me with the image drawn from my own reality. While there is still a disconnect between the shelter of Roswell's gated communities, and the explosive imagery of these shocking television presentations, make an effort to bring the reality of the screen home to me as part of my personal experience. Make my world accord with what I see on TV!

Some parents will try to accommodate children to this grand inevitability by giving their kids a pet. The cute little creature has a termination date, and this is the main reason for providing the kids with a living gift. Everything cuddly and loveable will eventually be taken away by the gift-giver. This is a truly cosmic vision.

If you can learn to accept death in this form, then you are willing to accept pretty much any type of shenanigans. Challenge your kids with the arduous tasks of Hercules since if they succeed, they will look down on anyone whose real life drama does not attain the same entertainment level as their own. If they can take this artificially-induced pain, then real-time suffering must be the product of the victim's own misdeeds.

Finally, dead men tell no tales. For those truly maligned by such iniquity, they have no actual recourse for their complaint. They have been judiciously silenced once and for all. If we were really willing to take on the weight of our own actions, we would be stopped dead in our tracks.

Hazel has prepared a litany of personal tribulations that she can use to counter any soul in need of true succor. Like most poets, her world is ideal and self-contained and offers only a distant echo of what actually transpires on the streets. Whether on location or on a hastily-created Hollywood set, the final lamentation is pretty much the same. If it doesn't stay according to script, it probably never happened. As the facts about the recent collapse of the credit market recede in the night, we can console ourselves that these smoky back-room deals have all been accomplished for our eventual well-being. At least, that is what Bill tells himself when he rearranges the stocks in his well-managed portfolio. After all, someone has to put cookies in my mouth.

If the trade off seems a little too much to bear, just remember that it is your children's futures that has been traded away. All the while, this very same child has remained quite insulated from it all. I'm going off to college next year. I've got nothing to worry about!

The same folk who disdain psychiatry are ready to strap their political opponents down on the analyst's couch so that they may be diagnosed for the mania that ravage their psyches. And every political argument of any complexity can be reduced to the simplicity of the spoiled brat unleashing his fury on the unsuspecting world. If you're not going to work for a living, at least work on your acceptance speech to the Academy of Radio and Television. Be sure to mug for those publicity pictures!

The fury of the scribbler has its own reward. There is a visceral satisfaction in slapping

paint on canvas. But the true artist knows that there is a big difference between the magnificent stirring of the soul and the successful communication of that turmoil to an audience. What gives a work of art its actual power? There is a special ambiguity in the random effects of the heart. If the artist can capture such minor commotion then this is only the beginning of the creative journey.

As I read Megan's journals, I was never able to discover that thread which really motivated our adventures. That may have been the reason that she so easily put aside her quest. It simply was not revealing what she needed to know about herself. Again I take pause with regards to her world. What is the cause of her murky illusions? She has so easily given up to the *Holly way*.

There is a lot of pressure in the high school social scene. But there is even more when a girl stretches out into a world of adults. Holly has that self-assurance that makes it seem as if nothing will ever touch her. But she is slipping into a gradual tailspin. It would be terrible if Megan blundered behind her.

There will be a day when I am supposed to meet Megan at the Marakesh, and, out of the shadows will step this guy who claims to know everything about me. "I know who you are! I know how you feel!"

But I barely know who I am. I don't need some mystery man trying to lead me to the path of salvation. I don't even want to be reminded what I was feeling about myself yesterday. I'm not that inconsistent. I just don't need an avenging angel trying to put it all together in a neat package.

In fact, I am at the Marakesh. I am waiting for Megan. And there actually is a guy here who is checking me out. I feel that I need to hand him a script. Get him ready for the eventual arrival of my friend. I don't want to start off on the wrong foot. She and I are friends, not rivals.

I hope Megan doesn't think that every future situation is going to turn into a competition. I tried to alert a while ago to the perils of the Amazon Queen. She pretended to ignore what I said, but she really was intimidated by Holly. I hope that things don't get worse between us.

I look over at my man at the computer, and he looks away. He's not ready to admit his interest. I let him go back to his child's play. He could be writing that special movie script, the sci-fi adventure where the character gains a hidden power that enables him to talk to girls.

I decide to take the not-so-subtle approach..

"My name is Haley. Do you mind if I sit down?"

Guys never mind unless another girl is on the way. Even then, they like a little risk.

I help him out, "I've never seen you here before."

"I come here after class. I'm at State."

"I had a friend at State. But she moved to North Carolina to go to school."

This is easier than I thought. Still, I have to face the dreaded question, "So what are you studying?"

"I'm actually in my last year of high school. I might study creative writing. I'm still not sure."

I watch his face to see if it betrays his suspicion about my age. I remain in the clear.

He is studying film.

"So are you working on a script," I ask.

He nods. I try not to laugh.

"I hope that it's not science fiction."

"Do you have something against science fiction?"

"I prefer a straight human story. The hidden powers stuff just seems like an immature distraction." Oops, I've said it. I have just called him immature.

"It's actually about a high school girl. A real know-it-all, if you know what I mean." He looks at me as if he's just stepped into the shit. "This isn't about you. I really am working on a high school girl." He tries to catch himself in his mistake.

I laugh. "So when you work on these high school girls, do you usually succeed?"

He blushes. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Guys have a way with language."

I've really worked him into a corner. This is better than I could imagine.

"Let me make it up to you. I could buy you a coffee."

"Guys always want to make it up after the damage is done."

"I didn't know that I was going to get into on the subject of guys."

"We could stick to high school girls. So what do you know about know-it-all high school girls."

"Honestly?" he asks.

"Go ahead, shoot. I can take it."

"You think that the world begins and ends with your emotions."

I challenge him, "And high school guys are different."

"They're more awkward. Easily led astray."

"Of course, you've got over that awkward stage."

"I had my heart broken. But I am over that stage."

I probe for information, "So this girl, whoever she was, she broke your heart."

"Really, I let her do it to me. But, yes, she broke my heart."

I could get more personal, but I play along. "So here you are, wiser, more mature, and you're ready to take a hatchet to us high school girls."

"It's just a story. Well, it's my story. She was on vacation with her folks. And she met this guy from college. He impressed her. It went on from there."

"You never gave her reason to stray."

"Not in the least. I was a good guy."

"So one girl gives you the brush off, and you're ready to give all us high school girls a bad name,"

"Just the way that she did it. It was so like her and her friends. They liked to pretend that they were so much older than they were. They'd chase older guys at bars."

"She was an attractive girl, your friend from high school."

"You could say that."

"And you picked her over some other girl who might not have been quite as attractive."

He gives me a frown, "I can see where you are going with this. That wasn't how it was."

"But you liked her because she seemed special."

"She was special!"

"But then she betrayed you."

There is a little venom in his eye, “Yeah, she betrayed me.”

“Maybe you took her for granted.”

“I was too good for her.”

We have been talking all this time, and I still never gave him a chance to introduce himself.

“I’m sorry. I never even asked you your name.”

“Stuart.”

“Stuart, you said that you were too good for her. Isn’t that a little arrogant.”

“I didn’t meet it that way. It was more like I was too *good*. She wanted something a little more dangerous. It was more fun to go with a college guy. She got into the college parties. He took her to bars. He showed her off for his friends. He had more money.”

“And now you have all the money to impress high school girls. And you can even tell them that you are writing a script about a high school girl.”

“You’re making me sound like a pervert hanging out by the elementary school trying to meet little girls.”

“You haven’t asked my age. I told you that I was in high school. But I could actually be thirteen and in middle school.”

“You know too much to be that young. You remind me a lot of Sally.”

“Who’s Sally?”

“The girl who cheated on me.”

“Ah, cheating. That sounds pretty heavy.

I have him on the run. This is great entertainment. He’s going to confess to some sex crime before I’m through.

“So you’re writing a script to finally get back at her.”

“It’s not quite like that. I’m trying to be honest with my writing. It wouldn’t be fair to savage her in a movie.”

“I’m glad that you finally turned into such an upstanding citizen.”

“I try!”

“Maybe she was just the wrong girl for you.”

“We were friends since middle school.”

“She didn’t have any chance to grow. In high school, so much is going on.”

“In a way, you’re right. It’s not as if I carry a torch for her anymore. I’ve met other girls in college. It’s really different now.”

“I’m glad that you admitted that to me. I got worried. I thought that you might turn up at her doorstep one day and seek vengeance.”

“I’m not writing a slasher film.”

“Writing has a mind of its own,” I am pouring it on heavy. He seems to like it.”

“I know that. But this isn’t going to become a slasher film. It’s more of a romantic comedy.”

“Where the guy gets dumped?”

“It’s more like the girl realizes something about herself.”

I am ready for the big revelation that I can apply to my life.

“In high school, we have this big fear of death. It makes us take silly risks. We just go

out of our heads. And that's what happens to my character."

"Sally was the same?" I ask.

"I just think that Sally liked to party too much. And I was more serious."

I sum up, "So she never was right for you."

"Something like that. Art doesn't have to imitate life exactly."

"Sounds like you're trying to get a little heavy."

"How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen. Almost eighteen. What about you?"

"I'm twenty-one."

"So it has been a while."

"Yeah, I'm almost twenty two. So it has been a while"

"You're like an old man!" I tease him.

He's not sure what to make of my comment.

"Yeah, I am quite a bit older."

"I was kidding you."

He adjusts, "Yeah, sure." He's lost his train of thought.

"Do you need more coffee?"

He gets us two espressos."

"You were waiting for a friend?"

I explain, "Yeah, she's coming. She's a high school girl too. I bet that she'd love to hear about your story."

"I could repeat it for her."

When Megan comes in, he does a bit of a double take. He really is taken by the *Holly* way.

I look over at him, "You saw a ghost!"

He quickly looks away.

"Stuart, this is Megan."

Megan tries to give him the once over.

"We've been talking about Stuart's script."

"You better back off, ladies. Now it's two to one."

He's again trying to check out Megan. She is still wearing her heels and her lips are shining with lipstick.

"So what is your script about, Stuart," Megan gives him a big smile. She really is turning on the charm. It's almost as if she wants to go one-on-one with me to answer to the Luke affair.

"It's about a high school girl."

"He calls her a know-it-all!" I add.

Megan teases me, "A little like you Haley."

I turn her comment around, "A lot like me. Stuart's probably glad that you came along. He was having a little trouble dealing with me."

Megan nonchalantly put her hand on his shoulder, "Haley always has trouble with cute boys."

Stuart responds by removing her hand. He maintains contact just long enough to give her a little chill. She jumps, and he smiles back at her.

“Megan, your friend Haley told me that she wants to be a writer. What about you?”

“I wanted to be a writer for a while. But I was thinking about something a little more glamorous. Maybe theater. Or the movies. If you’re writing a script, maybe I could star in it.” She is a little obvious as she thrusts her body at him as she finishes speaking. He is almost smitten by her provocative gestures.

“Stuart, I suppose that you aren’t the kind of guy who gets taken in by the least little flirtation. That was what did you in with Jane.”

“Jane?”

“I meant Sally!” I really have him in the noose.

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

“I thought that subtlety is a writer’s strong suit.”

Megan is feeling left out. Her flirting no longer seems that apropos. She is trying to figure out how to get in the game.

“I’m going to get myself a coffee.”

She walks over to the counter.

“Your friend is cute.”

“You’ve got a thing for high school girls.”

“I just made a comment.”

“You were coming on to her.”

“She’s really not my type.”

“Your type? She’s my friend. Is this how you acted with Sally?”

“No, it’s not how I acted with Sally. You are a naughty little girl. You could use a spanking.”

“And you’re the man to give it to me.”

Megan walks up just at that moment.

“What’s he going to give to you, Hale?”

“He wanted to give me a spanking. But I didn’t want expose myself to him in public.”

Megan jumps on me, “That sounds like an invitation. What about it, Stuart. Are you going to take my friend back to your place.”

He acts more defensive, “I’m sort of seeing someone.”

“That never stopped you before.”

He has a touch of anger in his voice, “That wasn’t me. It was Sally.”

I work my comeback, “This is my friend Megan. She doesn’t know anything about your past.”

Megan continues to flirt, “I really don’t want to know too much either.”

He’s having it too good to quit now. “We know each other. You already introduced Megan.”

Megan is willing to play along with me, “But you don’t know the true Megan, does he, Haley?”

She obliges by shaking her head and then twirling around.

“Do you have this kind of thing in your script?” she asks.

“I think that he was working more on a PG kind of thing.”

Megan stares in his eyes with her big smile, “I can do a little triple X if you coax me.”

Megan now seems lethal. She has all my cynicism mixed with Holly's in-your-face flattery. Stuart is having trouble coming up for air.

I look back at Megan, "Seems like old times!"

We both laugh.

Stuart has a request, "Could you run all that by me again. I never thought high school was this much fun."

I offer him my advice, "I told you that Sally was never the right girl for you."

Megan buds in, "You're still seeing Sally."

I play it off, "No, he's seeing some other girl. Sally dumped him."

Megan teases, "You get around."

"He does what he can."

"Hold it, ladies. One at a time."

"Let me kiss him first," I blurt out.

I grab him and give him a friendly shake. He looks as if he's ready to kiss me, but I give him a tap on the face.

I remind him, "You're moving a little too fast for me."

Megan realizes that this is her opening. I'm basically setting her up. She gives her body that once over bump and grind.

"Did someone call for a high school girl?"

She leans on his shoulder.

"Who let you two out of your cages?"

"The Wizard!"

"So where are the keys?"

Megan gives him a long look, "I think that you left them back at your place."

I offer my final assessment, "I think that Jane picked them up."

We all laugh!