

Human agency is the capacity for human beings to make choices. It is normally contrasted to natural forces, which are causes involving only unthinking deterministic processes. In this respect, agency is subtly distinct from the concept of free will...

-Wikipedia "Agency (philosophy)" subsection "Human agency"

THEN

I was eight when it happened. I was watching TV when the window broke, and my mother grabbed me and shielded me from the crashing glass. I remained there, clinging to her arms, and even though I know these things probably didn't happen all at once that's how I remember them. The lights went off. Then there was noise, a lot of noise, then screaming and gunshots and I thought it was the end of the world. *Eight*, remember?

Mom had a gun. I'd never seen that gun before. It was silver and shiny and in the dark, it looked like something friendly. She kept it pointed at the window for a long time, one arm still holding me. There were sounds of sirens off in the distance, but then they faded away. I thought I saw something in the corner, a brick or something, the thing that'd come through the window.

"Hayley," my mom said to me, after taking a long ragged breath, "you and me are gonna go to your room, yeah? I'm gonna sleep in your room tonight. Don't worry about the gun. You're safe, honey. We're both safe." She steered me to my bedroom. It was the biggest room in the house. "We're not gonna open the door if we hear knocking, yeah? Hayley?"

“We’re not gonna open the door,” I repeated. It was almost midnight, I was afraid and confused. I just knew something bad had happened. And not normal bad. Proper bad.

“No,” Mom confirmed. She turned the lights off in my room. “Put your head down.” I did.

“I pissed someone off real bad,” Mom whispered to me as I lay terrified in the dark. She was never worried about swearing in front of me. “I know stuff I’m not supposed to know. They’re gonna try and drive us out, Hayley, they’re gonna try and scare us. We gotta be so, so careful from now on.” She stroked my hair. The lights outside were dying down. “You get me? Honey?”

“Who are *they*?” I asked, my voice muffled by the covers.

“People,” she said hesitantly. “Really powerful people.”

There were a hundred things I could’ve said in reply. I was thinking them. But what I said was, “Not monsters?”

Mom was quiet for a long time. “There’s only one definition of *monster*, sweetie,” she finally said. “Something more powerful than you.”

I waited for the second half of that sentence but it never came. There are monsters *everywhere*, is what I thought she was telling me. And even when you’re tucked up in bed and your mother is right beside you, that thought is *terrifying*.

The last thing I saw that night before I fell asleep was my mother reading a scrap of paper. I think I dimly realised that it must have been attached to the brick thrown through the window, that whatever was written there was a threat, but I tried to catch a glimpse of it.

There were many words on there, scrawled in red ink, but the one that stood out for me was underlined twice: HELL.

I was afraid. I slept badly. Those four letters danced in my mind. The next morning Mom got Uncle Warren to drive me to school, and she was waiting right outside the doors when classes were over. She took me to the mall and bought me candy.

When we went home, I noticed the gun had gone. And there were no more bricks. No more breaking. No more panic.

Then, five weeks later, *then* the zombie apocalypse happened.

CHAPTER ONE

I'm fifteen now. I won't make it any further.

"Mommy," says my little sister to me, pulling at my jeans, "Mommy, you gotta help me." I've told her time and time again that I'm not her mother but she won't listen. "I got homework."

Misty is four. I guess I'm not surprised she calls me her mom, really, since our real mother is dead. She died in childbirth. Lots of people at Eva did back then. I mean, they still do die, they die a lot, but *more* did then.

"I gotta make a fam'ly tree," Misty says. She has worksheets and pens all spread out over the lightest corner of the room.

"Alright," I say.

Misty focuses hard. I think she probably knows the answers to most questions re: her heritage, but again, she's only four. "What was real-mommy's name?"

When Misty *does* remember our mother, she calls her that. I suppose it's better than nothing. "Emmalee Walker." I say. And I spell it for her.

Misty writes it down carefully in one box (this takes a while) and then turns her attention to the next one. "Who did real-Mommy marry?" she asks. "Did she marry our daddy?"

"We've got different daddies, Misty. And no."

"So what should I put in the box?" Misty asks, rather worriedly.

"Don't put anything. Just put a question mark or something. You won't be the only one."

"I don't know how to draw a question mark," Misty whines. So I do it for her.

"The next box is for a sister," I tell her. "I'm your sister, so you have to put my name."

"But you said we have different daddies," Misty says. She's still using that annoying whiny voice all four-year-olds apparently use *all the time* and I'm sick of it already. "I don't *getttt* it."

"You don't have to get it, Misty," I snap. I bite back a swear word, too, but such is the state of my mind that I don't even feel guilty. "We have the same mommy so we're sisters. Write my name."

Misty does. My heart softens a bit when I see she knows how to spell it.

"Where should I put Uncle Darren?" she asks, once she's done that.

"Darren isn't really your uncle, we just call him that. He's a friend."

Misty thinks about this long and hard and then says, "What about Auntie Lily?"

“Again, not really your auntie.” And I can’t keep the stress and frustration out of my voice anymore. “And she’s *dead*, Misty, for God’s sake! You were *there* when she was taken away! Do you want us to get in trouble for talking about her? Do you want us to get taken away too?”

Misty bursts into tears instantly. “No!” she wails. “I was just asking!”

“Then *don’t!*”

I should apologise and comfort her, that’s what a real mother would do, that’s what *our* real mother would do, but I honestly...can’t. Sometimes you just can’t do the things you know you should. I wait for her to stop crying.

“We won’t get taken away, Misty,” I say lamely. “Or sent to the basement or thrown to the zombies. You just gotta be careful. Don’t talk about Lily.”

Misty nods. She wipes her eyes and colours in bits of the paper for a little while. Then, she says, “I haveta write down your kids now.”

I glance at the worksheet and coming off the box marked ‘sister’ are four little lines directed to smaller boxes. Of course, four pregnancies is the minimum. Of those four babies probably only two would survive.

“I don’t have kids, Misty,” I say. I stop short of saying, “I *can’t*, and I’ll be punished for it.” “You *know* that,” I say instead.

“I want to be your kid,” Misty says.

“You are,” I say hopelessly. I raised her, so she might as well be.

The buzzer outside goes off.

“Bedtime. You should go sleep, Misty.”

I know she won't sleep. I know she'll do what I do and just lie there for ages, thinking about our mother and our lost little world and the zombies that are supposed to be gathering beneath the windows of the building even now, scratching and snarling to get in. Probably when she does sleep, it'll just be the word HELL over and over again.

Or maybe I'm just projecting.

“Okay,” Misty says. She leaves her pens and paper on the floor, doesn't pick anything up, but our shack is so dirty anyway that it doesn't really matter. “I love you, Mommy.”

“I love you too,” I say, as she moves to her tiny bedroom and settles down on her mattress. It's not a lie. I do love Misty a lot, I just wish she wasn't *four*.

But I won't live to see her grow up. I wait until I'm sure she's asleep, and then I sneak out.

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EVA doesn't stand for anything. I used to think it did, but it's just the name of the department store. Eva. It was probably named after someone, I don't know who, probably someone dead.

Where else was there to go? At the end of the world, a luxury department store on the edge of the city seems like a pretty good place to die, all things considered. So people went to Eva. So many people. And yet not enough.

“It’s up to you young folks now,” President Trillis told us the day he was re-elected, two years ago. “The world has fallen apart, but *you* guys can rebuild it. God permitting, all of you will be parents twice over by the time you’re fifteen.”

God did not permit.

It’s after curfew so I’m taking a pretty big risk. Luckily security’s pretty lax in this part of the building. Level 2 doesn’t cause much trouble, and there’s always the cameras to keep an eye on us- luckily I know how to avoid them. Down through the lingerie section (the lingerie itself long gone, it’s just a bunch of shacks beneath smiling women on the wall), and straight past the elevators. Then through Entertainment, waiting for the mounted camera there to point the other way- and dodging a second camera by ducking behind the reception desk. A picture of Vice-President Carter hangs there for some stupid reason. He probably put it up himself. I make a rude gesture at it as I hurry past-

-and then, finally, I reach the surgery. Every floor has one. Ours is the best. Small mercies. Darren opens the door for me.

"Did anyone see you?" he demands.

"No."

"You'd best come right in."

I do and Darren taps his fingers on the operating table while putting his words together. I stare at the posters on the wall, posters put up completely against Darren’s wishes, posters that read ABORTION IS NEVER AN OPTION and LIFE IS A GIFT FROM GOD. "Hayley, you're never gonna be able to have a baby. There's nothing I can do about that."

"Carter will want to know," I whisper. He's the one who deals with that sort of thing. "It's a miracle he hasn't run into me since my birthday."

Darren nods. "But I *can* show you how to protect yourself when they send you out on patrol," he says. "We've all been out there, haven't we? We all survived." True. "Your mother survived." Not so true: she survived the zombies, she didn't survive Eva.

Reclassified men and women are sent outside, *on patrol*, they call it. Obviously this would be a big enough problem on its own, but... "If my heart won't hold out long enough for me to give birth to a kid, how's it gonna hold out long enough for me to fight and run from zombies?"

"With the right pills-"

"It's useless, Darren."

"It's all there is!" he says. "Pregnancy, or patrol!"

I try so hard not to be angry with Darren. A major part of him checked out a long time ago. What's left is standing before me, and he's taking a big risk in lying for me. He'll tell the authorities that I'm barren, that I can't have a child no matter what. While the truth is...a baby birthed by me would probably live. But I wouldn't.

Because they wouldn't care about that.

"I'm sorry, Hayley," Darren says hopelessly. "Listen. Tomorrow I can start teaching you. I know how terrible things are right now but there's gotta be a little hope-"

Darren hasn't talked about hope in ages. Maybe I should listen to him- but maybe I should also remember that Aunt Lily talked about hope too and now she's dead. "What sort of pills, anyway?"

"They've got a stash, on Top," Darren says. Darren gets to go up the Top sometimes, because he's a doctor, but he's one of the few who *is* allowed up there. "I could get some for you," Seeing my quizzical look, he lowers his voice, and anxiously he says, "Hayley. This mustn't get out, but I did a favour for President Trillis a couple months back. He owes me one in return."

"What?"

"You mustn't tell anyone," he says. "Not your sister, not *anyone*, understood?"

"Yes," I say.

"I'll get you your medicine. I promise." He turns away. My curiosity is *burning*. "Was it to do with the Basement?" I ask nervously.

"No," Darren says. "The last epidemic, they didn't even bother sending anyone." His gaze convinces me to shut up about it, but there's something else in his eyes too. I never knew my father, but I've known Darren for almost six years.

"Hayley, I'll be damned if Misty's left alone," Darren says, suddenly and slightly unexpectedly. "Alright?"

"Alright," I say, but I don't want to talk about that possibility, not tonight. I'm silent for a while- until finally, I ask him a different question. "Darren."

"Yeah?"

"Did my mother know that giving birth again would kill her?"

Darren sighs, and turns away from me. "I think she knew there would be a risk. I don't think she knew it would kill her. But she didn't have a lot of choice. You were old enough to work, and she *had* to have another kid. Hey," he says quickly, "*please* tell me you don't blame Misty."

"Course not!" What does he think I am? "I just wonder, that's all. Now that the same thing's happening to me." I have an overwhelming urge, suddenly, to just break down and sob. I'm going to *die*. No matter which way you look at it, I'll be dead in a few months, as certainly as the sun will keep rising. And dead *painfully*. I'll go out screaming; Misty will be sister-and-mother-less. And I doubt there's anything after death, except maybe zombiefication if I'm unlucky- whatever way you look at it I won't be going to join my mother. I'll just be *dead*.

"Course not," I whisper.

"You alright?" Darren asks. He even touches my arm, which from Darren is like a hug. "Hayley?"

"I don't want to die."

"You might not. Listen." He actually takes my shoulders and spins me around. "I'm gonna save you. I'll get you your drugs, I'll prepare you, I'll try to protect you. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Tomorrow we'll have to reclassify you. We'll go see Carter. He'll put you in for the next patrol, and between then and now you've got to learn all you can, okay?" I say nothing, I'm thinking of bricks and windows and Aunt Lily's body hitting the ground. "*Okay?*"

"Yeah."

"Good." He lets me go. "Hayley, we can do this, I think we can do this. You'll be with people who're well-trained, you'll have a supply of Rs with you in case you get bit. You'll have maps, you'll have equipment, you'll have weapons-"

"I should go back to Misty," I say blankly, "Shouldn't I? In case she wakes up and I'm not there."

"Yeah," Darren says, trailing off. "Come and meet me here tomorrow morning, okay?" He gives me a grim little smile. And I go.