

# SAVING THE DAMNED

*Scanlon*

I imagine hell not as the antithesis of heaven, but as a faraway isolated corner of the place to simulate the idea that your soul never left earth. I don't imagine hell as dark black pits of bloody lava and fire. Hell is a bright and blinding yellow-to-white color, like the color we think we see when we stare at the sun just long enough for the eyes to focus but not long enough that partial blindness comes for a couple of seconds. There are no plants on the ground, no clouds in the sky, and not a single sound in the air. The sun's heat is so strong, and you would have light clothing and no protection so you are in a constant state of burning. There is water, but I dare not touch it because I know, even though it looks calm, that it is boiling. I learned on the History Channel that the most painful way to die from torture is to be boiled alive—especially in this case because I can't die, I would just be a boiling, blistering, burning soul forever.

I learned from a very young age, from the speeches in a bright yellow Catholic church with bloody figures of "martyred saints" (conquistadors and colonizers), paintings of the "damned being saved" (Indigenous people from any continent of the world), and weapons (that held the "gospel truth" in every death they brought) everywhere on the walls, that I would go to hell if I sinned. Sinning is lying. Sinning is stealing. Sinning is hitting or pushing others, or cutting others in line. Sinning is saying, and even thinking horrible

things. Sinning is disobeying your parents and others who are in charge of you. If you got yelled at by a parent, or by a teacher, it had to be because you had sinned. Probably in preschool, and definitely by the time I was in Kindergarten, I realized that the kids who got in trouble and got yelled at were the ones who didn't do exactly what was told of them, the ones who were not traditionally good at "school." From then on, I associated not being good at school with sinning.

My earliest memory of someone reading to me was my dad. He used to read a Shakespeare sonnet or an Edgar Allan Poe short story to me every night. I never understood the sonnets, so I never listened, but I had very vivid nightmares about the descriptions of a man with an eye of a hawk that never closed and how his body was brutally mutilated. I would get panic attacks as early as four years old because I thought that the gruesome nightmares I was having counted to God as horrible thoughts, and I thought I would go to hell.

My earliest memory of trying to say a new word was when I was in the church nursery. It was lunchtime, and the nice old lady was opening a container of yogurt for me. She kind of popped it open, and a bit got on her glasses. She laughed and said, "It splattered!" I remember I started laughing because I thought the sound of the word "splattered" was stupid. Stupid was a mean word. I shouldn't think that. So instead I tried repeating it, almost asking a question with the tone of my voice as I attempted to say the word. I know today that I had to have known to say other words by then, but I don't remember when I learned them. I didn't so much try to learn anything past singing the ABCs and memorizing a few prayers at this nursery/pre-k; I just wanted to play. We would get prizes if we visited every learning station during our playtime, but I didn't know that until I volunteered at this nursery ten years later. There was only one station with books, the "library," and I never went there because I didn't understand it and it bored me.

I watched a lot of movies and TV when I was little, and I was obsessed with PBS Kids. I watched the channel for years because I didn't know how to read. I understood that I learned a lot more information from cartoons than from any books. *Sesame Street* taught me about being kind, and loving people, and that when someone dies they don't come back. *Between the Lions* taught me about stories like Icarus and Daedalus, stories like King Midas. So I thought it was dumb that there was a library learning station but not a cartoon learning station. But I shouldn't think things are dumb, let alone books, that's not kind. I shouldn't even think of that word. Why didn't I ever get a prize at preschool? Am I a bad kid? I don't think I am...but I don't even think the right things anyways.

The first word I ever learned how to write was my name. Probably the summer I turned five, my dad and I were at Kin Lin, a Chinese restaurant, and I asked him to show me how to write "Lucy." Then I asked him to spell "Daddy." I figured out I could spell "Lucy ad Daddy." I didn't know that I spelled "and" wrong, and I wouldn't know for a few months until I got well into my kindergarten year. The only things I knew how to write were the words that I would ask once and just write over and over and over again. I knew how to write all my siblings' first names and "I Love Mommy." That's a nice thing to write. I love my mom. Maybe I'm a good girl.

I knew how to write sentences in French long before I knew how to write in English. My kindergarten English teacher relied on at-home studying with parents to memorize sight words on flashcards that she made for us at the beginning of the year and reading the weekly five or six take-home books. I remember her giving us these flashcards, and I remember taking them out of my backpack and putting them on the counter, home alone, and never touching them ever again. I remember I would get in trouble because I never read any of the take-home books and my book log

would always be empty. I tried to not get in trouble and lie and attempted to copy the names of a few random books by myself, but I didn't know that my parents had to sign the log at the bottom. Disobeying teachers by not completing homework is sinning. Lying is sinning. Not reading and watching cartoons instead is sinning. Oh, my G\*d. I must be destined for hell.

No one ever practiced the sight words with me and no one ever read books to me. I didn't understand that my parents were simply so busy with work and several other children that they just didn't have the time to read with me every day. I thought it was always my fault that I would get in trouble in class for never knowing the simple one-, two-, three-, and four-letter words. I remember I would try to read books on my own, but I would just look at the pictures and make up my own stories in my head. I didn't understand how I could read on my own. We never practiced writing or reading in English class, it was mostly her reading us picture books and poems. I felt like learning to read was pointless since it wasn't important enough for anyone to actually teach me. Is it mean to think something so many people obviously care about is unimportant? I probably shouldn't think that. You should respect what others find important. Maybe I just need to try harder. I should just be better.

I learned how to write the alphabet in French class. I would ask the teacher how to spell a sentence in French, and I would write the same sentence obsessively over and over again. Sorcière is witch in French. I wrote that word over and over and over again. I decided that if there was only one word that I knew every time how to spell then it would be sorcière. But I didn't understand that the assignment was to write sentences, rather than just one word. I didn't know how to write sentences, I knew how to write the names of my family, "I Love Mommy," and "sorcière." I Love Mommy. I love Mommy. What a very loving and nice thing to write. Sorcière, sorcière, sorcière—what a horrible, unholy thing to write: a

monster, a worshiper of the antichrist.

By the end of second grade, I think I had finally memorized how to spell all the one-, two-, three-, and four-letter sight words that my kindergarten English teacher first introduced to me. It was the most extreme mental task trying to come up with my own words to write sentences because I fully relied on memorization and regurgitation. To this day I can recite the book *Three Little Kittens* because I memorized it after the one time I forced myself to read it, and I never actually looked at the words again after that. But even reading that picture book with probably ten sentences total was so difficult. Maybe difficult was good, it means I was working hard. Was I cheating by not really reading every time after that? Cheating is lying. Liar, liar, pants on fire, and now you'll be burning and boiling in hell.

I remember being on the school bus going home in second grade and seeing Kelly Rifle, a first grader, reading a *Goosebumps* book. I remember saying to her, "Oh my gosh Kelly, you're reading a chapter book!" and she responded with the driest tone and the most irritated and annoyed look: "Yes, Lucy, I read chapter books." There are very few times in my life when I've felt stupider than at that moment. I must not have been as good of a student as I thought I was. If this first grader was ahead of me at reading, that must mean that they weren't getting in as much trouble as I was because they were better at school. I thought I was doing okay. Maybe I'm not. I'm not being a good girl. I have to be better.

Third grade came and our English class started out as normal: memorizing and reciting poems, the teacher reading us picture books. Then we started reading the first chapter book I've ever read, *Because of Winn-Dixie*. Very quickly my new English teacher realized that several students, including myself, were struggling more than we should have been, and the thing is that none of us were in Sp-Ed and none of us were ELLs.

She then started weekly spelling tests and gave us daily

worksheets where we would have to use the words on the spelling tests in sentences or fill in the blanks. She would set us up in groups of four or five students and have us read quietly out loud to each other, and everyone had to read at least one page at a time. She wanted us to sound out words to learn the phonetic rules of the different combinations of letters, rather than just memorizing what a word looks like. She made extensive packets with puzzles and games about the book to help us comprehend what we were reading. I felt as though for the first time someone had implemented in me how important it was for me to learn how to read and write and comprehend what I was reading and writing. And I knew all I had to do myself was practice. I decided I would read ahead outside of class, so I could practice reading by myself, and so when we reread in class I could focus on comprehension rather than pronouncing the word. Because of *Winn-Dixie*, I learned how to read, and I learned the big word “melancholy”.

I also wanted to prove to myself that I could write better than I had been, so I forced myself to learn cursive. The only way that I learned cursive was that my third-grade French teacher would write the date in cursive every single day, so I would copy it every day. The words for the days of the week and the months in French are much less repetitive than in English, so I learned almost all of the letters of the alphabet. I wanted to prove to myself that even though it was hard to write “Mercredi le 18 Décembre 2013,” “Dimanche le 21 Janvier 2014,” and “Vendredi le 12 Juillet 2014.” The dates gave me enough letters by themselves to start mostly writing in cursive. I’m going above and beyond. My teacher is proud of me. I’m being a good girl.

I started taking pride in the physical form of how I wrote, so I thought I should get better at the content of what I wrote. In fifth grade, my teacher told me that I wrote a very beautiful sentence about leaves whispering secrets when you walk by, and that you should hold your breath when walking outside of a graveyard

because you don't know if the dead buried there are the jealous type. It still took me well into fifth grade to read a chapter book outside of school, but even with picture books, I started to read more and understand the story more. I'm learning more. I'm getting better grades in my English and French classes. I'm good at school now. I have to hold onto this, I have to keep this up. A's will be good, B's are adequate. I'm two days from graduating high school, and, since fifth grade, the only class I have ever gotten below a B in was a 79% C last semester for Advanced Placement Physics. I can read, write, and do homework all by myself now. I'm quite convincing now. I can finally act right. Maybe convincing enough that it doesn't count as lying. Finally, you're in good graces with God. Don't lose that: remember that He sees, hears, and knows everything.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How does the discussion of hell and its identity set the stage for the author's description of their history with literacy? And how do their callbacks to the dichotomy between heaven and hell help tell that story?
2. Read over the last four or five sentences of the essay, namely the final one. What kind of tone or feeling do you think the author is projecting in that moment? What kind of tension remains, if any?
3. This take on a literacy narrative is unique in numerous ways. In what ways does this uniqueness impact the author's story?
4. The author often equates doing things incorrectly or not doing things well to sinning. Are there ways that people—whether in this story or in your experience—reinforce this mindset? And what does that do to someone's relationship with writing and reading?