Saturdays

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Awake, Harold Dean moves his arms and legs between the flannel sheets, feeling the contrast between warm cotton on his body and chill air on his exposed face. Aromas of bacon and coffee creep up the attic stairs and he works his feet toward the edge of the bed until they pierce the covers and emerge. Then he flings back the bedding and sits up quickly to grab the blue and white striped overalls tossed on a chair beside the bed. His algebra textbook and a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* are underneath.

"Mr. Layton."

A voice calls:

"Mis-ter Lay-ton."

The voice is far away at first, then closer until it is here in the room. Harold stares out the window for several seconds before his right hand moves to the wheel and reverses his direction in one smooth motion which leaves him facing a slim dark-haired young man. They examine each other across the empty bed.

"Mr. Layton?" the young man says again, "I'm Dr. May."

"What kind of doctor?"

Harold does not know all the doctors in this place but he knows none of them are young.

"Well...," the young man hesitates, "I'm not a medical doctor, Mr. Layton. I'm a Ph.D."

"That's nice."

"I'm a psychologist, Mr. Layton, and I was wondering if you'd mind having a few words with me. I'd like to get acquainted a little bit if I could."

Harold closes his eyes to dismiss his fading dream. When he opens them again he speaks more politely.

"Come on in."

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Layton?"

Harold hates this question, the first they always ask. He asked the nurse to make him a sign saying JUST FINE, THANKS, but she missed the humor of it. He gives the Ph.D. the nod of life.

"What can I do for you, Doc?"

"The nurses asked me to stop by to talk with you, to see... to see if there is anything I can do to make you more comfortable."

"Not unless you can work miracles. If you can, I'll take my wife and health and a fifth of good bourbon. Or maybe my health and then my wife." He looks at the briefcase in the doctor's hand.

Dr. May feigns a laugh. He smiles and resumes the placating voice Harold recognizes as for children and the old.

"Well the nurses say you do get a little grumpy with them sometimes. They thought I might be able to help."

Harold Dean slides his bare legs into the overalls. It is late October and his father has not built a fire, so there is enough bite in the air to discourage dawdling. He has slept in his underwear and a flannel shirt, so he has only to slip into the overalls and then the high top leather shoes. He descends the steep staircase and passes through his parents' bedroom to the kitchen, bright from the Aladdin lamp on the icebox. He pours himself coffee from the gray-speckled pot and sits down at the heavy table to drink it with sugar and lots of cream.

In a few minutes his father is scraping his shoes at the door and then comes in, a big smile lighting his face as he sees the table and Harold Dean and his wife Adele busy at the stove. He puts his arms around her from behind and gives her a hug. She shakes him off, pretending annoyance, but pleased.

"I'm just an old man," Harold says. "It's not a lot of fun being an old man."

"I know what you mean," says Dr. May, who looks to be twenty-seven or eight. Harold knows he doesn't know, but what can he do about that?

"What I'd like," continues Dr. May, "is to get you to do some things for me so I can see what you can do and what you like and don't like."

"Sure, fine," says Harold. "You want to do it now?"

"Uh, in a few minutes. I've arranged for us to use a room down the hall. Let me go get my stuff set up and then I'll come back for you. Is that okay?"

"Fine."

Harold wheels back toward the window and lets his head slump down onto his chest. He tries to pick up his dad's voice, his dad's smile, his mother's bustle and clatter at the stove.

"Saturday," says his dad, with almost the same tone of expectancy Harold Dean might use.

After breakfast he and his dad will do the chores — milk the cows and pour hot foamy milk through the big stainless steel strainers, then mix bran and sour milk and table scraps for the hogs. His dad likes to lean on the fence and watch the hogs grunting and shoving to get up into the trough: the more they push and eat, the fatter they grow, and butchering time is not far off.

"Are you ready, Mr. Layton?"

The voice at his elbow startles him as that Saturday fades into this. Dr. May takes the handles of Harold's chair and backs all the way into the hall. Harold does not like being rolled backward but he knows Dr. May can't turn in the space between the two beds — one empty now, since Arthur, his second roommate, died.

I'm the kiss of death, Harold thinks, but I can't kiss my own ear.

The doctor rolls him down the hall to an office with a sign that says ACTIVITY DIRECTOR on the door. Inside is a table with some paper and pencils and flat little blue boxes. Dr. May parks Harold on one side of the table and then sits opposite.

"Now Mr. Layton, I'm going to ask you some questions and ask you to do some things. Some will be easy and some will get pretty hard. Nobody gets them all right, so just do the best you can. . . .

"Now, Mr. Layton . . . tell me . . . in what *direction* does the sun *rise*?"

Harold is quiet a moment.

"East," he says.

"How many *months* in a *year*?"

"At least twelve."

Dr. May gives Harold a look, asking just how difficult this has to be. Then he goes on, and Harold finds some pride in his ability to answer. They plow along until they get to one about Madame Curie, whom Harold confuses with Madame Chaing Kai-shek. Then Dr. May stops and picks up one of the flat blue boxes and lays a stopwatch on the table.

Oh, Jesus, he's going to time me, Harold thinks. Doesn't he see that I'm an old man?

Fair or not, Dr. May has him put puzzles together and make patterns with the blocks while he looks at the watch. Harold thinks he got most of them right, but he can tell he is terribly slow. Dr. May keeps saying, "Good, Good," which irritates Harold.

"Whadya mean, Good? I messed up, didn't I?"

"You're doing just fine, Mr. Layton. Am I making you nervous? Would you like to rest for a while?"

Harold nods yes. He doesn't need the rest, but he feels himself growing angry. Things don't go right anymore, even when he knows how. He thinks about the buttons on his shirt and then about the galluses on his overalls and how much easier it was to slip the button under the clip. Overalls are for people who have better things to do than poke slippery buttons at invisible holes.

And then they are all tramping out of the house to the blue Plymouth in the yard, a big sedan with doors that open in both direction like a cupboard. The kids pile into the back and his mother and father sit proudly in front: his dad proud of the car and his wife; his mother proud of the children in their neatly ironed clothes; all of them proud and happy and excited to be driving off to town on a fine fall Saturday, to see neighbors, buy groceries, go to the picture show. It will be like all Saturdays, and yet a new one, another milestone along a path of possibility leading someplace exciting and unknown.

"Everyone misses some, Mr. Layton. It's designed that way."

In the afternoon, while Harold Dean and his sister are at the movies, his mother and father will buy groceries and Harold will ride home with his feet up on a five-gallon can of lard or a 50-pound sack of flour.

"Rest a minute, Mr. Layton. I'll get us some Cokes."

He heads for Evans' Drugs because they have the best comic books. If you squeeze back in the corner they won't see you reading for free, or at least Harold Dean thinks they don't.

Dr. May puts some cards with cartoons of *The Little King* in front of Harold.

"Now if you put these in the right order, they will tell a story. Can you do that, Mr. Layton?"

Harold shuffles the cards around, wondering if there is still a Superman, a Wonder Woman — all those heroes who were never to die. He feels tired. Maybe being old is just tired, but not the happy tiredness of riding home on Saturday with his feet up on the can of lard. How different to have those feet up in a wheelchair, to be going no farther than lunch.

After an hour or so, one of the pharmacists, usually the younger Mr. Evans, comes up and asks politely if he wants to buy anything. It is the signal for Harold Dean to leave.

"That's fine, Mr. Layton. You're doing just fine."

But Dr. May stops on that section of the test, so Harold knows he has got it wrong. There are too many possibilities — a story can go in so many ways. Maybe Dr. May is too young to understand.

In a few minutes they will line up for the picture show. Most of them are under twelve, and those older will put down a dime to see if they pass, keeping the other fifteen cents ready in case. The manager, in a black suit like Mr. Evans, walks up and down the aisle with a flashlight to look sternly at those who throw popcorn or make noise.

"Are you listening, Mr. Layton?"

Harold looks up. Dr. May has put the cartoons away.

"That's all of that one. Now I'd just like to get you to do a couple more things and we'll be through." He puts down a card with designs on it. "Can you copy that onto the paper there?"

Harold grasps the pencil and begins to push. It seems not to want to move, as though he writes in syrup. He can't make out the designs clearly but doesn't want Dr. May to see him have to pick up the card. He leans over a little and sees he is doing it wrong. He starts to turn the pencil over to erase — but loses patience with it and draws the new line on top of the old.

"That's fine, Mr. Layton, just fine. Now would you try this one?"

This one is a bunch of stars or dots or something, a whole line of them. Harold is not about to do all that. He makes three dots on the paper and looks up.

"Will that be enough?"

"If that's the way you see it, Mr. Layton."

"It's not the way I see it, I just don't feel like doing all those."

"I want you to do the best you can, Mr. Layton."

"And then you're going to lie to me, right?"

The accepted practice is not to lie, but simply push the dime through the cut-out to see if it gets by. It is a fine moral distinction drawn by hundreds of youngsters over the years.

"There's no need to lie to you, Mr. Layton. You have a lot of ability For-A-Man-Of-Your-Age."

That is the way Harold hears it and hates it, Dr. May's finely drawn lie.

"But you may have some brain deterioration, too, some arteries clogged. It's not uncommon at your age. You know it's uncommon to be your age."

Harold hears a note of honesty, even respect. He looks up at the young doctor and Dr. May looks back at him. Harold looks down at his hands.

"I don't mind the slowing down so much, Doc. It's not having any plans. Everything's a dead end."

In line with the others, he waits, certain as death that the hero will triumph, that Saturdays have not changed. They will march on endlessly into the future, the reward for works and days.

"I know what you mean," says Dr. May, packing his boxes and forms back into the case.

He pauses, then says, more softly, "I'm sorry, Mr. Layton, of course I don't know what that means."

"There's no way you can, Doc. These tests won't tell you anything we didn't know an hour ago — that I'm old and slow, forgetful, living in the past. That's because there's no living left ahead, don't you see."

They move into the theater and race for a favorite seat: first

row...sixth row...balcony. Already the Movietone cameraman is pointing his lens and zooming up to the *News of the World*.

"So sometimes I get a little grumpy, like you say...but it's not at the nurses. It's at myself.

"You've done very well. Really, Mr. Layton, you have. I've enjoyed working with you...and getting acquainted. Now I'll take you back to your room."

The hall is much busier now. Old people come on walkers and in wheelchairs, collector bags hanging from their waists or under the chairs. Some are hungry and goal oriented, but others meander, purpose flickering in and out of consciousness like images on a screen.

Daffy Duck, who has been ironed flat by a boulder, shakes it off and runs away. The children scream with delight.

They reach Harold's room and Dr. May slows to make the turn. A man is sitting on the bed nearest the door, his old smooth skinny legs dangling from under his gown. Mrs. Franks, the duty nurse, is there.

"Oh, there you are, Mr. Layton. This is your new roommate, Charles McRae. Mr. McRae, this is Harold Layton."

"All right now, let's hold it down!" says the usher. "Some people might like to hear this."

The two men look at each other in silence. There seems no need to speak.

The Lone Ranger rears suddenly on his great white horse and he and Tonto gallop off the screen.

"Who was that masked man, anyway?" says the same puzzled townsman who says that in every Lone Ranger film.

"I enjoyed meeting you, Mr. Layton. I'd like to see you again."

"Come again anytime, Doc. I'll be here until I'm not here anymore."

"Maybe I could just drop in from time to time and talk. Would that be okay?"

"I'll look forward to it," says Harold, surprised to find that it is true.

Then he falls back heavily into the car seat, exhausted from Saturday.

"Did you have a good time?" his father asks as he works the gears.

"It was okay. About the same."

Coming Attractions discloses a scene of violent death as the U-Boat Commandos wreak their terrible revenge.

"Better make it soon, Doc. You never know."

"Is that good or bad," says his mother, looking back.

"I don't know," says Harold Dean.

"Don't be silly, Mr. Layton," says the nurse.

Then she and Dr. May leave Harold and Charles to stare warily at each other.

"What're you in for?" asks Harold.

"Just old age, I guess," says Charles. He has a soft, shy smile. His skin is baby smooth and pink.

"Pretty serious crime," says Harold. "You'll have to watch your step."

His sister lies flat on the car seat and flubs her lips with a finger.

"Look at them," says his mother, "Saturdays just wear them out." ❧

Talking to the Stove: Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*

Jay Paul

Beth Henley's play *Crimes of the Heart* offers the audience a chance to stand around the kitchen with three sisters — Lenny, Meg, and Babe — as though at a party in home of good friends. It is a play that flaunts family and home and honesty, but its success lies in seeming to be what it is not — a tale with a happy ending.

One might debate the degree of hope present at the end. The final moment creates a "magical, golden, sparkling" snapshot of "The sisters... laughing and catching" pieces of Lenny's birthday cake (*Crimes* 125).[1] Meg has already said, "I could want someone" (98), rather than resorting to the old tactic of fabricating a story that will please Old Granddaddy. Barnette Lloyd seems to have struck a deal with Zackery to take the heat off Babe. And Lenny has finally stood her ground against her cousin Chick, as well as phoning Charlie Hill in Memphis. But Henley has countered these gestures of autonomy with too many acknowledgments of the sisters' immaturity for the ending to be triumphant.

Among them are details and actions that may be understood more clearly within the context of fairy tales — Babe's brushing her hair, Meg's broken shoe, Lenny's dead horse, all three sisters' fondness for eating sweets, to name several. But the most pervasive is the set — the kitchen. It recalls the site of Cinderella's drudgery, but it also evokes the qualities of nurturing and security associated with the hearth and stove, and ultimately the mother.

As Bruno Bettelheim has articulated in *The Uses of Enchantment*, many of the best-known fairy tales — "Hansel and

Gretel," "Little Red Riding-Hood," "Rapunzel," "The Sleeping Beauty," "Snow White," and "Cinderella" among them—demonstrate the successful negotiating of the perils of childhood and adolescence. A heroine like Snow White, for instance, must outgrow narcissism, mentally and physically, before becoming an autonomous individual. Bettelheim stresses that the failure to develop completely precludes the forming of successful relationships in adulthood.

An examination of *Crimes of the Heart*—especially the images and actions that define its central characters—reveals that Henley speaks the same language as the tellers of the tales that have offered reassuring examples of personal development for centuries in cultures around the world. But Henley shows us three infantile women for whom psychological autonomy and thus satisfactory relations remain unlikely; moreover, she tempts us to remain in the kitchen with the three MaGrath sisters, intoxicated and diverted by rediscovered affection and apparent freedom.

Henley's persistent symbol of the sisters' immaturity — the eating of sweets — reveals the most durable relationship influencing the MaGrath women. On the day of their mother's funeral, Old Granddaddy tried to console them by treating them to "banana splits for breakfast" (72). Meg recalls that "he thought that would make it all better," thus distracting the sisters from their grief. "I think I ate about five!" Babe gloats. "He kept shoving them down us!" (73). Such gorging brings to mind Hansel and Gretel's compulsive devouring of the gingerbread house, an act representative of immaturity.

From the opening curtain, when Lenny is trying to mount a solitary candle in her birthday cookie, until the last, when all three women exult in the cake, sweets proliferate. Chick presents Lenny with a box of assorted cremes. Cokes are drunk, candies nibbled. Meg remembers Willie Jay as "that little kid we used to pay a nickel to, to... bring us back a cherry coke" (46). Barnette fondly savors the time he saw Babe: "At the Christmas bazaar, year before last. You were selling cakes and cookies and... candy" (59). Of course, the most excessive indulgence of sugar *per se* is Babes's stirring it into lemonade by the spoonfuls. "I like a lot of sugar in mine," she explains (33).

Although Old Granddaddy never appears in the play and is comatose by the end, his influence is undeniable. Meg chides Lenny for "living your life as Old Granddaddy's nursemaid" (79) and accuses him of discouraging, if not preventing, any romantic activities on Lenny's part. While Lenny's loyalty to Old Granddaddy might be written off as the eldest female child's traditional duty, he has perpetrated the same dominion over the other sisters. Babe, whose nickname — "Dancing Sugar Plum" — continues the eating motif, provided what Meg calls Old Granddaddy's "finest hour" (21) by marrying Zackery Botrelle. Lenny agrees enthusiastically: "He remarked how Babe was gonna skyrocket right to the heights of Hazlehurst society. And how Zackery was just the right man for her whether she knew it or not" (22). Apparently the most footloose of the sisters, Meg, too, pays allegiance to Old Granddaddy — by fabricating glamorous lies about her recording career, her movie career, even an appearance on Johnny Carson.

While Old Granddaddy may have encouraged self-gratification in order to curtail the sisters' grieving (and, by extension, their personal development), subsequent events point out the harm done. Babe has tried to relinquish control of herself to the extent that she appears unable to distinguish between the trivial (making lemonade) and the lethal (shooting Zackery). Meg's whimsy has led to her abandonment of Doc Porter in Biloxi and his crippling by Hurricane Camille. Also, after the night with Doc during the play, she returns with the heel broken off one of her shoes, a detail that reminds one of the important role the slipper, a traditional female symbol, plays in some variants of the Cinderella story. But whereas the slipper's fitting signifies Cinderella's achievement of selfhood, the broken heel of Meg's shoe suggests her incomplete condition. But the sharpest complaint of the harm Old Granddaddy has done to Meg comes from Lenny, who scolds, thinking of the extra jingle bells Meg wore sewn in her petticoats after being the one to find her mother hanged, "You have no respect for other people's property! You just take whatever you want! You just take it!" (78).

Crimes of the Heart evokes another recurrent fairy tale symbol — brushing one's hair, an act associated with sexuality

in "Rapunzel," "Snow White," "The Goosegirl," and other stories. In *Crimes of the Heart,* Babe, "always the prettiest and most perfect" (21) MaGrath sister, according to Lenny, spends much of Act Two brushing her hair and, as Act Three opens, appears with the same "pink hair curlers" she brought from jail and "begins brushing her hair" (63). If Meg has been the most flamboyant in exhibiting the incompleteness of her personality by means of self-gratification, Babe passively counts on her beauty to escape responsibility. As her collecting articles about her shooting Zackery "to keep an accurate record" (70) implies, Babe pretends to be an observer of her own life. Her disinterest takes the form of falling asleep while Zackery talks at the dinner table, and she appears to misunderstand the ramifications of having been discovered with a black lover ("Why do you think I'm so worried about his getting public exposure? I don't want to ruin his reputation!" [48]). Babe's greatest exertion is to escape life through suicide; and if she does make a discovery, as when she decides her mother had "hung that cat along with her" "'cause she was afraid of dying all alone" (118), Babe's imagination is capable of nothing more than self-projection. On occasion, she exhibits understanding of her predicament, but she is more likely to resort to mindless truisms as she tries to comfort herself or her sisters. When Lenny complains that she "can't seem to do too much" (96), Babe is ready with this illogical encouragement: "You just have to put your mind to it, that's all. It's like how I went out and bought that saxophone, just hoping I'd be able to attend music school and start up my own career. I just went out and did it. Just on hope. Of course, now it looks like... Well, it just doesn't look like things are gonna work out for me. But I know they would for you" (97).

It should be noted that Chick makes a point of brushing her hair in Act One, soon after changing her stockings, an act Henley's stage directions say should seem "slightly grotesque" (4). No doubt, Chick would like to seem fetching, but the inappropriateness of her grooming in someone else's kitchen is emphasized by her concern that her hair might be "pooching out in the back" (7) and by her grotesque dropping of a ball of hair onto the floor. But when Babe brushes her hair, she is alone

and taking pleasure in the mutual attraction between Barnette Lloyd and herself.

It is Lenny MaGrath whose actions seem most promising of independence, even though at thirty she seems to have been the sister most contained by domesticity. Lenny's association with the kitchen might suggest that she would carry out a nurturing role, or that she were being nurtured for eventual autonomy. But neither possibility obtains. Her misformed ovary precludes childbearing; and even though she has served Old Granddaddy faithfully, Lenny cannot sustain Babe in the crisis that follows the shooting of Zackery. Indeed, Lenny frantically wires Meg; and when the sisters have gathered, neither Lenny nor the others do much nurturing.

The cot that Lenny has moved into the kitchen while looking after Old Granddaddy indicates she is no mother figure, but like Cinderella sleeping among the hearth ashes, a not-yet intact individual, in need of nurturing. And her behavior has the self-effacing quality of her fairy tale forebear: Lenny is admirable for her loyalty, her meekness; she is certainly more likable that her self-centered, self-righteous (though often *right*) cousin Chick. Out of this womb of character-building, we might expect Lenny to emerge mature. Indeed, as the play ends, she finally expresses her resentment at Chick, chasing her out of the kitchen "right up the mimosa tree" (114), and she has mustered the courage to phone Charlie Hill. It is possible, to continue this line of thought, to regard the final feast of the play — the gorging on birthday cake — as further nurturing of Lenny.

But there is too much evidence otherwise. First and foremost, it is too late for Lenny. She is not an adolescent in the process of forming herself for adulthood; instead, she is thirty years old, with a long record of uncertainty. Second, there is no one to nurture her — no dwarfs or other surrogate parents. Third, the nourishment her sisters provide is reminiscent of the gingerbread house in "Hansel and Gretel" — a symbol of self-gratification.

In her confusion, Lenny puts on service to Old Granddaddy like one more disguise, a role assumed by default because it was available. For the snapshots she sent to Lonely Hearts of

the South, Lenny wore a wig; when she works outdoors, she dons Old Grandmama's hat and gloves. These "faces" suggest, as does her undeveloped ovary, that Lenny has not developed to the extent of being independent and productive. Moreover, the news that her horse Billy Boy has been killed symbolically rules out any journeying toward maturity, as is often the case in fairy tales like "The Goosegirl," in which the talking horse Falada is an important figure.

If there is anywhere Lenny is getting, it is, as she herself admits, older. Knowledge of her birthday permeates the play's three acts; and though the occasion prompts celebrations, it reminds Lenny of her mortality and loneliness. Doc Porter's news about Billy Boy makes her weep for her age. On several occasions, she apologizes about her age to her sisters, and with good reason. As soon as Meg enters in Act One, she exclaims, looking at Lenny's face, "My God, we're getting so old!" (15). Even when the sisters are happily gathered together and eager to play a game of Hearts, Lenny remembers the rules: "Hearts are bad, but the Black Sister is the worst of all" (74).[2]

Thus, independence remains elusive (and illusive) for Lenny, just as it has for Meg and Babe. Unlike mature fairy tale heroines, who get married (and thus embody the harmonious integration of the various elements of their personalities, according to Bettelheim), the MaGrath sisters' dealings with men have been disastrous. Far from being whole women, Lenny, Meg, and Babe represent, respectively, drudgery, self-indulgence, and passivity — three facets of stunted selfhood, all in a suspension of subservience to Old Granddaddy. He has been both protector and oppressor; they have been molded by him and remain unable to resist him effectively. Now the old man lies in a coma — an absent, senseless patriarch, an impersonal god; and the play offers us a final image of the sisters hilarious together, a bitter greeting-card tableau commemorating their delusions and their regressive regrouping.

In addition to activating the ambiguous condition of the MaGraths, Henley's setting *Crimes of the Heart* in the kitchen recalls a favorite means of a fairy tale character's telling a secret without breaking a vow of secrecy — speaking to a stove or fireplace so that the intended auditor might overhear. In this

case, there is no beneficent character (usually an older male in the tales) to effect the teller's salvation; instead, the audience eavesdrops on the sisters' intimacies. Ironically, we are the only auditors of the *whole* story and so develop an understanding that surpasses any individual character's.

Crimes of the Heart, in other words, invites an audience — we moderns uprooted from families and dislocated from the small town or ethnic neighborhood — to return home. Not only does the play star nostalgic women, but also its format can effect nostalgia. As we laugh with (and at) the women — and certainly at the clichés — that humor, becoming progressively wilder, may be our permission once more to revel in what we believe, as autonomous individuals, we left behind. ❧

Notes

1. Since all subsequent citations in this article come from the play, only page numbers will be included parenthetically.
2. Predictably, Meg becomes excited by this symbol of death, while Babe wonders, "And spades are the black cards that aren't the puppy dog feet?" (74).

Works Consulted

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment.* New York: A. A. Knopf, 1977.
Henley, Beth. *Crimes of the Heart.* New York: Viking/Penguin, 1986.