

All Our Happy Days Are Stupid

Sheila Heti

Sheila and Margaux sit at Friendly's restaurant, near their studio, over a shared breakfast of scrambled eggs with processed cheese on top. Sheila works as a writer and has been trying to finish her play, All Our Happy Days Are Stupid, which four years ago a theatre commissioned her to write. They have paid her several times—thousands of dollars and more. She is supposed to send them the final draft tomorrow morning, but the play is not nearly ready. She thinks talking it out to Margaux will help her write it.

Sheila Do you mind if I record?

Margaux What?

Sheila Do you mind if I record? I just haven't been recording for a while.

Margaux Sure.

Sheila If I talk it all through, it might help me.

Margaux Okay.

Sheila So it used to be that—so what happens in the play is there are these two families, the Oddis and the Sings. And they both have a twelve-year old kid. The Oddis have a twelve-year-old girl named Jenny, and the Sings have a twelve-year-old boy named Daniel. And they're both in Paris. And they're from like Toronto, let's say. And both families are vacationing in Paris. In the first act—the first scene of the play—the two families coincidentally meet up at a parade—

Margaux Were they always meeting in Paris?

Sheila By accident. It's an accident.

Margaux I mean, was that how the play always started?

Sheila Yep. So they meet in Paris by accident because the kids recognize each other, and then there's this sort of like inexplicable hostility between the two mothers. They hate each other instantly.

Margaux Right.

Sheila And at the end of the first scene Daniel goes missing, kay?

- Margaux Okay.
- Sheila And then the next scene's back at the hotel. And now this is the problem of the play: this kid's gone missing. But nobody really reacts in a conventional way to it. The mother of the boy who's gone missing falls in love with the other mother, even though she originally had this hatred for her.
- Margaux Wait—the mother who lost her son falls in love with the other one?
- Sheila Yeah. And she really wants to be her friend. And Jenny really wants to find Daniel, but she kind of in some way becomes a more minor character in the play, even though in the beginning, in the first scene, it seems it's going to be all about Jenny. And the real central character of the play becomes Ms. Oddi, Jenny's mother—
- Margaux Who's being fallen in love with...
- Sheila Yep. Who sort of realizes through the course of things, really quickly, that she's completely dissatisfied in her life and has never reached her full potential, blah blah blah. In the first draft of the play she runs away from her family to the beach—to Cannes. The other mother, Mrs. Sing, follows her.
- Margaux Why does she run away to—
- Sheila Well, she feels that she's been kind of oppressed by her family.
- Margaux I guess she has no feelings for them. Or else how could she run away?
- Sheila Hm?
- Margaux So, okay. She runs away in the middle of the boy being lost—
- Sheila And the other mother follows her.
- Margaux And the other mother follows her because she's crazy?
- Sheila I guess so. She feels that there's some kind of—I guess she's distracting herself. So she forgets about her son. But...um...at the end of the play, Jenny's mother is still gone—oh, so she had this affair with the Man in the Bear Suit. Like she ran away to have affairs.
- Margaux Right.
- Sheila But now Mrs. Sing, Daniel's mother, comes back home, and Daniel comes home, and at the end of the play Daniel has kind of grown

up in this very weird way—he has this monologue about how great it is to be a grown-up—

Margaux Wait—Daniel was the one who went missing?

Sheila Yeah.

Margaux Where did he come from? Where did he—

Sheila How was he returned? Like, policemen found him.

Margaux laughs.

Then he speaks a big monologue about how great and free it is to be an adult. Anyways, now they don't go to Cannes.

Margaux Oh they don't?

Sheila No, because Chris, who's the director, thought it would be better to localize the action at the hotel.

Margaux Right.

Sheila So instead what happens—

Margaux Oh, I guess that *is* how the theatre works.

Sheila Yeah. So now what happens is—the reason that Ms. Oddi—like what sets her off is that they're in the hotel room and she's playing the flute, and Jenny never knew that she played the flute, and now she's playing the flute and somebody from the hotel asks her if she'll play for the dinner tonight—

Margaux Yeah.

Sheila And...and she doesn't.

Margaux (*disappointed*) Oh.

Sheila Cause she realizes she hasn't been playing all these years—she loved it but never took it seriously—and now she's not good enough.

Margaux Where did the flute come from?

Sheila (*laughs*) The suitcase.

Margaux The suitcase that she brought to Paris?

Sheila Yeah...Margaux, the whole play's a total mess!

Margaux Huh.

Sheila It always was a mess.

Margaux Really? You don't remember ever being pretty excited and certain about it?

Sheila Never.

Margaux Uh oh.

Long pause.

Sheila So now what happens is, we've got Ms. Oddi who is somehow... she feels she has to change her life—

Margaux That flute's my favorite part.

Sheila Yeah. So she moves into a different hotel room, but she keeps getting embroiled with all these various men from the hotel, and all she wants to do is play her flute! (*laughs*) It's stupid.

Margaux (*laughing*) It's just an autobiography.

Sheila I know, but my life keeps changing. My life keeps changing.

Margaux Huh.

Long pause.

Well, it's too bad she never plays the flute. You know, it's like when in films there's a painting that's being discussed but you never—and all you want is to see this painting, but you never get to see it. It always seems nice to never see the painting, because then it becomes more amazing than you could imagine.

Sheila Yeah.

Margaux (*picking up a cream cheese container*) Did you have one of these?

Sheila Yeah.

Pause.

Margaux In fact, it's a total mess. I should pull the play. Pull the play?

Sheila Too late now.

Waiter More coffee?

Sheila Thanks. Like it could be the story of Ms. Oddi, but what about what everyone else thinks?

Margaux Right.

Sheila What do I do with her husband, what do I do with the other husband? It doesn't make sense for Mrs. Sing wanting to be her friend because she's so unlikeable a character—

Margaux Miss. Sing who lost her kid, who fell in love with...

Sheila The play has never worked.

Long pause.

Margaux How is that possible?

Sheila What do you mean?

Margaux Well, you've been working on it so long. Did you just feel it would just come together at the end?

Sheila I don't know.

Margaux And what happens with the—like it's a musical, right? So...

Sheila The music doesn't really work somehow.

Margaux Oh, so the music's already been written?

Sheila Yeah.

Margaux So that's hard. What's the music like?

Sheila Ballady. But from no point of view.

Margaux Right.

Sheila Like it's not really anything any of the characters would sing. The play's a mess!

Margaux Huh.

Sheila With the last draft I thought I was coming closer, but the last time I read it over I thought, wow, it's just too expository.

Margaux Is there anything you could do that's just radical? Like, if you could think of something radical that makes perfect sense and that *is* related to the whole, and to the music...

Sheila Did you have all of your salmon? Cause this is a lot of salmon.

Margaux I had half.

Sheila Do you want a little more?

Sheila offers her the salmon. Margaux denies it. Sheila takes it for herself.

Sheila Oh my god, what am I going to do?

Margaux Is it possible to drop out?

Sheila I think I missed my chance.

Long pause.

Margaux Have you gotten paid for it?

Sheila It's not a matter of payment. I think it's a matter of scheduling.

Margaux Right. Oh no!

Sheila *I could.* I could talk to them about whether I could...

Margaux It still seems like you might do something in the next day that's remarkable. Maybe that's what the play could be about.

Sheila What? Saving the day?

Margaux Something remarkable.

Sheila *(uncertain)* Yeah.

Margaux *(laughing)* That makes everyone get along okay.

Pause.

Sheila Right now the whole play is about Ms. Oddi being lost. In the beginning, Daniel goes missing, but the play is about Ms. Oddi being lost.

Margaux Yeah?

Sheila Yeah, maybe I should go back to our studio and spend all day...

Long pause.

I think not enough happens.

Margaux Maybe all the characters who aren't being so useful could just be like, can have sort of their big gestures that relate to Mrs. Oddi.... I don't know.

Sheila That's kind of a little bit what's going on.

Margaux Yeah. So Daniel gets lost and Jenny...

Pause.

I thought I might have an easy fix for you, but—

Margaux laughs.

Sheila I have a real psychological block. I have never been able to bring myself to work on it for four years. I haven't been able to bring myself to finish it or work on it—I don't know why. I really don't know why. It starts to go well, but then at a certain point...

Margaux Do you like plays?

Sheila Maybe not.

Both laugh.

I don't think I could...I don't think I could go back to the studio and wing it.

Margaux Right.

Sheila I should have totally fucking like said no to this in January! I don't know what possessed me!

Margaux Well, everything always comes together in the end. Maybe it's just the structure—something about it being theatre that's really like, blocking you.

Sheila It's just never been good. The play's never made any sense. It's nonsense.

Margaux So what? They want to start getting actors and stuff?

Sheila They want to have a workshop in December for two weeks and a main stage production in the spring.

- Margaux Huh.
- Sheila Oh my god...maybe it's not too late to pull it.
- Margaux It might be better than—
- Sheila All I'm doing right now is dropping out of things! Dropping out of the play, dropping out of the long article, dropping out of...
- Margaux What long article?
- Sheila I was supposed to write a long article that I, like, then said I wasn't going to write. Maybe that's good. Maybe I'm being more honest. I don't want to do bad work.
- Margaux Yeah. You don't have to. I think that's great.
- Sheila Here they think, like, "If you write a novel, you can write a play, you can write a long article..." And in Europe they understand like, oh, actually, it's a different skill. Like, wow, you can write a book *and* you can write plays? That's amazing! And you know what? They're right! It's a completely different art form!
- Margaux Yeah, but here you *have* to because—
- Sheila Because everyone's for hire.
- Margaux —it's not so respected, or...that's interesting.
- Sheila And it's like, Oh, right. I've never actually written a good play *ever*.
- Margaux You know, maybe it's okay if you cancel. Maybe you don't also have to have the craft of theatre.
- Sheila Part of me thinks: you're giving up. But maybe sometimes it's smart to give up. Like, well, I tried—and it didn't work! And then so, maybe it's best to be honest about that.
- Margaux Yeah.
- Sheila It seems worse to do it just because I'm nervous about my—I mean there's nothing even to be nervous about except if I fuck over the theatre, which I don't want to do. But it's still early, they could probably still get—
- Margaux Maybe you could say, you know, "What I've written is not interesting—*this* is what you should do. I know that's a gamble, but if you don't want to do that I'm sorry, but maybe you could pick

someone else.” But I’m sure you could come up with something that’s—

Sheila There’s all sorts of interesting things you could do in a theatre in three weeks! But they want a production. They want a play.

Margaux Yeah, they want a play...man are they missing out. I really feel like theatre hasn’t caught up from a 1930s awareness.

Sheila (*frustrated*) There are so many interesting things one could do with a theatre in three weeks! That I would love to do! That would be really interesting!

Margaux Maybe that’s an out. Maybe you could talk to them, and if they don’t take it, it’s their—

Sheila Maybe I should write a long letter to the producer. Don’t you think?

Margaux I don’t know. Yeah, I guess, I mean, I guess you’ll just spend all day...

Sheila I can’t fix the play in one day! If I can’t fix it in four years I can’t fix it in one day!

Margaux Right. You could come up with an alternative to the play, but you’re probably—you could think up, you could think of an alternative—

Sheila Like an alternative way of writing it, or an alternative what they could do? I could say that at the end of my letter, but I can’t make that the bulk of my letter.

Margaux Right.

Pause.

Oh, it’s so scary.

Waiter More coffee?

Margaux Thank you. And you’ve never felt excited about it—and maybe forgot?

Sheila I’ve never felt that it worked.

Margaux Oh wow. And—like sometimes I get excited about things, but I work on them so long that I forget—I forget that I was excited? But you don’t—you really are pretty sure that you never were excited?

- Sheila Even if I *was* about an early draft, no one else liked it.
- Margaux Well...maybe that's okay if you quit then, if it's been so acceptable—I mean unacceptable.
- Sheila I don't see why we're doing this. There's never been a draft that anyone's been happy with.
- Margaux Right.
- Sheila Not the producer *or* the director *or* myself *or* the other director that we had. No one's ever been happy with this play.

Very long silence.

- Margaux How do you feel? Do you feel free?
- Sheila I don't. Cause I don't know what they're going to say or if—
- Margaux I feel like I just understood story this year.
- Sheila Yeah, I thought so and then I forgot it again.
- Margaux I've got to write it down!
- Sheila What did you understand?
- Margaux I think I always had the narrative elements, but I think with my last work they were really—they had the, uh—

She makes hand gestures.

—that tight conflict? Not conflict, but that thing that goes in a circle. I mean, especially cause they're paintings, so it was the...it had all the elements that keep you there. You know?

- Sheila Sorry, sorry...I'm kind of distracted by this idea of cancelling the play.

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Walking down the street to the studio, after breakfast.

- Sheila I think I'm just bored by it. That's why I can't get myself to work on it. It's just too—
- Margaux And then this character says this...and then that character says... Yeah, that's hard. I'm trying to think of an example in my life—

when I was doing something that maybe I shouldn't have been doing, and I just felt like maybe I couldn't do it properly—

Sheila It's like having a boyfriend you never want to see. Like, break up! Forget it.

Pause. Sighs.

I guess I'll go back to the studio and quit.

Margaux I'm just trying to think of...things I've given up on.

They keep walking.

No, I can't think of anything.

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Sometimes I'd wonder in what way were we any different from two old Jews sitting in the synagogue. It was like that old joke. A son says to his father: "You've gone to Temple every week for forty years and you don't even believe in God! Why attend so religiously? Why not stop?" Father says to his son: "Moishe goes to Temple to speak to God. I go to Temple to speak to Moishe." That's the way it was with us. Or what it had become for me. Was I going to work on my play? No. I thought: If God wanted me to work, he would have called on me to work. He wouldn't have given me Margaux.

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Margaux unlocks the front door of the Katherine Mulherin Gallery—closed, since it's Monday—and Sheila and Margaux walk past the art, towards the stairs at the back, which lead up to their studio. They slowly go up the stairwell, continuing their conversation.

Margaux Like, I would find it really embarrassing to make a giant sculpture...

Sheila But I think that's key! Because Otto is saying that in the future there will be no art, only artists—that the work of art has to be renounced! And I agree—I mean, I *only* use art in service of life. Like I *totally* do. I'm renouncing this play because it's not in service of my life. But the primary thing isn't the work. If the primary thing was the work, I'd spend all my time on the play! But you know what? This does not serve my life!

Margaux Right...

Sheila And the work is secondary to the life!

- Margaux Right.
- Sheila Don't you think that's what's going on?
- Margaux No.
- Sheila No, no! In Otto Rank's construction of it!
- Margaux Um...
- Sheila Right? Like—
- Margaux Not sure...
- Sheila You—you said that yourself! Like...
- Margaux Well, I think it's responsible not to put out a crappy play—in an old-fashioned, like in a strict old-fashioned sense.
- Sheila Right.
- Margaux You shouldn't put out bad work. But I think it would be *way* more in service of your life to put out this mediocre thing, so you could—
- Sheila (*with angst*) More in service of my life!

She follows Margaux into the studio.

- Margaux Yeah, because what you just said—it's not about the art-work, so it doesn't matter how crappy it is. What matters is the people you're doing it with, and it's okay, and you could do things with them again, and you know, it's not about the work. It's not about how good or bad it is, and...
- Sheila But my life suffers if I make bad—if I put out a bad play.
- Margaux That's right. So...Otto would say, *Who cares?*
- Sheila No! Otto would say I'm doing the right thing, cause if I want my life to be a work of art—
- Margaux Yeah...?

Margaux starts setting up things at her drafting board.

- Sheila Then if I make bad work, it tarnishes my life. All I'm trying to say is what *you* said earlier I think is *true*! We make art insofar as it enhances our life, but not beyond that to an obsessive degree, like

with that sculptor or the other man. Like we make art insofar as it adds to the beauty of life—

Margaux Right.

Sheila —and makes art out of the beauty of life—

Margaux Yeah.

Sheila —cause as you say, it feels good to work hard—

Margaux Right.

Sheila —it feels good to create something beautiful. But not beyond that, to the point where life suffers!

Margaux So you would have had to work really hard for this, yeah, for this play that might not have served you.

Sheila ...I don't know about the play. I don't know.