

My Betty

There's a sleek, metallic, ultra modern set of Nambe salt and pepper shakers in a small cardboard box on the top shelf of an upper cabinet, left of the sink in the kitchen, in an apartment in Almunicar, a resort town in the south of Spain. From the seventh- floor balcony off the living room you can see a two-lane road, a narrow rocky beach and then beyond, the pure blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

The apartment is small, consisting of a living/dinning area, one bedroom, a Pullman kitchen, and a bathroom. The furnishings reflect the artistic taste and thoughtful planning of the owners, Walt and Bette T. I can see them shopping for the rust-colored ceramic candle holders, the blue, woven place mats with matching linen napkins, the brown leather chair, and the Swedish modern reading lamp. I can almost hear them debating where the perfect place within the apartment for each item might be.

Five years ago this September, my husband Ken and I spent a month in Spain in celebration of my sixtieth birthday. Walt and Betty were supposed to go with us, but then Walt had surgery on his hip, making his presence impossible. Walt, having organized trips to Spain for his landscape architecture students, prepared an itinerary for us that included a stay in the apartment. We ended up spending a week there; cooking our own meals; drinking red wine on the balcony; and drifting in the still-warm waters of the Mediterranean.

We called Walt and Betty a couple times from a pay phone in the lobby to thank them for letting us enjoy the apartment that they had bought on a whim shortly after their marriage. Once, when they weren't home, I left a lengthy message saying we had decided to appropriate their place and had no intention of ever leaving. Betty so enjoyed my message that she left it on her

My Betty

answering machine for over a year and cried when Ken accidentally erased it the week we were in California and Walt was dying.

At the time of our telephone calls, Betty and Walt already knew about Walt's cancer, but intentionally kept it from us so as not to disturb our trip. I try to imagine now what that stay would have felt like if, when we played Walt's Spanish guitar music, or made coffee with their French press, or slept in their beds, or laid out in the sun on their straw mats, we had known that neither of them would ever return to the apartment they loved so much. Walt would be dead one year later and Betty in three.

I think of the shopping trip Ken and I made in Almunicar, walking up and down the narrow, hilly, cobblestone streets, searching for just the right present to leave in the apartment to express our thanks for allowing us to stay. The salt and pepper shakers seemed perfect. I can't remember if we wrapped the box they were in. I'm certain we wrote a note, probably an attempt at humor. I do remember we looked for the right place to leave our gift, so they would be certain to find it, and yet be surprised. It pains me now to think of that box sitting unopened in that beautiful, empty apartment in the south of Spain.

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When the phone rang, close to kickoff time that Super Bowl Sunday, Ken, and I knew it wouldn't be our son, a die-hard football fan, the only person for whom we might have picked up the phone, so we let the answering machine kick in. I let a few minutes go by before I checked the message. It was ominous. "This is Valerie W. I don't want to leave a message. Call me" and then a phone number. Alarm bells went off when I heard that. Valerie W. was someone I knew only as my best friend Betty's sister-in-law and there was no reason for her to call me. And then there was the "I don't want to leave a message," message that told me her news was so shocking

My Betty

that it couldn't be left to sit alone on an answering machine. This call had to be about Betty and she herself would have called unless she was incapacitated or dead. I tried countless times to reach Valerie after that, my heart pounding, my breath getting short. I paced around the house with the phone in hand; redialing, busy; redialing, busy.

6 p.m. was the scheduled kickoff time for the Super Bowl game, a major event in our lives. My husband's accident, a fall from a ladder, resulting in a fractured ankle and crushed vertebrae, had kept us confined for weeks. So we welcomed any activity that might hold our interest for several hours. I'd spent most of the afternoon preparing to watch. I knew there would be numerous ads and interruptions, so I had Sunday's crossword puzzle at the ready; a pair of jeans that needed hemming; a book club book that needed finishing; and a pot of vegetarian chili on the stove that needed doctoring.

At five minutes to six Dick T., Betty's brother-in-law, called. I had nothing in common with him other than his dead brother and his living sister-in-law. Although by now, I assumed Betty was his dead sister-in-law. Somewhere recently I read about the moment before you learn bad news: the moment when life looks one way and then it doesn't. The moment when life has someone in it and then it doesn't. The moment that becomes "the before."

I knew before Dick said anything that I was in "the before." That moment before my world would change forever. I knew that Betty was dead before I heard the slow, soft timber of Dick's voice.

I know exactly where I was on the University of Maryland campus when I learned that John F. Kennedy had been shot. I know exactly where I was on East Capitol Street in D.C. on my route home from work when I heard Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. I know exactly where my golf ball was lying when the golf professional drove up and told my foursome that the Twin

My Betty

Towers had come down. And I will always remember exactly where I was standing in my living room when Dick said I should sit down.

A passenger plane over the Atlantic is losing altitude and the passengers are told to detach their seat cushions and prepare for impact, as if that might help them survive. I didn't sit down. I already knew the blow from what I was about to hear could not be cushioned.

I already knew what Dick was about to tell me. All I could learn now was the "when" and the "how." I will never know the "why."

* * *

I met her on a blind date. Not that someone set us up. But it feels that way since we barely knew each other when we decided to become roommates. We were both freshmen on the fifth floor of Cumberland, North, the newest and only co-ed dormitory on the University of Maryland campus in 1962. Those were the days when women living in college dormitories had curfews. Those were the days when women weren't allowed to wear pants unless the temperature dropped below twenty-five degrees and jeans were never permitted. They were the days when having a boy in your room was grounds for dismissal and a co-ed dormitory only meant a shared lobby since a wall divided the building into two discrete halves. They were the days when one telephone on a wall in the hallway served a score of girls and living in a dormitory meant sharing a communal bathroom with a row of open showers facing a row of sinks.

My freshman year, Betty was someone I had only seen on occasion in the communal bathroom shampooing and then bleaching her long platinum blond hair in the sink, a process that seemed to take hours. The only conversation we had with one another before we became roommates was me saying to her: "you seem always to be in the bathroom." And her responding: "cleanliness is next to Godliness."

My Betty

As our freshman year drew to a close, a meeting of the residents on my floor was held, the purpose of which was to select rooms and roommates for the next term. A girl I knew from high school had approached me about being the replacement for my freshman year roommate who was leaving for a sorority house. I had agreed. So when Betty W., sitting next to me on the floor at the meeting, asked me if I had a roommate, I don't know what possessed me to say "no."

That "no" would change my life.

I spent the summer wondering what I had gotten myself into deciding to room with a girl I knew nothing about except that, while in the bathroom, she talked of God. Lying in bed in the dark that first night we spent together in our 9' by 12' dorm room, our heads only a few feet apart, this virtual stranger asked: "Do you believe in God?" What a question! Even in the 1960's, politics, sex, and religion could be mine fields as discussion topics. I can still feel the tension of the silence in which I tried to formulate my answer. I was a Jew by birth and an atheist by decision. Both categories put me in a minority. How might this blond-haired, blue-eyed, *shicksa* react if I told her the truth? I don't remember what I said. Whatever I said, I know I did not offend her. It wouldn't take me long to learn that Betty was the wildest, most deliciously irreverent, open minded, non-judgmental person I would ever know.

Our blind date would turn into a romance and our romance into a love affair. It was a love affair that would last almost fifty years. It was a love affair that refused to be tempered by our marriages, our jobs, or the miles that separated us. No sex was involved, but we were more intimate than any two lovers. I knew about her conflicts with her mother, brothers, fathers, both step and biological, sisters-in-law, and colleagues. I knew the things about which she had confidence and the things about which she felt insecure. I knew what turned her on sexually; what music made her toes tap; what jewelry she coveted; and what stories would make her