

Betty

It was time to make the yearly pilgrimage to “The Shoe Barn,” on Kempton Place in West Newton, with Betty, my mother. We usually went just before Labor Day, in preparation for the new school year. The Barn was located in a valley below Washington Street and was adjacent to the taxi company I would work at some years down the road. One entered the building through two green swinging doors, each of which included a large pane of reinforced glass embedded with wire in a diamond pattern and a long rubber sweep on the bottom of each side. Once inside the main foyer, it was the smells that I remember most. In the anteroom, it was a rich brew of Jack Purcell and Converse rubber; through another set of swinging doors and it was a full-on assault of brown shoe leather.

During this visit, I lobbied relentlessly for a very specific version of black boots with Cuban heels. It was 1965, and the Beatles had been sitting atop the record charts for more than a year and I was about to enter middle school. I needed to establish an image and there was no solitary piece of gear that could make that happen better than a pair of satin-finished, over the ankle Chelsea boots, just like John’s, or Paul’s.

Betty was unconvinced. My desire to make a statement was at odds with what she described as the need for practicality. This offset, ultimately, would become a part of the battlefield we would traverse over the next decade and a half. What I have come to appreciate is that “practicality” really was not the issue. Her unstated objection arose from the myriad ways she had worked to remain unnoticeable throughout her life, as she labored to divert attention from the disfigurement her polio had created.

That polio, from 1931, had left her right leg an inch and a half shorter than her left, and a full shoe size smaller as well. My enthusiasm for the striking black boots with a zipper up the instep and the seriously pointed toes may have been in competition with the tedium Mom must

have felt when, just as in previous years, she had to ask for two pairs of the same shoe – “one in a four and a half and one in a five and a half.”

I wonder how many times it was that I heard that exact phrase uttered and in how many shoe stores across the Greater Boston area.

Somewhere, at various Goodwill or Salvation Army stores, there was a team of mismatched shoes: artifacts of our annual trek, each with a five and a half for the right foot and a four and a half for the left foot. What were the odds of a customer for those?

Elizabeth Anne Riley was born just two years before the stock market crash and the start of the Great Depression. When the polio struck a few years later, it just seemed like one more dose from the tainted well, according to her father Frank. He and my grandmother, Alice, were able to scrape together enough money to fit Betty with a brace and an elevated shoe, but she did not want an appendage that screamed “look at me” and preferred to take her chances and let the pronounced limp speak for itself. She explained that the brace was simply uncomfortable and never wore it again.

The pattern, established then – so early — was repeated throughout her life: with suitors, children, employers, and any challenge that was remotely frustrating. Suck it up and move on. As a strategy, it was effective for self-preservation, but the “stiff upper lip” approach ultimately *was* the handicap, and it affected every relationship she had, or could have had. “I don’t know why she was that way,” her sister Pat explained, “and we just let her be. I don’t think we had any idea about how to deal with it, and she rejected any offer of assistance out of hand. After she got married, it seemed clear that she wanted distance from the family.” And when she scrawled that final sentence, it was a summation that tied a lifetime of emotional denial up succinctly using just four words.

How do we resolve the boxes of inherited photographs and small format movies with stories and anecdotes from the tribe, not to mention our own riddled memory of the day-to-day events from a hazy pre-adolescent fog bank?

The shutter snares an inflected eyebrow, or a side glance – a gaze of longing toward a distant, unseen horizon, captured in 1/500th of a second, on an overcast afternoon, and stamped SEPT 1963, but the sinew that connects to the family backstory cannot be deciphered.

Betty at the animal farm with a green silk scarf surrounding her stunning, auburn hair – her inheritance from Enniskillen – holding an ice cream cone full of peanuts above her head and away from the llama just behind her left shoulder. She looks joyous and invigorated. She is fully present. She is authentic.

In another image, the couple – Paul and Betty at a backyard summer family gathering. The photo screams “1962.” Dad faces the camera directly and has his fingers interlocked around her 23-inch waist. He grins maniacally and looks like a scientist from the Manhattan Project and not unlike the father from “Back to the Future.” He seeks the limelight.

She is leaning into him (or is that simply the way her weaker leg has caused her to support herself on the uneven backyard grass at Aunt Pat’s house?) and wears a stylish size six jumper with a slight silver sheen and her shoulder length hair offers a nod to Jackie, in the sweep, up and back from her forehead. She looks off to her right with a forced grin and has her arms intertwined behind her own back. No reciprocity of touch. A subtle look of “What am I doing here?” on her face.

I could not appreciate the signs of disconnection that surrounded us (their single beds, the absence of “family time,” the strident chill of dinners that had no inherent love in the preparation). In fact, my only memory of marital turbulence during this time was of my father struggling with a frozen front door, cursing, and my mother’s sarcasm from the second floor: “Temper, temper, little man.” My father was five feet and seven inches tall.

Shortly after those photos were added to the family album, Betty started working weekends at the Boston Lying-In Hospital cafeteria on shifts that kept her away from home from Friday afternoon until Sunday evening.

When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Betty's self-imposed exile every weekend created a platform whereby my father became, inevitably, the good cop. The fun began on Friday evenings with old time radio rebroadcasts of *The Shadow*, *Suspense*, and *The Green Hornet*.

“Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men?”

“Tired of the ordinary? Want to get away from it all? We offer you...SUSPENSE!” And then that blood chilling organ line.

Simple food, fun food, was his specialty: hot dogs, macaroni and cheese, and sometimes breakfast for dinner. On Saturday afternoons, he would take us and a few other neighborhood kids to the Paramount Theatre for a triple-header: a cartoon, an episode of an ongoing serial with a cliffhanger at the end of every episode, and then the main feature. We'd walk the three-mile round trip along Washington Street, under the canopy of centuries old oak trees and past the Jackson Homestead, which had been a stop on the Underground Railway during the mid 1800s.

In between these activities, my father worked on his thesis, sometimes sitting cross-legged in the living room and surrounded by stacks of 3×5 inch index cards. On Sunday night, there was the changing of the guards, but the first time we saw Betty again was, typically, on Monday morning before school.

One evening in the middle of the week – a Tuesday, I believe – my mother came to the room I shared with my brother and blurted, “Your father is leaving. Oh, God. I don't want him to go.” Then, her tears as she pulled me into a foreign country – within her arms.

No foreshadowing. No screaming matches, no plates hurled against the kitchen wall. No intercepted phone calls from lovers. Like every emotional milestone, once again, we had been blind-sided. The slog toward acceptance was easy compared to the confusion of an intimate encounter with my mother.

My chin, on her shoulder, bounced lightly with each of her convulsive sobs as I confronted my brother's gaze from the other twin bed. He was flushed and on the verge of nervous church laughter, given half a chance. Neither of us understood that this was the beginning of the unraveling.

Then, like prizefighters who enjoy a respite every three minutes, we were back to neutral corners and the familiarity of isolation and silence.

At 40 Walker Street in 1967, the tectonic plates of a union crafted in post-World War II optimism had settled and could not support the ongoing needs of my father – a narcissistic, only child whose mother's interest in Christian Science meant that medical as well as emotional support was withheld, and Frank Riley's third daughter, damaged by polio at three, who had determined early on that the unflinching British way would get one through.

Such irony, that the weekend crew was reunited fifteen years later on an Eastern Airlines flight to Florida to repatriate Mom. We landed before noon and went directly to see the detective that had called my father two days earlier.

Three metal chairs with a very thin layer of brown vinyl padding sat in front of Detective Arden's desk in the Fort Lauderdale police station. The chairs were arranged in a triangle with one directly in front and two behind. I took the lead position. Without any discussion, I had been promoted to first chair in this hastily formed orchestra.

Jim Arden had a thin comb over that complemented a nicely tanned pate. He wore gold-rimmed aviator glasses and held a new and recently sharpened No. 2 Dixon Ticonderoga pencil in his left hand that he was moving idly in a small circular motion. Once we were settled in, he broke the ice.

"Our whole office is very sorry for your loss," Arden started.

A long pause, during which it became clear that his comments were directed to me. Isn't the dad supposed to drive?

“Thanks,” I managed.

“We were called on Monday morning because your mother had not arrived to work at the bank. Two officers were dispatched to the house and couldn’t get a response at the door.”

No response – that’s a 10-7, I thought, or perhaps a 10-30.

“Officer Gale circled the house and was able to observe that there was someone in the car, in the garage. It was then that we called a locksmith so that we could open the doors.”

Nope, definitely a 10-56.

He mentioned something about my mother’s manager at the bank and that the gas to the house had been shut off, but I was only absorbing about half of what was being ramrodded my way.

He reached across the desk and handed me a small light yellow envelope with some transparent spring flowers on one of the upper corners. The envelope had been opened and I could see that it was addressed to me with my complete address in Newton but was not stamped. *That’s odd, I thought. Why the address, if it was going to be in the car with her?*

At every job I have ever had there were yearly performance assessments. In the best companies, these were checklist events, no surprises. If the environment was healthy, the feedback offered was a summary – a simple recap of what was already known.

In less healthy companies, and especially with less astute managers, the feedback was withheld until review day, forcing an awkward, silent reading session during which the employee had to try and absorb a lot of critical and complementary information in real time. I usually found myself thinking afterwards about the things I wished I had said or at least expressed better.

And so there I sat, in an unanticipated performance review, watching an enormous black fly land repeatedly on the desk before me, as Detective Arden waved at it and looked back at me implacably.

The letter had four pages, folded in half, numbered (and circled) at the top of each page. I carried this letter from house to house for almost thirty years. After my divorce was assured and I was clearing out my belongings from the home in Rhode Island, I threw the letter away.

A fresh start! No baggage. Now, I wish I could reference it directly, but a few sentences still exist in the back eddies of my memory.

“Dear Shaun – I address this to you, though of course it is for Christopher too.” It was already starting on an offbeat

Later down the page: *“Now don’t fret dear...I just can’t continue to go on in a world so full of pain.”*

At the bottom of the second page: *“I left Mini and Maxi out in the backyard with plenty of food. I suppose you’ll need to get them to an animal shelter.”*

Then, in conclusion: *“It might seem a cruel final note, but Fuck the Whole World.”*

I noticed the capitals, and when I turned back to page one, I saw a stain in the upper right corner of the page. A tear? Coffee? It was not lost on me that this was aggression and it made me uncomfortable that my brother had been excluded. As if inclusion was an honor.

I was tired. Profoundly exhausted. I bowed my head and though I did not want to, not there, not then; some tears. A hand patted my shoulder from behind. Dad.

I reached around to my right without looking and handed the letter off to Chris. “Here you go, bro’.”

When I looked back up, the fly was just landing on the black handset of the desk telephone.

None of us wanted to stay in Florida any longer than we had to, but the requirements for cremation meant that there was a cooling off period – literally – before the ashes could be moved.

Back at Mom's house, I felt like an intruder. No chair was comfortable. We made a run to the local Kroger's for the standard weekend menu from years before, but that night there was no Shadow or Green Hornet. Beer had some appeal, though the selection was only average. We did what we had to do.

The cats were in the backyard and we still had to deal with them before we left the state. At one point, in search of their food, I opened the door to the garage, gagged and recoiled from the overwhelming smell of car exhaust. I slammed the door shut, and hard. Ever since, in traffic or perhaps walking past a car warming up on a winter morning, that smell transports me back to May, and Fort Lauderdale.

On the sideboard, next to a small wooden dining table, sat Mom's mini-bar. Front and center, a half-gallon bottle of Gilbey's gin, which had been her go-to drink for as long as I could remember. The bottle was rough to the touch, like fine grade sandpaper, and as a kid, I'd wet my finger and run it down the side of the bottle, briefly revealing the level line inside as it faded back to an ambiguous frost.

In high school, I would sometimes pilfer some of the gin, replacing what had been purloined with water. I could usually get away with two or three thefts, safely. During those times, I imagine that Mom's intake went up. I read once that gin has over three hundred ingredients and, as a result, everyone is allergic to something in the liquor, contributing to a hangover or big behavior (or both). Once, on a trip to Nantucket, from the bar car on the train to the cross-sound boat, I watched Charlie consume 34 gin and tonics before we had even docked the ferry.

Nothing to read, nowhere to hide, not much to say, so shortly after dark, I pulled the cushions off the couch, flipped them over, and made up a crude bed on the floor. At every turn, I was doing whatever I could to disassociate from my surroundings.

Dad took the master bedroom, sleeping in a dead ex-wife's bed.

On Thursday, we took the two refugees, Mini and Maxi, to the Broward County Humane Society. It was unfair and I apologized to them. I told them shit happens. Then, a pre-GPS cross-town drive to the Larkin Crematorium to pick up Mom. The urn they gave us looked like a cocktail shaker from Casablanca, and I was shocked by how much it weighed.

Later that afternoon I sat in seat 18D with a blue plastic Swiss Air carry-on bag at my feet, lugging Mom back to New England. Christopher sat directly behind me in 19D, and my father was across the aisle in 18C. We each ordered a Budweiser shortly after takeoff.

The snacks that were provided included a small round and stale bulkie roll of some sort. Chris said, "These things are like buffalo chips," bringing a smile from the rest of the team. It was a three-hour flight, so we opted for a second Bud, and as the flight attendant was starting to walk back up the aisle, Chris, not using his quiet voice said, "Oh and another one of those buffalo chips, please!"

It was dumb, but it was funny. All of us laughing hard for the first time in days and, for a change of pace, tears of laughter. *My brother can be pretty funny*, I thought – a bit of a surprise.

One week later, he'd be gone too.