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Betty

Gerald Carlson

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Betty

Before I met Betty, Bill had told me she was crazy; he told me there were a lot of crazy people at the Horizon House, a government-subsidized high-rise for senior citizens in St. Petersburg, Florida. Bill had lived there for several years already and knew most of the people. But I wasn't going to let Bill's stories discourage me from moving there; I figured that I would just take the residents one at a time.

I had first met Bill about a year earlier at the student activities center at the local university; we both exercised there. Bill was seventy-five years old and still very active; I was only sixty-two. Both of us took classes at the university under the seniors' audit program.

It was during registration for summer classes that I ran into Bill again; I told him that I had put in my application at the Horizon House and I asked him how life was there. He said that it was OK, but that there were a lot of crazies in the building - especially an old woman named Betty.

"She walks around the place like a spook," he told me; "She always wears an old sport coat and a faded head-scarf, and she just stares at you." I assured Bill that I would be able to avoid Betty and the other "crazies."

During the time that I was moving in, I quickly figured out who Betty was. She looked pretty harmless to me - she was about five feet two inches tall and very frail; she couldn't

have weighed more than ninety pounds. Her face was pale, her cheeks were hollow; her hair was below-shoulder-length and gray; and like Bill had said, she always wore a tattered sport coat and a faded scarf. I guessed her to be about eighty years old. I smiled politely and said hello each time our paths crossed, which was quite frequently.

Bill and I both enjoyed discussing a wide range of topics, including politics, psychology, and criminology, so we started meeting each other regularly for long talks. Bill was also quite the cook, and he started preparing a lunch for us on the days that we would meet. Although Bill rejected the Christian religion, he said that he had once belonged to a Theosophy Society, which believed in some sort of mystical, spiritual realm. Among other things, he told me that he could recognize the characteristics of demonic people, who he described as having a death wish. I found these ideas strange, but Bill seemed to approach the subject with a sense of humor, so I just listened and nodded and laughed, since I found these ideas quite amusing.

Despite his age, Bill still rode a motorcycle. I gave him a pair of leather biker-pants that I had from the time when I used to have motorcycles, and he gave me a karaoke machine in return. It appeared that although there were a lot of "crazies" in the building, at least I had found a friend with whom I could discuss the weighty matters of the day.

In the meantime, I had begun saying more than just hello to Betty. Although Bill had said that she was spooky, she appeared to me to be just detached, forlorn, and, quite simply - lonely. When she and I were in the elevator alone, I would make small-talk with her.

Over time, I came to the conclusion that she wasn't crazy at all - she was quite intelligent, lucid, and interested in and considerate of other people. I started making a point of greeting her when I went downstairs into the lobby, where she used to hang around; she was almost always there, usually sitting or walking alone, with an expression on her face as hollow as her cheeks.

Bill told me that he had been raised in New York City; his father had moved there from South Carolina to work in construction; while there, he met Bill's mother. Bill said that his mother's parents had come to New York from Sicily, and that her father had ties to the Mafia. He once told me how his mother used to berate people so harshly that they would never speak to her again. He told me how he had often been the object of her aggression and that he suspected that this was the cause of his severe asthma; when Bill talked he was usually wheezing and short of breath.

One day, while I was out walking downtown, I saw a woman wearing a scarf who looked like Betty. She was standing in the middle of the street as the traffic was whizzing by. I walked faster to see if it was Betty - it was. I walked up to her and stood next to her as though I were shielding her from the speeding cars. Trying to act like the situation were absolutely normal, and raising my voice so that she could hear me, I remarked how dangerous this particular street was. Betty was teetering and tottering on her spindly legs with her poor sense of balance; she looked up at me, recognized me, and nodded in agreement with what I had said.

I saw a break in the traffic and motioned to Betty to follow me; she started towards the other side, but I saw that at that pace she would not make it in time. I took her hand and pulled her along behind me to the other side. I pretended to admonish the drivers for driving so fast, but actually, I wanted to admonish Betty for being so far away from home, alone, and in the middle of a dangerous street. But, I couldn't bring myself to admonish her; she was too fragile, too old, and too sensitive; I just didn't want to hurt her feelings.

I let go of Betty's hand just once during that four-block walk back home, but when I saw that she had become dependant on me for balance, I quickly took her hand again and didn't let it go until we got back home. It must have taken us twenty minutes to walk those four blocks; I told her about my life and she told me about hers. I remember telling her about some people who had behaved badly toward me once and Betty said, without hesitation, that that was "unconscionable." Our conversation soon made me realize that there was more to Betty than most people, and certainly Bill, realized.

Bill and I had exchanged some reading material and we swapped our favorite Internet websites. Bill didn't have an Internet connection in his apartment and so I suggested he come to my apartment to try out my computer and to use the Internet. When he looked at my computer-monitor-desktop he loudly said that it was cluttered with a lot of crap. "You can consolidate a lot of this crap," he said harshly, and he proceeded to do so. It looked like he knew what he was doing and so I let him go. I then suggested that he go to a certain website to see some articles on current political news. When he saw a photo of

the administrator of the site he said that he looked like a demon; he had the same comment for the next site I told him about. Bill explained to me again that he could tell just by looking at people and their environment if they were demons. He then pointed at the several small bouquets of artificial flowers I have in my apartment for decoration. "Those," he said, "are demonic signs, they are signs of a love of death."

After Bill left, I was very puzzled. It occurred to me that he had behaved toward me exactly as he had described his mother as behaving toward people. My conclusion was that Bill's comments and behavior toward me were abusive and that he needed help; but I also had to conclude that I had neither the time nor the energy to give him the help that he needed. I decided that I would have to break off my relationship with Bill.

The next time I went into the common area in the lobby, a woman who had seen me walking up to the building holding Betty's hand gave me a very special look; it was a look of respect, acknowledgement, and even admiration. It was a look that said that she knew a secret about me - actually, about me and Betty. I got this same look from two other women - an administrator of the building and the vice-president of the residents' committee. Word about my holding Betty's hand had spread.

A couple of days after Bill had berated me in my apartment he approached me outside as I was locking up my bicycle. As he got close to me, he pulled a knife out of his pocket; he opened the blade. The knife was eight inches long, all-together. He asked me if I

wanted it. He explained to me that this type of knife cost twenty-five dollars. I told him that I couldn't imagine what I would use it for.

I went on to tell Bill that I considered his comments from a few days earlier to be abusive and that I didn't want to continue with our relationship. He was taken aback. I told him that he was behaving exactly the way he had described to me that his mother had behaved toward him. I told him that he had been very strongly influenced by his mother and that he should seek help. I also told him that Betty was not crazy; I said that she was harmless and that she was a very caring and considerate person. I informed him that I wasn't strong enough to deal with him. I returned a book that I had borrowed from him and told him that he could keep the leather biker-pants. He said that I could keep the karaoke machine. That was the last time I spoke with Bill.

About three months later, I noticed that Betty was no longer in the lobby when I went downstairs. I asked about her at the front desk. I was informed that Betty was taken to a nursing home. When I asked why, I was told that when she had not responded to her doorbell, friends went in to find her under her bed. Betty told them that her doctor had told her to get under the bed. The administration decided that Betty was no longer rational and that she could no longer look after herself - one of the stipulations for living at the Horizon House - and therefore she would have to be placed in a nursing home. I asked various people about Betty after that, but no one ever knew where she was or how she was doing; gradually, I forgot about her.

One day, I met Ruthie in the elevator. Ruthie was a coarse and crusty building resident who was entrusted with selling off the household items of people who had no relatives or friends to do so; she was allowed to keep the money. I had already been to a couple of her sales and I bought a chest of drawers from her once for twenty dollars. Ruthie was short and pudgy; she appeared to be about seventy years old; she smoked a lot, and her face looked like the parched earth of the Mohave Desert. She told me that she had another sale going on and invited me to take a look at what was available. We went up to the sixth floor and Ruthie unlocked the door. "Mostly a bunch of junk," she said. "Lots of books and papers; I can't understand what someone would want with so many papers."

I didn't see anything that I could use and I started to excuse myself. Ruthie picked up a small, white, porcelain vase from an old vanity and asked me if I wanted it. "Yes, sure," I answered. Ruthie had been in my apartment and she knew that I collected knick-knack items. She gave me a few other things and a small hand-mirror that was on a worn dresser.

"Must have been a woman who lived here," I said.

"Yea," answered Ruthie.

"Do you know who it was? I asked.

"Yea," Ruthie snarled, "it was that spooky one; the one who used to hang out downstairs all the time and ride up and down on the elevator all day."

"You mean Betty!?" I said, quite surprised.

"Yea," said Ruthie, "Betty. The one they found under her bed."

Betty, I thought. Betty would not be coming back; and now all of her things would be sold off and thrown out.

"Do ya wanna buy any books," Ruthie asked. "I'm gonna take 'em down to the book store and try to sell 'em."

"No," I answered. "I've already got a lot to read." But my thoughts were about Betty. At least I've got a few items to remember her by, I thought. How very sad. I said good-bye to Ruthie and went back up to my apartment.

Two days later, while I was putting my garbage in the dumpster, I noticed some books in a cardboard box. I can't help but look through things that people throw out. There were books on psychology, religion, and writing. Someone really wanted to be a writer, I thought, as I rummaged through the books. Then it hit me - these were Betty's books. I looked through them all again with a new interest. I took several of them - some on self-improvement, some on religion, and some on writing. One in particular, on writing,

caught my eye: "How To Sell What You Write," by Jane Adams. Maybe I would write something some day, I thought, and Betty's book might help me to sell it. I was sure that Betty would like that.

There were also some articles of clothing in the box with the books - one was a nightgown and the other a light housecoat. These must have been Betty's, too, I thought. I often take old items of clothing out of dumpsters to use as rags. I looked at the nightgown and thought that I could use it to clean my car windows. I took it out of the box and held it up. The material was soft, light-cotton, and very delicate looking, but without lace and frills. Someone had mended it by one of the straps. I wondered how many years Betty had worn it. As I held it up in the bright sunlight, I thought of Betty - about how she looked so forlorn as she sat in the lobby, about walking her home and holding her hand, and about how cruel some of the others were toward her.

The back door opened and someone started walking toward the dumpster to throw something out. I hastily wadded up Betty's nightgown and stuffed it along with the housecoat into the canvass bag where I had put the books. I walked back into the building and to the elevator. I thought of Betty as I rode up to the fourteenth floor; I thought about how she had referred to the behavior of some people toward me as "unconscionable." People often behaved in an unconscionable way, I thought, but most people were too insensitive to notice, or to care. I wondered where Betty was now and how she was doing. I wondered if she would forgive me for using her nightgown to clean my car windows.