

I wrote this story as simple and uncomplex as possible, but wasn't able to completely move away from the slightly dark overtones. In other words, this story is a departure from the norm in some ways, but readers will recognize standard elements of my writing style nonetheless. I enjoyed writing this story and was pleased with the grade it got in class. I hope you enjoy it, too.

Matthew Rutherford, 1999

Writing Betty

In her hand, Laura held the most recent letter, a symbol of her son's betrayal. She stood in the kitchen, poised over the trashcan. It had been a long day at work and she didn't want to deal with this problem. However, she was willing to do what was necessary. Just a few minutes earlier, Laura had come home wanting only to lie down. As usual, Jimmy had returned from school a short while later, not enough time to search his room. To get him out of the house, Laura sent Jimmy out to buy milk at the grocer's down the street. She really needed the milk but could have waited for the milkman, Mr. Thatcher, to come in the morning. Mr. Thatcher was usually out doing his rounds when Laura left for work and always said good morning. Only once had he ever brought sour milk to her doorstep. As part of his apology, Mr. Thatcher eagerly rushed to bring fresh milk that same day.

Jimmy was a good boy. He liked doing errands for his mother. Laura had given him the money for the grocer and given him a hug, and he was out the door. He wouldn't leave her much time, but still she listened for his footsteps to disappear before reluctantly heading to his room. As she expected, there was nothing suspicious in his book bag, but after a quick but thorough search, she found the letter hidden underneath his mattress. He was probably planning to sneak it out to the mailbox after she went to work the next morning. Laura had left his room and headed for the kitchen after making sure his room was the way she had found it. Same as she always did. Laura read the letter, then reread it for the second time, checking the date. It was written that same day, probably at school. He must have pushed it under his mattress when he put his bag down. Jimmy knew his mother always searched his bag for homework. Reading, Laura tried to understand why the letter bothered her so much.

May 15, 1958

Dear Betty,

How are you? I'm sorry you haven't been getting my letters. I haven't gotten any of yours for a while. Mom doesn't like me writing you. I wish she could meet you. Then I know she wouldn't mind. I tried to write a letter before but she found it, took it away. I think she tore it up, too, but I didn't see, because she sent me to my room.

Are you still sick? If you tell me what you have, I'll go to the library and find a book to read about it. You said don't worry but I can't help it. You're my only friend. My best friend. I will try not to worry, but I wish you were better so your dad would let me see you. I got a B in math today. Miss Seitan said she was proud of me. She also said I'm doing better in geography. She said she was glad I

don't write letters at school any more. I try to be more careful so I'm not caught when I do write you. She hasn't found me out yet.

My twelfth birthday was last Monday. My mom and I had cake and ice cream. She bought me my first bike. It was second hand, but I love it anyway. She's the greatest mom in the world.

I'll write more if I get a letter today. I want to see you. Get better soon. And write to me! I haven't gotten anything in two weeks.

Sincerely,
Jimmy

It was natural for a mother to worry about her son, so Laura worried. His grades had been slipping and he put so much time into his fictitious friendship, he had no real friends. She had hoped her little talk with him last week would put a stop to his letter writing, but now he was doing it behind her back. Jimmy was taking after his cheating father, sneaking around and hiding things. Tom hadn't been able to hide his lack of love for her, though. Worse than that, Laura never knew what he was doing those nights when he didn't come home. Though it had hurt when Tom left her, Laura finally was able to move on with her life. She was able to live without wondering.

When Jimmy first had started writing Betty, a couple years ago, it was cute. She didn't even mind him wasting a few cents a week in stamps. She had hoped it was just a phase he was going through. But week after week, Jimmy kept writing these damn letters. How could a mother compete for attention against a phantom, a figment of the imagination? How could a mother gain some of that devotion? If anything was to change, Laura needed to make it happen. On Jimmy's birthday, Laura finally decided it was time for her to destroy Betty.

She took one more look at the letter in her hand and ripped it up. The garbage can swallowed up the evidence of her spying. Laura considered herself to be a good mother, caring and concerned. She had done the best she could without a husband to support her. She and Jimmy were better off without Tom anyway. Filthy bastard, walking out on her like that. Last she had heard, he was living it up in Oklahoma City with that jezebel secretary of his, Wendy Hart. But Laura wasn't bitter. She couldn't afford to be. Jimmy needed her.

So she left every morning at five, before Jimmy woke up, to work at Sparkle Laundry. She ignored the fact that she was now a single mother, working. She tried to take pride in the fact. However, at first, it was difficult. The social pressure alone was hard, but the financial burden Tom left her with was unbearable. Right away, she realized she needed a babysitter to come and help Jimmy get ready for school in the morning, but this added to the financial burden. Through all the trials, Laura always tried to make sure she was home from work by three so she could be there when her boy returned from school. Even after he grew older and didn't need a babysitter in the mornings, Laura made sure she was there for him in the afternoons. He was a good boy and went to school when other boys would play hooky.

Laura really couldn't complain about her boy. Except for the problem of Betty.

Laura went out the front door to check the mail. It was hot outside, probably in the high nineties. Summer was coming soon, which meant Jimmy would be unsupervised during the day while she was at work. Another reason to act now. If only she didn't have to work. If only a prince charming would come to sweep her off her feet and support her so

she could stay home and watch her boy. If only the town of Hadleyburg didn't judge her for working, for being single. It wasn't her fault that Tom left.

Sure enough, there were several envelopes stuffed within the black metal mailbox. The surface of the box was hot, so Laurie was careful pulling out the contents. Several bills, a letter from Mother, and the expected envelope. It was addressed to Jimmy, from a Betty Sills. Written in Jimmy's handwriting. There was no denying it.

Still standing on the porch, Laura saw Jimmy coming down the street with the milk swinging precariously in his left hand. He saw her and smiled.

"Don't drop the milk, honey!" she called, worried about a repetition of recent history.

"I won't!" he yelled back.

Laura waved for a moment and let her hand drop. She was not looking forward to this confrontation. Laura went back inside and sat at the kitchen table. The door opened and Jimmy entered.

"Hi, Mom." He came over and gave her a sweaty hug. It constantly amazed Laura how cheerful he could be, even in this heat.

"Hi, sweetie. Thank you for getting the milk. Come sit down. I want to talk to you."

"What about?" He sat down at their small, square table, setting the milk bottle down in front of him.

"It's about Betty. I'm concerned that you are still writing her."

At the mention of Betty, his normally cheerful face went hard, blank, a plaster mask. Where had he learned how to do that? Must have been his father.

"What about her?" he asked, feigning disinterest.

Laura just wanted to yell, "She's not real!" Instead, she calmly stood up and went to the icebox. On top was a stack of letters, his letters. She pulled out a recent letter, the one from the day before and placed it on the table. Pointing out the date, May 14th, she looked in his eyes, searching for a reaction. The rest of the letters, she placed on the table on her side, then sat down again. Immediately, he began to protest.

"Mom! You were in my room again."

Laura was indignant. These were old letters. Today's was in the trash. Laura replied, "I was putting clean socks away yesterday and saw it sticking out from your bookshelf." That much was true. When she got these letters, she had been putting away his socks. He looked ready to interrupt, but she gave him her sternest face and continued. "I think it's time we talked about why I don't want you writing Betty."

"Mom, she's my only friend. You can't do this to me."

It struck Laura that her intended action was like to telling a child there is no Santa. Once she convinced him of the truth, some of Jimmy's innocence would be lost. But there was no turning back. This needed to be done.

Laura took a deep breath. "Son, Betty isn't real. She never has been real."

Disbelief filled his eyes. "No, that's not true." He looked like he was going to cry.

"Honey, it's ok," she said, reaching out her hand to caress his cheek from across the table. He jerked his head away from her hand. Startled, Laura's hand also jerked, nearly knocking over the bottle of milk.

"No, it isn't. And you shouldn't have been going through my room."

Despite herself, Laura raised her voice. "Don't take that tone with me. I'm your mother and I have a right to know what you are doing." Then realizing that the conversation was on the verge of slipping from her control, Laura calmed her voice again. "Look, I'm sorry I went through your room. I did it because I worry about you. You're my little boy and I depend on you so much. You're the man of the house."

He was such a sensitive boy. Most twelve-year-old boys would be putting on the tough guy act. Jimmy just looked like a wounded animal, the mask face dissolving. He tried to smile. "I'm not a little boy any more, but that's alright, Mom."

It amazed Laura how easily he forgave. He didn't get that from either of his parents, or from anyone living in Hadleyburg. Laura only hoped that he would forgive her as easily for what she was about to do. Not knowing what else to do, she smiled at her son before continuing.

She decided an indirect route would be best. "About Betty. How did you come to know her?"

"She wrote me a letter, saying she heard about me and wanted a pen pal."

"How come I've never seen her?"

"I told you Tuesday. She's been real sick."

"Well, I would like to take her some cookies, then."

"Her dad won't let her see visitors."

"I'd like to talk to her father, then."

"Oh, she says he's really mean, doesn't like people much."

"Doesn't he have a doctor for her?"

"No. He just takes care of her at their house."

"Hmmm, doesn't he have to work? He sounds like he's rich."

"No, I don't think so. She says they live in a small house."

"How do they live?"

"I don't know. She never told me."

"Don't you ever wonder?"

"No. Why are you asking me all this?"

That approach wasn't working. Either he had an answer for everything or he ignored it. Logic wasn't going to work.

"Tell me, honey. Where does she live?"

"In the woods. Why are you asking all this?"

"Is there a street that goes to her house?"

"No, there's just a little path to the house."

"Then how does Mr. Murphy deliver the mail to them?"

"I don't know." He looked a little confused. Good, she had him thinking.

"You know what? I talked to Mr. Murphy just yesterday. He knows everyone in town, because of his job. You know what he said?" Jimmy dutifully shook his head. "He doesn't know any little girl named Betty in this town. Hadleyburg is a small enough town for him to know everyone."

"But he takes my letters to Betty," he protested. Laura knew his face well enough to see the panic building inside him. His illusions were starting to crumble, she was sure.

"He told me he takes the letters and sends them to the dead letter department. They don't go anywhere."

"He brings me her letters, though."

"He brings you letters, but let's look at one, shall we? Are they really from her?" Laura couldn't help but feel a little cruel as

she drew out a letter from the stack, supposedly written by Betty, and laid it beside the first letter. This was the moment of truth. Either he would see the truth and hate her for destroying his reality or thank her for helping him move on into the real world. Either way, she would not let him avoid the truth.

"Hey! You've been reading my mail!" He examined it and looked into his mother's eyes, disturbed. Scanning the letter, he complained, "I never even got this one. It's two weeks old."

Laura was ashamed, but couldn't let that stop her. Ignoring him, she continued. "Honey, look at the handwriting. Compare the two."

"Yeah," he said, trying now to act disinterested, "her handwriting is a lot like mine." I knew that already. I wrote her about it a while ago. We think it's funny."

Damn! He was being stubborn and blind. She would try anyway. "Look, it doesn't just look like similar handwriting. That is your handwriting."

Jimmy gave her a blank look. The mask was back. "What are you talking about?"

"Look at it!"

Timidly, he pulled the two letters toward him. Laura watched his eyes dart back and forth from one page to the other, comparing. He might live in a delusional world, but he was no dummy. He would get the truth eventually, but at what cost? Laura was getting frustrated and knew her son was, too. The heat wasn't helping either of their moods. She needed to get this done before they both lost their tempers.

Finally, he looked up. "I don't see it. She writes different than me. You must not be able to see it, though."

"Admit it!" Jimmy blinked at the sudden increase of volume. Laura didn't hold back any longer, but somehow still tried to tone down her voice. "You've been writing the letters. I don't know where you do it, probably at school when you should be paying attention. You must be leaving the letters from her at some mailbox and let them get sent back here. Then you write her back and the letters sit in some back room somewhere in the post office and you think you have a friend that doesn't exist. She doesn't exist and never has. You pay more attention to an imaginary friend than you do to me!"

Laura realized that her last sentence came out as a yell. Jimmy shrank in his seat, close to tears, anger, she wasn't sure. He was trying to hold his feelings in but not quite succeeding. His father always held his feelings in. Laura hoped he wouldn't develop that skill any further. She watched as he struggled with his feelings.

"She, she's not real? I don't believe it. She's my best friend." His voice now wavered with doubt as his head lowered, his chin coming to a rest on the table.

"No, honey. An imaginary friend can't love you the way I do." Laura grasped her son's hand over the table and squeezed reassuringly. With her other hand, she caressed the top of his lowered head. Now was the time to move in for the kill. "Besides, have you ever seen her?"

His body stiffened. Then he raised his head from the tabletop. Whatever doubt he had seemed to disappear. What happened? How had she lost control?

"No, Mom, I haven't. But Mom, you told me in church that sometimes, we have to believe in things we can't see. Like God. And love."

Laura was speechless. Somehow, he had gained the upper hand. She was losing control. Laura withdrew her hands gently.

"I don't know what to say." Gathering her wits, she took one last stab, using the knife of guilt. "Jimmy, you give all your time to a figment of your imagination. You're abandoning me in the process and letting your schoolwork slide." It didn't matter to her present argument that his grades were improving recently. "I haven't seen her. The mailman hasn't seen her. The milkman hasn't seen her. No one in the town of Hadleyburg knows who she is. In fact, you haven't even seen her, yet you claim she exists. Why is that?"

"I don't know." Again, a moment of despair seemed to wash across his face. He wasn't so strong, after all. Perhaps because he actually doubted, or perhaps because of the power she had over him, Laura knew she had won. It didn't matter why. He paused, then in evidence of his final defeat, covered his face and said, "I . . . have no friends." A plea? Or perhaps an explanation. Laura wasn't sure.

She stood up and walked behind where he sat. Wrapping her arms around him, Laura whispered, "Mother's here, Jimmy. It's just you and me. Nothing's going to change that."

Just then, there was a knock. Laura patted her son on the back before going to answer the door. Mr. Murphy, the mailman, stood outside, sweating and smiling.

"Hi, Mrs. Harris."

"Please, I already told you yesterday. It's Ms. Harper again."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I keep forgetting you are one of those progressive women."

Laura let the irritation pass. His chubby face held no guile, so she ignored the comment. She was victorious with Jimmy and that's all that was important. "You've already finished your rounds, haven't you? What brings you here?"

"Oh, that. I was thinking about what you said yesterday, so I did a little checking. Charlie, I mean Mr. Jordan, does the south route, down the highway, see, and I went to talk with him this afternoon. He said that there might be some folks living way out on his route, outside of town, that might answer to the description your son gave. Oh, hi there, Jimmy." He waved.

Jimmy, by this time, had left the table and joined me at the door. "Hello, sir," he said.

"So anyway," Mr. Murphy continued, "I talked to him and he said he was pretty sure it was them, but he never took them no mail. Didn't even know their name. They never got a thing by mail. Charlie only knows of them from old, crazy Peter Ferris, who gets drunk a lot way out in the forest."

Laura was getting impatient, even as Jimmy's eyes began to shine again. "Go on," he said.

"He said it was a father and a little girl," he said, "living alone. Don't leave much, seem to prefer going shopping in the city instead of here in Hadleyburg. Never go to church. Naturally, I was curious. I'd never heard of no folks like that, so I asked him if he ever checked the dead letter office, because there was a pile of letters just for that little girl. He said he never went into that old stuffy room. He never liked talking to Jared Fergeson, who works there. Old Jared . . ."

"Please, go on," interrupted Laura. She reached down and grabbed hold of her son's hand. Despite herself, she was intrigued.

Momentarily startled, Mr. Murphy nodded solemnly, shaking sweat off his wide and tanned forehead. "So this morning, before starting my rounds, I checked the dead letter room. There was plenty of stuff in there, even an early letter to Santa. I guess that kid wanted his Christmas real bad. Anyway, I looked and I looked, but I couldn't find those letters. I know they were there, because I put them there. Well, I put them in a bin that gets taken to that room. But the fact remains. They plumb weren't there. Maybe they never were."

Laura could feel Jimmy's grip tighten.

"So I asked Postmaster Meyers if he knew what had happened. He told me that he didn't know. When I told him why I wanted to know, you know what he said?"

"What?" Laura and Jimmy said in unison.

"He said that about two weeks ago, he received a moving notice and a request to send all that mail to New York. You know, have it forwarded to them. When he got that notice, he checked the dead letter office, himself, on account that he remembered the name of Sills. There wasn't a letter to be found."

Laura and Jimmy had been holding their breath and let it out then. Laura, still looking for a logical explanation, not including her son's, asked, "What does this mean?"

"Well, Ms. Harper, we at the post office are split three ways. Charlie and some of the sorters say that the letters must have been lost before they ever made it to the dead letter office. Postmaster Meyers claims he doubted the letters existed at all. Even said he expected they were really just all in my mind. Or your mind," he said, indicating Laura. Before she could react, he continued. "I'll tell you what I think, though. I think those letters were just meant to make it to their destination. Putting them in the dead letter office only slowed them down. It didn't stop them."

"So, wait. You're saying that some ghost or something took the mail to this family that only crazy drunk Peter has seen?" Laura was not swayed.

"All I can say is that nothing else adds up. Maybe the letters went by themselves."

After Mr. Murphy had left, Jimmy and Laura talked again. Laura did her best to keep Jimmy calm, but the conversation eventually declined into a yelling match.

"You read my mail and never even let me see it."

"Jimmy, you wrote that letter yourself. You already know what it said."

"She wrote it and you stole it!"

"Jimmy, you heard what Mr. Murphy said. The post office never sent those letters. Letters do not send themselves!"

"These ones did. I hate you!" His young face was nearly purple with rage.

Laura was at her breaking point. "I have had enough of your disrespect. Go to your room! If you come down in an hour or so and apologize, I might let you have your precious letter."

Jimmy wailed, "I want it now!"

"That's it! You don't get the letter!" As she had earlier, Laura took the letter and tore it up in front of him, sprinkling the pieces into the garbage. Jimmy shrieked and stomped up to his room.

Satisfied by her victory, Laura busied herself cleaning the kitchen. She should have started dinner a long time ago, but that was

ok. It was a little cooler now than it had been, right after work. Cooking wouldn't be such a hot task this time.

Upstairs, she heard Jimmy yell in frustration. Then she heard a bang on the wall. Must have discovered today's letter missing, kicked the wall. He would get over it. Eventually, he would come down and say sorry for trying to break his mom's heart by straying. He would hug her and ask if everything was all right. If he got over his anger quickly, he might even come down in time to help set the table. He was a good boy.

Then Laura noticed the bottle of milk on the table, exactly where Jimmy had left it. She had forgotten it was even there. She felt the glass. It was warm. Worried, she pulled a cup out of the cupboard and poured herself a little milk. She drank it, only to spit it out violently in the sink. The milk had gone sour.

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