

Betty Superman

by Tiff Holland

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When I was seventeen, I had this poster in my room. It was a picture poem by Kenneth Patchen. I didn't know who he was yet, that he was a poet from my very end of the universe. The artwork, the painting part of it, wasn't very well done. I didn't know that was because Patchen could hardly move when he did it, that the last years of life he pretty much wrote from bed. No, I just liked what it said "All at Once Is What Eternity Is" which seemed right to my seventeen year old mind, explained it all to me the way nothing else did. I matted the poster in art class and put it in a frame over my bed. Betty hated the poster.

Betty was my mom but I refused to call her that. Even my dad called her "Betty" that year.

"That's got to be the ugliest thing I've ever seen," she told me one morning. She had come into my room to play my Goodwill stereo, even though I was asleep. The stereo was at least ten years old, big and blue with an eight-track player and big globe speakers on pedestals.

I groaned and rolled over , but she pulled the blanket off my bed and began dancing around my room with it like some harlot, twirling, wrapping and unwrapping the blanket around her. I closed my eyes hard and tried to pretend she wasn't there.

I don't remember what LP she had on the turntable. Knowing Betty, it could have been anything, Motown or some soundtrack, Barry Manilow or Barbara Streisand. I remember that year she had a thing for Streisand's *Superman* song. I remember the picture on the cover of that album: Barbara in a white t-shirt with a big *S* on it.

. Barbara was tugging the shirt down on the cover and looking shyly at the camera. Maybe she wasn't wearing any underwear, maybe that was why she was tugging on that shirt. At the time, I don't think I even noticed. In any case, obviously, neither Betty nor Barbara knew anything about Superman, although even I had to admit Barbara had a set of pipes and so did Betty, and Betty knew it. Whatever was playing that morning and every other morning for that matter, Betty sang along. "Porgy I'se your womaannnn..." she'd sing from *Porgy and Bess* or dirty stuff by Barry White. She sang all day long, and it wouldn't have been so bad if she could have kept the lyrics straight. But each song was a sort of mosaic of every song she knew with Porgy sneaking into Superman and Elvis intruding on *Stayin' Alive*. I remember how disappointed I was ,years later, when I learned that Neil Diamond had not written a song about *Reverend Blue Jeans* but *Forever in Blue Jeans*. Eventually she vacated my room and I turned off the stereo.

She made breakfast that day. Afterwards, I went back to bed to sleep some more. That was one of my favorite things when I was seventeen, napping after breakfast, but Betty had to ruin that, too. I devoured the cinnamon rolls and sausages and carried what was left of my juice back up to my room. I'd just drifted off when I heard the sound of pebbles plunking against the window. It was Betty. She had on her gardening hat and gloves and was holding a basket of tiger lillies she must have just cut.

"What?!" I demanded, throwing open the window.

"What light through yonder window breaks!" Betty shouted.

"Huh?"

"I said, what light through yonder window breaks," Betty repeated, "and you're supposed to say..."

She paused for a moment. I looked around the neighborhood to see if anyone was watching. I couldn't have been more embarrassed if Betty was wearing a Superman outfit.

"You're supposed to say..." Betty continued and paused again.

"All at Once is What Eternity Is!!" I shouted.

"Oh come on, play nice. You'll wish you'd played along after you leave home." Betty took off her hat and put down the basket. "You know the rest."

But I didn't. I had no use for Shakespeare at seventeen. I took the glass of juice off the nightstand, took aim and let it pour down on Betty's head. She screamed and jumped and looked up to yell at me just as the glass slipped from my hand. I like ice in my juice, and the condensation must have made it slippery. It tumbled in slow motion down to Betty where it conked her right between the eyes. She fell to the ground.

I've never run down those stairs so fast. The glass was intact, to my surprise, but had left a large gash on Betty's forehead, kind of above her eyes, the place she was always warning me I was going to get wrinkles if I didn't stop frowning. She was on her butt on the grass and calmly reached over and put her hat back on her head.

"Let me see, Mom," I pleaded.

"No," she sounded like a child, "you didn't want to play."

"Look, we have to get that looked at," I told her. Blood was trickling down the bridge of her nose. I took her hand to lead her to the car.

"Ehh, ehh, ehh," Betty clucked, "you say your line first."

"It is the sun and thou art the moon?" I guessed.

Betty thought for a minute. She still couldn't remember the line. She let me pull her to her feet.

"Ok, but no more of that eternity crap," she admonished.

"Ok, " I agreed. She followed me a few feet.

"Wait! Wait! My flowers!"

"They'll be fine," I assured her.

IShe sang most of the way to the hospital. I tried turning on the radio to drown her out, but she just sang along, mangling the words as usual, until she fell asleep.

