

BETTY  
by Miriam Lewis  
Nenagh Library

Let me tell you all about Betty – in fact, she would insist upon me telling you all about her. Betty was a ‘one of a kind’ type of gal, nothing too spectacular to write home about, but the outer veneer was fiercely important to her.

Betty was known by several names (or aliases as we liked to call them), but will use Elizabeth to give her her full title. As a member of the upper class (as she always reminded us), Betty would really like to have been born a Lady – well, a Dame at least. As the years progressed, an aging and dishevelled older lady, was assigned to the back seat but was always fondly spoken about (nearly).

Betty was a real attention seeker, probably some would say she couldn’t go down the road without someone commenting about how she looked – her sleekness; her polished look; the shine on her; she always took great care of herself. She was incredibly vain for someone of her age. She loved to just sit back and watch the world go by. She would comment on any other ‘old dear’ passing by. She really was a bit of a snob with her fine pedigree, she could trace back her lineage; where she came from, her humble beginnings and the fine living she aspired to. She would never push herself, in her opinion, she was meant for the finer things in life, not to live our her time on, of all things, a farm. This was nearly beneath contempt to be insulted in such a way. A classic model like her to be assigned to have to deal with muck and dirt and farm smells. It nearly was too much for her to bear, but she tolerated us ruffians.

Sitting outside the house, she would know something about everyone who passed by and could be quite sarcastic. If Betty didn’t like you, you wouldn’t be long about finding that out.

Every mark on her body told a story. Betty could be quite careless at times and when not paying attention could get in trouble quite quickly. Her colouring meant that scratches became a feature and although a sign of aging actually added to her character. She hadn’t great eyesight and tended to get steamed up quite quickly resulting in sometimes what could be classed as ‘night blindness’, which wasn’t a very good idea for someone trying to get by.

She had a habit of making herself heard and could quite literally blow you out of it, if she so felt. She couldn't tolerate bad drivers, particularly those who drove new cars but, obviously, hadn't quite mastered (or found out about) a new feature that they would be unused to – the indicator. She would drive scarily close to the car ahead and politely 'beep' to remind them there was a car behind them to inform that really she did know where they lived.

Betty was a member of the family for over 15 years and looking back over the years, we recalled many happy times. One particular time we remembered the time that we went with Betty to Achill Island on holidays – all 8 of us bundled into the family car, with children crammed into the back seat, with other children perched on their knees, with plastic bags holding a week's worth of clothing ontop. Betty never complained once.

These were the days even before Ryanair was invented – Michael O'Leary could have picked up some pointers from our clever use of storage space. There were even some children 'stored' in the boot – we were reusing way before our time. Michael would have been proud of us.

Betty was a true and loyal friend, up to the point that you needed her to be true and loyal. Then she had an awful habit of letting you down, with a bang, and often a thud to follow.

Betty was so unpredictable and spent so much time down at our local garage, we thought she was having an affair with the local mechanic, Seamus. He spoke in loving terms of Betty, telling us that Betty would need to be serviced more regularly and that if we didn't look after her properly, he would have to look after her himself.

Betty was a 'once off' type of model, stylish to look at and very proud of her looks. Mind you, she could be very vindictive and if you spoke to her rudely, or by chance, called her a name (or maybe several names), she could be quite unresponsive. She had a temper on her, that one.

So much for loyalty, as soon as Betty heard this (she had incredible hearing), she was off to visit Seamus again with another complaint. She always came back home, sounding and smelling beautiful, until the next time.

Betty liked her tippie, a lot. In fact, lots and lots of tippie. The most expensive one available is all Betty liked. One drop of the cheap stuff and she was not a nice Betty. She had exquisite taste and frequently stopped mid sentence just to have a top up. She didn't care. The more expensive the juice, the better Betty performed.

There was a dark side to Betty, the one that wasn't very pleasant. There was one particularly hot day that we all went to the seaside and you know that children, once they get an ice-cream into their hand, it will immediately fall either to the right or left of the cone. Betty knew this and took full advantage so while our ice-creams were sliding off, Betty decided to play a trick and stopped short, meaning that balanced ice-creams were no longer balanced but were sitting on the floor of the car where there had been the remains of two takeaway cartons of chips (nearly empty); three pairs of football boots (and their associated smelly socks); five empty juice containers and one lump of turf. The sod of turf belongs to another story completely. Several nearly hysterical children had to be soothed, but Betty had a wry grin on her face. What was another bit of rubbish on the floor of the car to her. She had won. Betty didn't care, it didn't bother her. As long as Betty looked good on the outside, that was all that mattered to her.

Betty's heritage was often in doubt and often questioned. She didn't like that. She was quite proud of her family tree, able to trace back her ancestors as she could. Mind you, during the 60's, many of them were still in the locality and met regularly (probably to compare notes).

You see, Betty could pretty much do as she pleased. She could go, if she wanted. She could also stop or the technical term is 'stalled', if she so wished. Her wish was her command. She 'ruled the road' and often, Betty did just about whatever Betty wanted to do. You could ask nicely, coax, cajole, tempt her with all sorts of treats, but Betty could decide that today wasn't her day and no amount of soft talking would get her to change her mind.

You see, Betty was our Volkswagon Beetle, a vintage model (as she would say herself, if she could). Twenty years later we can list off the times she let us down on long journeys when she felt she had enough and couldn't (and wouldn't) carry on any further. The amount the AA were called out to 'investigate' what had gone wrong to find out a plug had 'fused'; a lead had 'slipped'; a pipe had 'split' – really, Betty was quite adventurous and we had a new adventure every time we went out. It was a challenge to make it home in the one piece.

Towards the end of her natural life, Betty become old, cranky and crotchety. No form of appeasement would pacify her. She had a lot of tricks up her sleeve and always was one up on us.

## THE SUNDAY DRIVE

I don't know about you, but for us we had a Sunday ritual, which was observed, religiously, without fail.

It all really started after bathtime on a Saturday evening. With the fire blazing, we'd dry ourselves, hair checked for those lovely creepy crawley things and snuggle under a blanket to watch what was deemed 'suitable' (pre 9 o'clock RTÉ viewing). Once the 9 O'Clock news came on, that signalled bedtime – no arguments. Clothes were left out for Mass at 10 with all the shoes lined up, from largest to smallest, all polished until they shone – Dad's orders.

Not that he really was that strict, but we never dared disobey him. A working farmer all his life, he knew no other way of life. The harder the work, the better. He enjoyed getting up with the first light of dawn to check on animals calving, and just a quick look around – to be sure nothing was amiss.

Then at 6am sharp, the cows had to be brought in for their morning milking session. We were quite progressive, even back then. A 6 bay herringbone milking parlour, electrified and we all took it in turns to do whatever was needed – hunting in the cows, washing them in preparation for the clusters, hosing down the parlour after and squeegeeing up afterwards. Then there were the calves to be fed – firstly by hand, gently letting the baby calves get to know that they had to put their heads in the buckets if they wanted milk and then to show them how not to knock the bucket over! Trying times for all involved.

Once they had mastered the bucket process, they had then to learn how to eat calf nuts – and so the process began again! A lock of hay, a fresh bucket of water, clean bedding and they were sorted until the same process started again at 6pm. Everything was the same – different day, same routine.

And that was what it was – a routine. We never questioned why, we just got on with the work that needed to be done. The fact that our friends and neighbours only had to wash the dishes and put out the clothes – we had to do that too – was never questioned.

And so it was every day of the week, except Sundays. My Dad would never allow us to 'work' on a Sunday – it was against his religion. We had to go to Mass, we daren't even question that – not even if we were out the night before until God knows what hour – and with whom...!

Sunday after the jobs were done (obviously not real work) and the Sunday dinner was eaten was time for our (not always) Sunday treat – the mystery drive. Where would we go to? Would we bring a picnic of ham sandwiches and our swimming togs? It didn't really matter if the sun was shining or not, once it was Sunday afternoon, it was the trip in our faithful Beetle that would drag us screaming and shouting down mysterious lanes, some with grass in the middle of the road which was so high it hit off the already low to the ground exhaust pipe, making a funny rattling noise!

Different counties were explored, but all within a fifty mile radius – we had to be back for the milking. Into the countryside we went, peering through steaming windows to find our new destination.

We often headed to the beach where my parents, my mother an avid swimmer and my father a confessed water hater would go their separate ways – my mother straight into the water/pond/swimming pool/river or whatever and my father to the nearest available 'hot and comfortable spot' where he would immediately fall asleep. Not only that, but snore. And boy, could he snore! I'm sure there are whole beaches in Ireland who have witnessed this man, with a farmers tan, lying out under the sun on a towel, with a grin on his face and snoring quite happily to himself. That was my Dad.

The rest of us – six kids in all – having been packed into the Beetle like sardines – children upon children, or when we were really young, the youngest three of us brought up the rear, quite literally. I'm not sure if you know about just how big the boot of a Beetle is, but there was ample room for a 6, 4 and 2 year old, unrestrained in any shape, to fit comfortably there. I'm sure there are laws against this type of child cruelty now, but in those happy, carefree days, we cared less.

It was only when we got older (and bigger) that we gradually made our way into the 'back seat' and had to share space with siblings who had also gotten bigger. Things came to a head, literally, when my bony bottomed brother had to sit on his sister's knee for an unfortunately extremely long Sunday afternoon mystery trip. The whole suspense and mystery was well gone by the time we landed on a beach. My sister promptly dumped my brother onto the sand as soon as she could and declared that he was, on no account, ever going to sit on her lap for any journey, ever again.

How was he to get home? The only compromise that was worked out between them that he could sit on half of her lap and sit on my brother's other lap. Nearing home, he decided it would be fun if he would wriggle his bum, just a bit. He got a lot of abuse that day, poor lad. But it did teach him a valuable lesson in life – if someone is offering you half a knee, be bloody grateful!

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