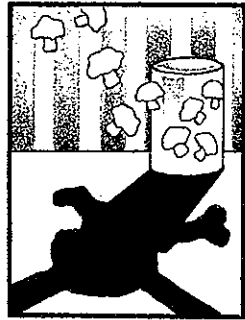


God Help Betty Canova



Cynthia Pomerleau

I LET OUT A LOW whistle when I saw the large purple bruise that covered most of Betty's shoulder. I just couldn't help it, I was so shocked. I mean, I knew Tony pushed her around, but this was the worst I'd seen. "Why don't you leave that creep?"

Betty shrugged her sweater back up. "I've thought of it. Believe me, I've thought of it. But I didn't even finish high school. How am I going to support myself? I haven't a snowball's chance of getting a cent from him, court order or no court order, you know that."

"Call the police, then," I suggested.

Betty's short laugh sounded more like a squawk. "I tried that once. The cops spent five minutes telling me to calm down and half an hour talking hockey with Tony. When they left, Tony damn near busted my nose. Took me all evening to stop the bleeding."

For several minutes we just sat there silently, watching the steam curl up from our coffee cups. Betty's passiveness, her resignation, has always left me at a loss for words. She and I have a lot in common, but in that way we're very different. I guess I'm what you might call an activist. I would rather do *something*, even if I risk making matters worse, than just sit back as Betty does and let it happen.

I took another sip and replaced my cup with a clatter. "What on Earth did you do, anyway, to bring on that one? I hope you enjoyed doing it, at least."

"Nothing, really. It's not what I do, it's how much he's been drinking. Sometimes he's so sweet you just wouldn't believe. But let him get some booze in him, and watch out." Betty shivered and hugged her cup as if to absorb some of its warmth. "I was sitting here reading the paper. I always read the paper, front to back - it's the only reading I ever do. Well, in he comes and sees me sitting there, the dirty dishes still on the table, and next thing you know, he's pasting me one. I'm not doing my job, he says. That was last night. This morning he was just as nice as you please. You'd never know anything had happened."

I threw up my hands in disgust. "Well, Bets, I don't know. Half the time I see you, you look like you just went the distance with Mohammed Ali. If Jerry ever did that to me" - Jerry's my husband - "you wouldn't see me sitting around talking about it the next day."

Betty smiled weakly. "I'll say this for him, he's been better since we got back from Arizona. That camping trip must have done him some good. This is the first time since we've been home, and it's been over a month."

"A real saint, isn't he?" I hate to get sarcastic with Betty, I know she's got her troubles. But what can you do with someone like that? "Kid, you're hopeless - always letting the s.o.b. off the hook, finding some excuse for him. God help you. God knows you need some help."

Betty sighed and stood up with what looked like an almost superhuman effort. She brushed a wisp of hair out of her eyes. I watched her walk listlessly around the kitchen, taking rice from a canister, hamburger from the refrigerator, a can of mushroom soup from the cupboard. Almost as an afterthought, she picked up one of the three shiny mason jars sitting on the counter. "I'll use some of these carrots you brought over tonight," she said, almost as if she hoped to make amends for not following my advice and leaving that rotten guy.

It's funny, but if I didn't know Betty, I might think Tony was a nice guy. Jerry goes bowling with him on Tuesday nights, and he tells me Tony keeps all the fellows in stitches.



"A real ham," says Jerry. But knowing Betty as I do, and knowing how Tony works her over, I can't stand the sight of the guy. I knew if I saw him that night, I might be tempted to let go with one of my wisecracks, and that would only make matters worse for Betty. I wanted to be out of there by the time Tony walked in the door. "What time will he be in?" I asked, pushing back my chair.

"Oh, don't leave." It almost sounded like a plea. "I just want to make a start here. Tony likes to have his dinner waiting. But he doesn't even get off at the plant until 4:30." She looked thoughtful. "You know, if he gets here by 5, that means he's come straight home, and we'll have a quiet evening. But sometimes he stops off for a drink with the boys, and the later it gets, the more plastered he gets. If he's not home by 6, watch out. It's not really him, it's the booze that makes the trouble."

I had to leave. I just couldn't relate to that kind of thinking.

The next morning, I called to find how Betty's evening had gone. There was no answer, which sort of surprised me. Betty almost never went out in the morning, at least not that early. When there was still no answer at 10, and again at 11, I started to get worried. Who knows what Tony might have done to her?

But at noon I got through - though her voice sounded so far away that it was like speaking to someone in Alaska. "What's wrong?" I demanded.

"Tony's in the hospital. I just came home to grab some lunch." She seemed almost reluctant to talk, but gradually the story came out. "He woke up in the middle of the night looking pretty green. 'Too much booze,' I said. 'Go stick your finger down your throat.' He said no, he ought to know a hangover by now, so I decided it must be a touch of the flu. But by morning he was moaning and groaning so much I called the ambulance."

"So that's why you weren't there," I said. "I was nervous when I couldn't get you. I thought you might have had some trouble last night."

"No, nothing like that at all. He started beefing about the soup being cold and I was afraid I was in for it. But then it blew over, and he settled down and ate his supper. He seemed fine - almost better than usual. That's why it was so strange when he woke up sick."

"What do the doctors say?"

"They just kept asking me all sorts of questions, like has he been out of the country recently and has he had his polio shots. They even wanted to know if I'd been doing any canning. I don't think they know from nothing."

I had to agree with her. I don't have much faith in those medical people myself. "Hang on," I said. "I'll come over to the hospital this afternoon."

When I got there, Betty was sitting at Tony's bedside, wiping his damp forehead with a wad of Kleenex. The afternoon was one long jumble of tests and consultations, with nurses and

doctors bustling in and out. But Betty hardly seemed aware of what was going on. "Look at him," she said, almost in a daze. "It's like he was two different people." And I had to admit that there was something touching about the sight of a helpless Tony, slumbering peacefully on those starched white sheets.

The next day things were even worse. Tony looked grey, and he was gasping for breath like when a goldfish falls on the floor. "They say he's paralyzed," she said, clutching his hand in her lap. "Just look at him."

Tony stirred slightly, his eyes flickered open. "Hey, I'm seeing double. There's two of you. That means double trouble," he mumbled. He gave a ghost of a smile and dozed off again. A large tear trickled down Betty's cheek.

That was the last we heard from Tony. As the afternoon wore on, I started getting restless. How could Betty just sit there, watching Tony gurgle, waiting for something to happen? But finally a couple of doctors appeared - a hoity-toity-looking grey-haired guy and a much younger woman. "Mrs. Canova?" said the older one. Betty didn't even look up.

"Hey, wake up, kiddo," I said, shaking her arm. Betty winced - I'd forgotten that damned shoulder.

"We've ruled out all the obvious possibilities, such as influenza and pneumonia," said the doctor. "I'm going to start running another series of tests tomorrow morning. But with a little luck we'll be seeing some improvement by then." I almost laughed out loud. This guy was saying nothing at all, but he sounded like he was the pope giving us the word from heaven. But poor Betty just nodded.

I noticed that the younger one wasn't saying much - I guess she was just a student. She looked like she might be feeling a little shy. But finally she looked at the grey-haired guy and said, "I still can't help wondering about botulism. Several of the signs are there - the progressive paralysis, the double vision..."

Betty stared blankly at the two white-coated figures. "Botulism?"

"It's a kind of food poisoning," said the older one. "Comes from improper canning. That's why we asked you about home-canned goods."

A faint smile crossed Betty's face at the thought. "Canning's not really my thing. That's Nancy's department," she said, pointing at me.

I didn't like the way the doctor was looking at me. "Couldn't it come from store-bought cans, too?" I said quickly.

"Yes, that happens occasionally. There was a big tuna fish scare a while back. But it's been years since we've had an outbreak of botulism from commercial canning anywhere near here."

Betty looked as though she'd been slapped. "But I have cans from all over the country. We took our RV to Arizona a few weeks ago, and we stocked up along the way. I've been using up the leftover cans gradually."

Well, that got the medicos moving. They did some new tests, and sure enough, the student was right. Sometimes the young ones are a lot smarter than these bigwigs. They sent for

some stuff called botulin antitoxin and gave it to Tony. But it was too late. On his third day in the hospital, he died. "If only we'd known about all those canned goods you've been using," the doctor told Betty, "we might have gotten on to this soon enough to help him. But of course, you had no way of knowing." I could have punched the guy. How was that supposed to make Betty feel?

When I went to the funeral parlor to pay my respects, I couldn't believe how awful Betty looked, even considering what she'd been through. She wasn't just weary - that I'd expected - she looked drugged, like someone had slipped something in her coffee. She was cold and stiff when I embraced her. I tried to cheer her up a little. "It's God's will," I said. "Try to see that. Don't blame yourself." Then I leaned closer and whispered, "God has released you, Betty. Be thankful. It's for the best. And Tony's insurance ought to hold you for years."

It was like she didn't even see me. The tears just rolled from her eyes. I left sadly, telling her I'd be back tomorrow. Maybe by then the first shock of Tony's death would have worn off, and I'd have more luck in consoling her.

Well, that was yesterday, but I never made it back to the funeral parlor today. That's because the mail came just as I was about to step out the door. I recognized Betty's handwriting on the envelope right away - but why on Earth would she be *writing* to me, for Pete's sake. I tore open the envelope, and out fluttered a little newspaper clipping. That was it - no letter, no nothing. I picked it up - it was from the *Phoenix Sun*. I began to read:

Botulism contamination has been discovered in at least three batches of mushroom soup from the local Purley's plant. Botulism, caused by improper processing of canned goods, is among the most toxic poisons known. It is generally fatal unless treated properly. Though botulinus toxins can be rendered harmless by thorough cooking, consumers are urged to return any Purley's mushroom soup in their possession to the store where it was purchased. Swollen or leaking cans should be regarded as particularly suspect.

Across the top, Betty had scribbled, "God helps them that help themselves. Do what you think right."

I stared at the clipping. I read it over three times. Then I took a match and burned it to ashes.

Cynthia Pomerleau is a college English teacher, and director of an oral history project on women physicians. She says that she's long wanted to write detective fiction. We feel that this sensitive tale is an excellent beginning, and we hope she writes lots more.