

## My Second Act



**Betty Auchard**

Betty Auchard is a native of Iowa and lived in the Midwest until 1956. When her husband, Denny, became a member of the faculty of San Jose State University in San Jose, California, the family relocated permanently to the West Coast. She raised four children, became a grandmother of nine, earned a teaching credential, and eventually taught high school art.

Betty's fiber arts – batik, nature printing on fabric and paper, and handspun wools dyed with plants – have been included in periodicals such as *Threads* magazine and such books as *Leaf Printing on Fabric* by Jean Ray Laury and *Making Journals by Hand* by Jason Thompson.

After her husband died in 1998, writing became Betty's tool for healing and eventually took on a life of its own. Many of her memoir stories have been published in the *Chocolate for a Woman's Soul* series, anthologies by Simon & Schuster, and will eventually appear in her own collection titled *My Second Act*. She's also writing about her experiences growing up poor in Iowa in the 1930s.

In addition to writing full-time, Betty has been a public speaker since May 2002 presenting the humorous, inspiring story of her book to groups and organizations in the Bay Area of California. *My Second Act*

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tells of her adventures and misadventures while learning how to be single at 68 when she had never been single before. She feels that after suffering a loss, surviving and thriving are necessary for recovery and should be celebrated.

Contact Betty for information regarding presentations or a CD of Betty reading 14 poignant and funny stories from *My Second Act*.

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### My Story

Whenever I learn that a friend has lost a spouse or significant other, my heart aches. I know what lies ahead for her because losing a long-time partner is a life-altering experience. When my good friend's husband was dying of cancer, she and I kept in close touch by email since she lived over a thousand miles away. I knew that any time of the day or night she might need someone to talk to. After she became a widow, I was her primary support system.

"Grieving is pure hell," she wrote. "Betty, I don't know how you got through it."

I never consciously thought about how I got through grief, but my gut had told me that I couldn't avoid the pain that was ahead. People are supposed to die and those left behind are supposed to feel sad. So I waded through my bereavement the only way I knew – which was head on. I cried when I felt like it and laughed whenever I could. I never stopped moving and prayed all the time. My daily plea was, "God, please keep me afloat."

What helped even more than praying was having someone to listen as I babbled on and on. I talked endlessly, and only those who understood tolerated it. By retelling the events of Denny's

Wise Women Speak

death, I was finally able to absorb the reality of my loss. I missed him so much that it took a long time before I got used to the fact that he was gone for good and that my life would never be the same again.

I joined a support group, which may not be for everyone, but it helped me. I didn't mind crying with others as we shared our sadness, regrets, and sometimes anger. It touched me to see a man in my group weeping over the loss of his wife, regretting that he had never learned to do the laundry or cook his own eggs. Another man had never written a check because his wife took care of the finances.

I also spent each evening reading and crying my way through bereavement books as I wrote in the margins. It was like having a dialogue with the author, which was another way of talking to someone. During the day, I was so forgetful and preoccupied with memories that I couldn't remember much of anything else. When I had jobs to do, I wrote them down on a list and then couldn't find the list. I felt heavy and dragged myself through each day. My appetite was missing and so was my brain. I felt disengaged. Driving a car was risky business, and I almost caused an accident twice. At night, I often drove for miles with the headlights off until a more alert driver gave me the "horn."

But what helped me most of all was concentrating on something that gave me comfort, which was writing down my thoughts. You might find comfort in gardening, cooking, or service to others. But for me, writing gave me solace, and every day I jotted down the thoughts and feelings that filled my heart. Sometimes the reflections were heartbreaking – sometimes they were resentful. I wrote on whatever was handy: scraps of paper, backs of envelopes, receipts, or anything that would take the mark of a pen. I put the little pieces of paper in safe places, but I never remembered where those places were.

Gradually, I abandoned scribbling on scraps and used full-sized sheets of paper. The notes became paragraphs, pages, and then chapters. Writing began as my tool for healing and eventually became my passion.

Now that I'm finally cleaning out drawers and cupboards that haven't been touched for several years, I'm finding those

notes. I don't even remember writing some of them. But they bring back memories of my passage through grief, a journey that I marked with stories I would like to share with you.

## My Second Act

### My donations: Embracing the pain

I wrap my feelings in funny words and give them away so you might listen and hear my heart through my paragraphs on paper, for that's how I package my pain. I have more than I want and have used what I need. I like to share, so please enjoy or pass the pain along to someone else. Avoid calling Goodwill; they won't pick it up, for pain's not deductible. Someday it **might** be when there's too much discomfort for humanity to bear. We'll hide our emotions, disguise them as knickknacks, and Goodwill won't know they're collecting bags of sorrow labeled as "useful" and left on the porch to be picked up by noon.

But until that happens, I'll conceal my hurting inside the polite wrapping of smart, funny writing that makes others crack up and fall on the hard floor and lie there a-laughing. It's the way I get rid of my pain.

### Negotiations have ended: Accepting the loss

After several months of being a widow, I sensed I had regained a fragment of my stability. I still cried when I felt like it, but I was learning to stay afloat. Three times in a row I paid the bills on time and did all I could to follow Denny's master budget plan. But I wanted to do more than just follow the leader, so feeling plucky, I decided to make some changes on my own. The familiar things around me that we had shared for almost 49 years were a constant, painful reminder that he was gone. Meeting widowhood head on, I started replacing our belongings.

The first thing to go was our massive dark walnut bedroom furniture. Alone, I was lost on that half-acre of king-sized mattress. My daughter and her husband, who lived with an odd assortment of furniture, took all six pieces. It was their first

bedroom set, and they were thrilled to have it. The room where I had slept with Denny for decades was now empty.

I moved into the computer room, sleeping on a day bed at night and shopping each day for a bedroom set of my own. After many weeks of searching, I found a charming Shaker style that I adored, and it was on sale. I put strips of masking tape on the floor and walls of the bedroom, pretending it was furniture. It fit, so I ordered every piece and left town for two weeks on my first trip without Denny.

While I was watching two live shows a day in Branson, Missouri, my children were at home painting the master bedroom and bath with my all-time favorite non-color, Kelly Moore Navajo white. The furniture arrived while I was away, and my family set all six pieces in their designated places. When I returned to my new nest, with the bed freshly made and nothing on the walls but what I might put there, I felt that I had taken the first steps in starting my life over.

That night, while flossing my teeth in the newly painted bathroom, I noticed the gray front tooth that had always bugged me despite the fact that Denny never noticed it. Even my 80-year-old mother in the convalescent home, who had cataracts, had asked, "Is your front tooth kinda gray or are my eyes gettin' worse?"

Denny insisted, "I never even notice that dark tooth, honey. Forget about it."

But I never did, and I wanted that ugly tooth out of my face. With very little thought about the master budget plan, I made an appointment the next day to have my four front teeth capped, then pondered what I might do next. There were many things on our master list, but Denny and I couldn't agree on what should come first, so our life-improvement projects often bogged down during negotiations.

I wanted double pane windows; he wanted new carpets. I wanted new copper pipes; he wanted a new car. I wanted a cell phone, email service, and an ATM card; but he didn't want any of those things and declared, "Honey, that stuff isn't necessary." Just thinking about what I could do on my own brightened my mood significantly because I could do what I wanted without negotiating.

*Without negotiating.*

The words shot through my heart and ripped it open. While staring at the gray front tooth that I was about to replace, I wept with sorrow because negotiations had ended . . . forever.

**Millennium: Learning to live without the person**

I had finally gotten used to the word *millennium* in everyday conversation when the phrase “Y2K” entered the scene. It had a catchy sound and look. But no one knew how long it took me to figure out what it meant. I was alone, thank God, when I realized it meant “Year Two Thousand.” I said aloud to myself, “Oh, yeah. I get it.” But I realized I still had more to learn when someone asked, “Betty, are you Y2K compliant?”

The new phrase was plastered everywhere in big, colorful letters. It began to worry me. One night, a newscaster asked from the television screen, “Are you Y2K compliant?” I grabbed a strand of hair, twisted it in my fingers, and whimpered, “I don’t know.”

Media coverage made matters worse. It warned of complexities regarding bank account numbers, documents, and records because of snags involving zeros and the number nine. It was far too complex to understand, and I had no idea what to do about it. I only knew that I wasn’t prepared for what the year 2000 might bring.

Should I stash some cash, fill my tank with gas, have plenty of food, water, and medical supplies available, and maybe a flashlight? I expected looting and vandalism. My garage was too full of junk to make room for my car, so I worried that it could be in big trouble, unprotected in the driveway. It felt as if the end of the world were coming instead of a new century.

It did not help matters that I would enter the year 2000 alone, without Denny beside me. He had planned a milestone celebration because the century would change on the heels of our 50th anniversary. It was a wonderful coincidence – but it wasn’t meant to be. Denny had a date with cancer instead of with the millennium and me.

The foreboding news of possible vandalism and looting didn’t help my frame of mind either. It filled me with dread, and I felt more alone than ever in my new role as a widow. I declined New Year’s Eve parties to stay home and guard my house and car – and watch the world fall apart on television from the safety of my bed. I felt weepy as I crawled beneath the down comforter alone and thought of Denny.

The television coverage was magnificent as it showed New Year celebrations and pageantry around the world. It was a welcome distraction. I was glad to see the mayhem hadn’t yet started in other countries, but maybe only America expected chaos.

As I flipped from channel to channel watching the nations of the world enter the new century, I forgot to worry. Soon, I was too weary to witness the arrival of the year 2000 on TV, so I turned out the light and hunkered under the covers. I prayed that my street would be the same in the morning and my car would remain in the driveway, unharmed. I was so tired from fretting that I easily fell asleep.

I had slept less than an hour when I was awakened by what I thought was the sound of popcorn popping in my microwave. I sat upright with eyes bulging. Had revelers invaded my kitchen? I picked up the phone to call for help and noticed the time. It was 12:05 a.m. New Year’s Day. I cautiously peeked out the window. My car was still there. No one was in the streets; there were no sparklers, drunkards, or anything.

*No lions or tigers or bears. Oh, my.*

Hearing the faint sound of firecrackers in the distance, I was reassured the house had not been overtaken by corn-popping prowlers. A few minutes later it was over.

I said aloud, “Is that all there is? Where is everybody?” I had expected more than that in the way of celebration and hell-raising for a new century. I was so relieved. My whole body felt different. I had come through the front door of the Year Two Thousand alone and unharmed. I felt like Wonder Woman.

I crawled back under the comfort of down, fell asleep, and dreamed. I was ready for Y2K. *Anything* was now possible.

### The carpet man: Reinvesting emotional energy

A few years after Denny died, I got a crush on the carpet man. I knew then that I must be moving on.

In the middle of home improvements, I had dashed to the rug mart wearing grubby work clothes, old sneakers, and no lipstick to have a quick look at area rugs. The man who waited on me was a nice looking guy with slightly gray curly hair, twinkling eyes, and a laugh like jazzy music. I had so much fun with him that I began to consider more than just a rug for my home. I pondered which chair he might use when we watched a movie together. After that first meeting, I couldn't stop smiling all the way home and resolved to look better the next time I sought his advice.

I sought his advice the very next day, but this time I dressed for the occasion, complete with bright red toenails, a toe ring, and my best-looking sandals. To bring attention to my strategically placed foot as we studied rug samples, I tapped it on the floor and gushed, "Now THAT'S a nice lookin' rug."

I discussed flooring with him often and became known as "his" customer. As his customer, I started wearing eye makeup and nice clothes. But I was self-conscious about the wattle under my chin. It made me look old. If he stood to my left as we talked, I would pretend to be thinking about rug stuff by holding my left hand casually under my chin to hide my wattle. If he stood to my right, I hid the wattle with my right hand. It was a lot of work and, for the first time in my life, I considered having that wattle removed. I made a mental note to do some research in the yellow pages.

One time I called to say, "Carpet Man, I'm going to be gone for seven days, but I'll see you next week."

He was in a goofy mood and affected an exaggerated southern accent, saying, "Betty, Ahm so sahhry that y'all won't be comin' in today. Ah was so lookin' forward to seein' y'all. Mah heart will jus' be pinin' for ya 'til next week." That silly southern accent got me so excited that I considered carpeting the garage, the driveway, and the sidewalk. But a new kitchen floor seemed more practical.

I had never in my life had a hare-brained flirtation like that, but it made me feel alive again. I was like a 16-year-old girl and all because of a guy who laughed a lot. We laughed so much that I was afraid he might get in trouble. "Carpet Man, your boss is going to think we're crazy," I cautioned.

With a wave of his hand he said, "Hey, we're consenting adults over 21 and can do what we want."

"*Consenting adults over 21?*" Thank goodness his ring finger was bare. It meant I could flirt forever. If he had asked me out for coffee or even mud wrestling, I was so smitten that I would have gone in a minute.

But nothing like that ever happened.

I was busy for 12 months upgrading one floor after another and everything was looking better because of my crush on the carpet man. I bought all new brass floor vents and carpeted the hall, stairs, and master bedroom. I had every scrap of carpet bound and had to hunt for places to use all those little rugs. I replaced the vinyl in three bathrooms and took out a home improvement loan to upgrade the kitchen so I could have laminate flooring installed. I stalked the carpet man for a whole year, but we never even went out for coffee because the only thing in my home that got his attention was the floor.

I'm not sorry. Apparently his "real" job was to open my heart, and he certainly did that. After the carpet man, I was ready to live and love again. And my house has never looked better.

**My grief is a memory:** Grief pressed stories from my heart, and poems that made me cry. Now, almost five years later, human pleasures and earthly places are teasing me and filling my heart with hope. Am I glad? Oh, yeah, I'm glad.