

# BETTY

*by Chris Morgan*

**H**er name is Betty. I know this from eavesdropping on conversations going on around me. I think it is a shame to shorten such an elegant name, but I don't think that Betty cares. She is Betty and always has been. At first, from a distance she appears to be a young woman, slim, agile, and a little zany, entertaining the noon-timers on the mall. She dances. She dances for her entertainment not theirs. And if the jazz bands are irritated by their self-appointed groupie they don't show it. Betty isn't young.

Betty really isn't young. She's fifty. Or sixty. Or perhaps even seventy. Her slim figure is still there

but the flaws show themselves. She has liver spots on her hands. Her thin legs are knotted with varicose veins, perhaps a result of her pregnancies or more likely from long years of slinging hash. Or beer. A tiny roll of flesh peeks over the top of her pale blue velveteen shorts. Her tummy protrudes—the elasticity of her muscles gave up ages ago. Her hair is short, alludes to no particular style. Betty's hair is blond, courtesy of the peroxide bottle. The dark roots at her parting scream this fact to one and all. The flesh on her bum droops, the tassles on the back of her shorts hang, limp. They have nothing to rest on. Her



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tube top is bright orange. It does not flatter. On a younger woman cleavage would enhance this top, but Betty's breasts have succumbed to age. They sag. The skin is crepey.

Betty dances. Her legs are covered by dark pantyhose. They are not sandfeet. She wears wedged sandals and clicks her heels in time to the

music. Perhaps Betty took tap dancing once—a very long time ago. The lady has terrific rhythm. But what seems acceptable for a young woman on a postage stamp of a dance floor somehow, to me, seems vaguely obscene here on the mall.

Betty is a chain smoker. Her hands are always occupied that way. The nauseating smell of stale nicotine invades my nostrils as she passes. What her cigarette doesn't do to hide her, her dark glasses do. They allow her to hide away from the very people she craves to allow her in. The glasses shield her eyes and I can not see the soul of this woman.

Sometimes I see Betty making her way to the mall. Then, perhaps for modesty, she wears a skirt, large orange flowers on a tan background. It's a wrap around for swift removal. It reminds me of kitchen curtain fabric. Orange seems to be a colour Betty enjoys. It makes her feel good about herself perhaps. But somehow she reminds me of a faded summer or spring not a vibrant autumn.

Betty is lonely. I say that but I don't really know anymore than the other noon-timers. I think that she is lonely. She brings to mind Katherine Mansfield's *Miss Brill*. But a hardened copy. An old, lonely lady, mostly not aware that those around her are laughing at her. I see Betty living on a small income in a well worn basement suite. A statistic, like many older women, living just around the poverty line. Her furniture is tired. The couch has a too brightly coloured crocheted afghan and the chairs, ancient antimacassars. There are pictures of children long since grown up and gone away from her and a picture of a husband long since dead. She has few friends. A couple of girls at Bingo maybe. Yes, I really feel that she is lonely. Her brave front, her dancing on the mall is a way of filling in her vacant hours. Maybe any attention is better than no attention.

Whatever her reason, and whatever character my overactive imagination has created for her, Betty is there providing the noon-timers with something to snicker about. I don't suppose they are any more interested in who Betty is than she is about what they think. Betty is—the lady who dances on the mall.