



The True Story of Betty Rizzo

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In her greaser boyfriend's soon-to-be-flying, needs-a-makeover car, before working class kids make it automatic, systematic, hydromatic, and in fact, fucking greased lightning - Riz faces a conundrum, or, in fact, the lack of a condom. Her soft black curls catch the yellow light of the city, reflecting distant and unashamed all-American industrial pollution. She wonders, *is tonight the night?* Is tonight, in this beat-up chassis, the place to take Kenickie to that velvety teen heaven she knows will make him shout her name into the custom air-vents? Her real name, not Riz, not her surname-come-street name, but Betty, her be-at-home, make-a-pie-for-your-man name? Riz knows that name makes them come harder. There's something hotter about fucking a Betty in the back of a car when her parents don't even know she's not home; hotter than pressing a Rizzo against the steering column, because Rizzo's a name that's been cried aloud in teen passion oh so many times. She looks at the stars over his shoulder as they come up for air and thinks, *well, this is as good a night as any.* She moans, *do you have anything?* Which, even for a girl like Rizzo, is as blatant as it can get. Riz knows about and has used condoms, unwieldy as they are, and knows she should ask for them. She's not some dumb farm girl, some wide-eyed priss like Sandy, who doesn't know one end of a guy from another and thinks all they're for is holding hands and talking and sharing milkshakes. Riz appreciates a man. And she is wise; wise to the world, and the feel of different men, and after, the feel of eyes on her back.

But at this moment, when he says no, he don't have any, Riz is also impetuous and lusty, and because she likes this one, really likes him, her body wants to show him that in no uncertain terms. So, as his eyes dart over her, she reaches for his button fly.

Weeks later, at the drive-in, smuggled in the trunk of a car, Riz is anxious, and it isn't because Marty's pumps are in her back or that it's hot and dark in there with Marty breathing hard and letting out snuffled giggles. She forms a line in her head to say to Marty when they get a minute, just the two of them. *I'm like a defective typewriter: I missed a period*, she will say, make it wry, like everything she says, with a slanting smile like she doesn't care. And maybe, maybe she doesn't. Maybe she can be the girl who marries and has a kid at sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and everyone's OK with it and she's happy – or that they move away somewhere no-one knows them, Idaho, they could move to Idaho and Kenick could get a job at a garage and she would be the mom and bake devil's food cake from boxes, or, hell, maybe she could sell Avon door to door to the potato farming women. Give them some glamour. And the baby lying in a yellow-frilled gingham cot in a room with animals on the wall she'd paint.

But later, as Riz walks back to the car from the ladies' room where she's just timed her typewriter line right for Marty, she sees how unlikely any acceptance might be of this backseat child, this abomination. She feels the eyes and hears the whispers, *Rizzo's knocked up, Rizzo's a whore, she'll go with anyone and she don't care*, and she is so blind with fury and rage by the time she reaches the car where Kenick receives the news that she pushes him away, just like every other person she's ever loved. She stalks off into the night, pencil-skirt flexing tightly with every step.

Riz now enters a period of darkness, where friends are few and far between, but she sticks to her guns. She has her own ethics, and at least she's not a tease, a coquette: she knows how to please a man and won't hold out. She won't rub up against you then put your hands in your lap or move them off her breasts when they roam, as surely they will. She will not refuse to see things through. In her mind, sex is better than flirting with no purpose. And now, she will deal with the result in her own way, and see this through too. In those days where no-one is kind to her and she walks within her own bubble, unclean, untouchable, she may as well be shaven-headed in remorse for her immoral collaboration, she thinks, like those women in France in the war. She felt sorry for them when she heard about it. To Riz, it seems practical to try to ensure your safety by getting in with a German officer. She compares her actions: she has compromised nothing and betrayed no-one. Biology

has merely had its say as it has done countless times before, and will again every time kids make out in Plymouths and Caddies or a borrowed Dodge.

At the sock hop, her red dress is too tight. She can dance in it, and she will dance in it, because to not dance and to rest her feet and her back would be lame. So she flounces in on the arm of a dubious catch – someone who doesn’t care about rumours, and for this, as much of a lout as he is, she likes him. Riz has always had a soft spot for a bad boy anyway, though this one may be playing out the stereotype too enthusiastically. At this point she has slept with him, because, she thinks, who cares now? When it happened her mind was somewhere else and her body, unusually for her, unresponsive. He breathed in her ear towards the end *at least I know it won’t be mine, doll*, and after, as they lay there in BO-soaked sheets listening to the rain drip through the window (this one at least had his own room above a hardware store), he had lit a cigarette and said as he gave it to her *I thought it would feel different with a knocked up chick, but you’re just the same as the others*.

Riz is a good dancer, though tending towards dirty, and the rebel in her makes sure that TV-watching America sees her. She may never be seen again in such a way, still with only the spectre of pregnancy for those who know her, and as an innocent high school girl having fun for those that do not. She wants to capture the moment forever. *The last time I was happy*. Because she knows, whichever she chooses, she will not be happy again for some time. So she ignores the tightness over her back and her belly and her gasping breath and she flips a vigorous hand jive, making sure the camera is on her as much as she can.

What takes her breath away completely, though, is Kenick and his date, the infamous Cha-Cha, sashaying toward her, arm in arm and flushed with a post-coital glow. Rage rolls inside Riz. Coming here with a slut on his arm, just-fucked look on his stupid face, pleased with himself to have bagged a trophy. Riz thinks sadly for a moment, *I wonder if she has ever been.....like me*. Or maybe she has some secret, this Cha-Cha, that Riz could have learned before it was too late, like vinegar sponges or douches or hand jobs only. He gives her one look, and she catches it before she storms out, sick of being in the same room as her own pride and the result of her own lust, sick of wanting to be loved. His look says, *I’m sorry*, and as she runs down the corridor she feels the hot dog she had before the dance heaving dangerously in her

stomach. She just makes it outside and coughs up the remains onto the school steps, down her polka dot dress and over the wilting corsage that she tears off in a hopeless rage. For the first time since she has known for sure she is pregnant, Betty Rizzo cries and cries.

In the end it is Frenchie, stupid, kindly, hapless Frenchie, teasing her pink bouffant hopelessly under a headscarf, that tells her where to go. It seems that beauty school has its own secrets, and there are girls there that have also cried, and received looks, and could not stand it any more, or the future that they have seen for themselves. Riz makes an appointment with the man on the phone. When he realises what she is calling about, his voice slows. *You tramps like to break the rules*, he says, *but when you get caught you all come crawling for help*. As he whispers this, indistinctly in the background Riz thinks she hears a woman’s voice calling *dinner, dinner, come in now*. She almost hangs up but it has taken her so long to get the courage to call that she agrees to the time and takes down the address in the margin of the open page of the phone book in the booth, the black receiver burning her ear. She hangs up and falls out of the booth and finds it is as airless outside as it was inside.

Three days later she arrives at a house very like hers just a few streets away. She fingers a wad of notes in her pocket that her father will find missing as soon as he wants to go to the track, but she cannot think of that now. It takes everything she has to knock on the door, and she thinks, *what doesn’t kill me*. Frenchie’s wan face floats in her mind’s eye, and the sudden memory of Sandy fainting at seeing her own blood as Frenchie pierces her ears. The old Riz momentarily resurfaces as she wonders if that priss faints every month when she looks at her own panties? But then the door opens and a shadow fills the space and says, *you better come in*, and the old Riz is gone forever.

She does not think of it. Cannot think for a moment of what happens, of his face over her, of what happens even before the procedure, as that is what it is called. The procedure is reasonably quick and clean, and Riz thanks a God her mother loved that apparently Frenchie was right in her belief that *he knows what he’s doing*. He may even have been a doctor. But she wonders if all those other beauty school girls also found themselves in an impossible position when they entered the lounge and

the man said, *before we do what you've come here for, this is part of my fee*, and started to unbutton his slacks. Riz does not think of it. She has seen it through to the end. The only thing she thinks is, *now the performance starts*.

For now Riz makes her comeback, and it takes every soft curl on her head to act it out. *No, I was never knocked up! It was a false alarm!* She practises saying it in her room for a week as she heals, telling her father she has the flu. She practises her wry smile and winks. She folds her old aura of wickedness and swank around herself and walks in it, trying to make it fit again, remaking it over like last year's blouse, re-tucked to emphasise her changing figure and the slick outlines she sees in magazines at the drugstore. She dangles her jacket from her shoulder and tilts her head, cig casually between red lips. *Tell me about it*, she mimes. *Don't fake me out*.

Last day of school and it's the performance of Riz's life. The day dawns hot. It's a day for hotpants and a shirtwaister and flats. She gets ready carefully. She thinks the bleeding has stopped now. She should be safe. She skips out before her father can yell *what happened to my stash, kid, I know you know*, and runs for the bus. There's a big wheel in the school field and she sees it as soon as the bus draws near. She thinks, that's the place. She waits for the jostling kids to get off first then puts on her sunglasses and styles it out, glides over and stands by the wheel, hips knocked out at an angle. She knows she looks good, and she waits. She doesn't bother checking her grades, pinned up on a wall in the yard. She knows she has probably flunked everything, and anyway tomorrow she starts work at a diner where her cousin works. It's not so bad. She looks good in turquoise. She can draw *what'll it be?* for dusty truckers.

Kenickie saunters over, sees her and stops to light a cig and comb his ducktail. She smiles in the way she knows he can't resist, all the time thinking, *OK, you gotta make this believable girl*. Tell him, then give him something else to think about. He says *hey Riz*, and she says, *hey*. He starts to say, to stumble over his words, *look, I'll make an honest woman of ya, I'll look after ya*, but she stops him with a kiss and says, like she rehearsed, *it was all a false alarm!* His face lights up like she knew it would and he sweeps her into a cab in the big wheel. For good measure, she shouts down to Marty and the T-Birds below, *I'm not pregnant!* And she thinks, *and I'm not*. And the wheel shakes its way to the top of the blue sky and she kisses Kenick all the

way, hoping the rocking and the height don't make her sick, and thinking, *I saw it through all right, and I'll have to see it through every day from now on if I don't want this to stop.*