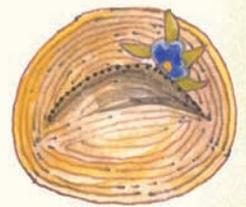


# Heavens To Betsy!

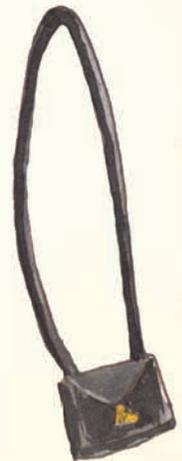
by Gael Shults

What a surprise! My mother had been given a subscription to McCall's magazine and I was delighted to discover an adorable, stylish paper doll tucked away in the back pages. I was allowed to cut out Betsy McCall, but only after Mom and her friends had read the magazine cover to cover. Sometimes when she shared with the neighbors I would have to be very patient, but other times she would carefully cut the paper doll page out of the magazine so I could play with it right away.

I was around seven years old when I began my mailbox vigil. Once Betsy had made her initial appearance it wasn't too difficult to figure out when her next issue would arrive. After walking home from school I would stop to peek into the mailbox. Once every month my due diligence was rewarded and over the course of the year I acquired a wonderful collection of Betsy friends, family and their various wardrobe items.



cut along dotted line



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However, this was not the only life-changing gift that Betsy had left behind in our house. She and her McCall's designers, like Helen Lee, began making a deep impression into my young fashion sense. It was only recently that I discovered just how profoundly I had been touched by those early experiences. A few months ago my big sister Pam and I had the chance to go through some of our mother's sewing items and we came across a large box of vintage patterns. Flashbulb memories began going off like fireworks in our heads! We recognized so many of our dear dresses, sewn by Mom, many after the fashion of Betsy McCall. Really, no surprise there, since we wanted to look just like Betsy! Our mother worked very hard to keep us in the latest fashions and she also used her own creative genius for a little added flare.

Betsy's regular visits and new paper doll dresses came to a sad end for me. After several fruitless after-school stops at my mailbox, Mom broke the news. All too soon our McCall's magazine subscription expired and she decided that we couldn't afford to continue it. I was heart broken! It was then that Mom showed me how I could make more dresses for Betsy by cutting out photos from the Sears catalog and by drawing my own.

Mom was a very gifted seamstress and I was also inspired to begin sewing at a young age. I still own a few favorite dresses that she made for me. My kindergarten photo showed a darling bright green dress trimmed with white rick-rack, and there is one special dress that I wore during my mailbox vigil years that was made of purple rosebuds and a purple corduroy pinafore. I could hardly wait to grow into the shorts and skirt outfit that Mom sewed for Pam, not to mention all the Easter dresses over the years. There were so many more, each a work of art. I wish I had room to draw all of them here!



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A few years after my Betsy experience I made another sublime discovery. I was visiting my grandparents who lived on the waterfront just off the Chesapeake Bay. We swam and played that summer, but eventually got bored. I can't remember just how this happened, but somehow I came across a huge pile of McCall's magazines that had been stashed in the corner of the basement for many years. I was amazed to find that Betsy was older than me! There were about fifteen years of pristine magazines, with uncut Betsy McCall paper dolls inside. I was in Betsy Heaven for sure! My blonde cousin Nancy lived close by and she reminded me so much of cousin Barbara McCall.

After getting permission from Grandmother, I gathered scissors and tape and a shoebox and began the delightful task of cutting out each and every Betsy paper doll, including stories, friends, pets, clothes and accessories. It took many days to carefully cut out the Betsy family and all those wonderful clothes. The Betsy girls wanted to share outfits so I cut off the tabs and put clear tape down the front of the paper dolls and down the back of the clothes and in this way I could take the outfits on and off without tearing them.

I can still smell the cool, light mustiness of the basement and feel the tingy sensation of pins and needle in my feet from sitting cross-legged too long. I have no idea where that old shoebox of Betsy McCall paper dolls ended up, but happily I have now enjoyed collecting them once again.



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For me, this love of all things Betsy has come full circle. My granddaughter Jada has always reminded me so much of Betsy McCall. When Jada was six years old I convinced her to pose like Betsy and then took a bunch of photos of her so that someday I could turn her into a little paper doll girl. Now that she is ten I finally have a use for those precious photos!

My drawings here have been influenced by important people whom I would like to thank. The McCall's Corp., along with the amazing designs of Helen Lee, AnneLise Wilhelmsen, Julie Reaves Lavers (my mother), and the forever winsome faces of Jada Shults and our dear Miss Besty McCall.



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