

A Christmas Gift

By Brantley Thompson Elkins

It may have been the most famous pinup shot of its time, and it has since become a classic – if anything in the genre of nude photography can be called a classic.

Back in the 1950's, there must have been millions of horny but lonely men who wished they could find Bettie Page under their Christmas tree. Bettie, who became a legend after she dropped out of sight in 1958, died a couple of weeks short of Christmas 50 years later.



It was her smile as much as her fabulous bikini-clad or totally naked body that set her apart from thousands of other pinup models in her time. Yet that smile must have masked her true feelings. She didn't have a happy life. She

never met the kind of man who could have made that smile real; she was thrice-divorced.

After her disappearance – reportedly occasioned by subpoena to testify about pornography before a Congressional committee – Bettie withdrew into herself, trying to find new meaning in her life as a born-again Christian and even a missionary – she was rebuffed at first, not because she had posed nude but because she had been divorced.

She suffered bouts of mental illness. Taking advantage of her cult status, she made occasional personal appearances in the 1990s, autographing pictures from her bad old days – how she justified that to herself, I have no idea – but refusing to let anyone take pictures of her as an old woman.

Her life was screwed up, but no doubt so were the lives of most of her fans back in the fifties. It is a recurrent temptation to look back on the past as an age of innocence, but the fifties were filled with troubles – like any other decade or era. Even forgetting about the threat of nuclear war or the kind of racism that seems shocking today, it was an age of ignorance – especially about women and sex.

Hugh Hefner, who published that Christmas shot of Bettie in *Playboy*, was the apostle of sexual revolution. Yet his idea of a revolution was simply that women owed it to men to invite them into bed, no strings attached, as opposed to owing it to men to remain virgins until marriage.

Women were to be sexual playthings and nothing more – Hefner didn't say that in so many words, but as late as 1969 he insisted on calling Ursula K. Le Guin "U.K. Le Guin" when he ran her classic sf story, "Nine Lives," in *Playboy* – and blipped out her true name again in a letter of comment from Roger Zelazny.

This was six years after Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and Hefner may never really have *gotten* it, even though he later put his daughter Christie in charge of the company (She recently announced she was quitting, with no heir apparent in sight.). He even had a puritanical streak when it came to women.

Back in 1949, Hefner had been shocked to learn that his first wife – who was to be Christie's mother – had cheated on him during their engagement, but took advantage of her remorse to fuck other women. Thirty years after their 1959 divorce, he took a second fling at marriage and fatherhood, turning the Playboy Mansion from a party palace into a family homestead. But that didn't last either, and he is reportedly spending his final years on a diet of Viagra and a constantly changing harem of fluff girls.

Hugh Hefner has nothing to teach us about relationships. Neither does the sad real life Bettie Page. And yet her image... There is still something inspiring in that. Her photos – even the notorious bondage shots by Irving Klaw, as opposed the bikini pictures and nudes by fellow model and photographer Bunny Yeager – were never coarse or crude. Nor was her body fake.

No silicone here, just a glorious all-natural female body. No beaver shots, although she occasionally posed full-frontal. Bettie may not have been innocent, yet she *looked* innocent – and somehow knowing at the same time. Men could imagine sex with her as innocent fun, as pure joy.

It was her smile, a smile many men would have given their right arms to put on her face – and to keep there – that is her legacy. Perhaps some of those men had an inkling that it would take being *good* to her, in or out of bed, to bring out that smile. They may even have gained an insight into what it meant to cherish a woman.