

Truly a Seal of Approval

An Author's Kind Response Brought Joy and Comfort to an Unhappy Child

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Some people find it odd that I keep my favorite piece of art in the bathroom, but I think it's the ideal location for Silly Willy.

In this framed Ludwig Bemelmans original, Silly Willy, a whimsical seal, sits in a claw-foot bathtub, a huge smile on his face. I can't help but smile right back at him, just as in love with him as I was 50 years ago, when Bemelmans first drew him for me. I was 9 years old, and it might have been the first letter I ever received, certainly the first one with a drawing in the middle of the page.

Bemelmans, of course, was the author and illustrator of the "Madeline" books for children. Madeline lived in an old house in Paris that was covered in vines, with 11 other little girls who marched in two straight lines: "They smiled at the good and frowned at the bad and sometimes they were very sad."

I was always very sad. I cried myself to sleep because both my parents were alcoholics and my older sister was emotionally ill. There was never laughter in my house -- the sounds I remember were the screaming and the thud of my father's hand hitting me whenever he'd had too much to drink. My life was filled with shame and humiliation, and I prayed each night that one of my friends' parents would adopt me.

Then my mother gave me "Madeline" for my ninth birthday. I knew Mr. Bemelmans had to be a great father because the little girls in his book looked so happy and did such interesting things. Maybe he could adopt me. I imagined I was his daughter. I pretended I was Madeline and that the other little girls were all my sisters. I wanted to write Bemelmans a letter so I'd have some tangible evidence of my new family, but I didn't know what to say, and I was afraid to ask him to adopt me, in case my parents found out.

Then, by coincidence, I found a yellowed copy of the San Francisco Chronicle from the 1930s that my father had saved. On the back page was a comic strip called "Silly Willy," by Bemelmans. Silly Willy didn't live in a Parisian convent. He was a seal who lived in a bathtub. Now I had an extra incentive to write to Bemelmans.

I don't know how I found his address and I'm not sure what my letter said. He answered it personally, as if he knew how much I needed his approval. It was typed on his stationery, with a drawing in black ink. The letter read:

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Dear Marjorie:

I think Silly Willy looked something like this -- I haven't a picture of him around, so I drew one from memory -- thank you, all good wishes:

Ludwig Bemelmans

I taped the letter to the wall by my bed. Silly Willy's smile cheered me up and helped to make my unstable life bearable. When my father hit me, it no longer hurt so much because I now had a secret father who obviously cared enough about me to send me my very own drawing.

For years, the little seal stayed on my wall, his smile a perfect antidote to adolescence. Then I went away to college and didn't see Silly Willy again until I was in another dysfunctional family. When I left that relationship and got my own apartment, I framed Silly Willy. He now hangs near my own bathtub.

My Manhattan apartment isn't far from Bemelmans Bar at the Carlyle Hotel. I have gone there to look at the artist's drawings, which cover every wall. Madeline is there along with the other little girls in two straight lines. There are rabbits and other whimsical animals, but there's no Silly Willy.

I'm glad Silly Willy isn't in a bar. My old and trusted friend belongs in a bathroom, where he is forever splashing in a tub and grinning at me.