

PRESIDENT-IN-EXILE

Bob's my uncle. He really is. But I could never trust any story he ever told me.

I used to.

When I was six I was proud to tell my class at school that my Uncle Bob was the president and Aunt Margaret was the first lady.

They corrected me.

"Oh, I'm not the president of the U. S. of A.," Uncle Bob told me after I ran home upset. He sat me down on the sofa in the parlour and explained that he was president-in-exile of a small island country off the coast of South Africa called Utopia. He had been overthrown by a pirate named Smith three years before, barely escaping alive. Of course he and Aunt Margaret had had to leave their fabulous wealth behind in the hands of the evil dictator. That was why they had come to live with us.

It had been impossible to find work. Who would hire a president-in-exile?

This time Uncle Bob suggested that I probably shouldn't tell my classmates his true position in life. The more people who knew, the more it hurt his job opportunities.

Uncle Bob was also the pivotal spy for the allies during the war. I found that out when I was eight. Aunt Margaret was not pleased to hear him recounting his heroics. Overhearing the tale he was telling to me in the parlour, she rushed in, yelling about spoiling my innocence, and cuffed him on the ear as she coerced him from the room. Aunt Margaret was usually a sweet, gentle woman, so it surprised me to see her punishing her husband like that.

Two days later, when Uncle Bob was certain we were alone and would not be overheard, he explained Aunt Margaret's rash behavior. She feared for Uncle Bob's life because Hitler was alive and hiding in South America and had a contract out on him. That Hitler fellow was really upset that Uncle Bob had spent so many afternoons in the war room with him and the German command, not to mention weekends at the mountain retreat. He was never once suspected of being a spy. You could understand the desire for revenge.

Again my promise of secrecy was vital. You see, Uncle Bob was hiding out at my parents' house until things cooled off.

The real truth was not as exciting, but almost as good as one of his stories. Uncle Bob and my mother were raised during the depression, but, unlike most, their family was quite well-to-do, even then. Their textile business in Brooklyn prospered. After the war, and my grandfather's early death, the business passed to my Uncle Bob, but changing demands in the textile market, and Uncle Bob's lack of business sense, carried the company into bankruptcy. With creditors lined up at his door, he really did take refuge in my parents' home. After so many years of wealth, my grandmother died penniless. I recall Uncle Bob standing off in the shadows at her funeral. He told me it was because he couldn't risk being recognized and I believe he told the truth, sort of, that time. He was ashamed of the course his actions had taken the family reputation and stature.

Aunt Margaret loved him dearly, despite his failure to provide for her and his continual visits into fantasy. He never meant to be a deadbeat (which is what my father's family called him). It was just an accident. It just happened despite all his good intentions.

My father was from a poor background and struggled to achieve a middle class life for our family. But neither of my parents harboured any resentment toward Uncle Bob and Aunt Margaret even though they had to support them for so many years. No mention was ever made of my uncle not finding work, of no financial contribution.

Uncle Bob did what he could. He even ran the household at times while my father worked at the hardware store and my mother and aunt did volunteer work first at the hospital and later on for the Korean War drive. My uncle did all the work around the house: the cooking, the cleaning, the laundry. There were never any vegetables in my lunchbox when Uncle Bob prepared it. He cared for me and my older sisters Laura and Nell. He washed my mouth out when I called my plump sister "Nellie the belly" once too often. Then he gave me a copy of a 'Peanuts' comic book and let me know that he was really Charles M. Schultz and that there was no money in cartoon work no matter how funny you were. He told me he had based the Linus character after me (he knew Linus was my favourite); and I felt better and I promised never to tease my sister again.

That was the kind of thing my uncle did. He was very influential in raising us. He was always at home. My sisters loved him as much as I did.

I wondered as a youngster why he and Aunt Margaret had never had any children. I heard only recently that Uncle Bob had steadfastly refused.

As we grew older Laura and Nell no longer accepted his stories at face value. They refused to believe that he was Santa Claus long before I gave in. I wanted to believe

Uncle Bob because he was always so earnest in anything he ever told me. But eventually I too began to doubt his stories.

When I was ten he gave me the baseball scores every morning. Gil Hodges always hit a home run and the Dodgers always won a close one. Bob's versions of the games were so vivid that I never questioned them and never compared his stories to the line score in the newspaper. But Gil Hodges' totals at the end of the year were less than spectacular, and the Dodgers finished a distant fifth.

Several years later, when I was old enough to stay up later and listen to the games on the radio with my father and Uncle Bob, I was struck by how much less exciting they were than his condensed play-by-play version at breakfast.

At fourteen, when Uncle Bob confided that he had been asked to be a part of the space program in the race against the communists to put a man in orbit, well, I hugged him and told him I hoped he got in, just like I would have at seven.

Laura and Nell were the same. I saw them both spend hours listening to him. We always listened to Uncle Bob individually, and we always kept our promise of secrecy, so I was never sure if he told us the same tales. Years later, comparing notes with my sisters, I found that he did not. He never ran out of things to tell us.

When each of my sisters left home, Laura to go to California to go to law school and Nell to marry Tommy Henderson, there were some very tearful goodbyes. My mother and father said things like "see you at Christmas" and "we'll visit", but Uncle Bob, through big tears and clumsy hugs, could only say "goodbye".

After that, first when there was just Nell and me, then later when I was alone, I heard more than my original share of stories. I discovered that Uncle Bob had a masters degree in theology, led an expedition up the east side of Mount Everest, was a stunt double in the movies for Elvis, and many other adventures that I wished I had done too.

When I was eighteen, I was drafted to go to Viet Nam. I only had a month to prepare to leave home.

Uncle Bob was sitting in the front room with me a week before I had to leave. We had listened to the Mets lose another game and my father had gone to bed. After sitting in silence for a few minutes I stood up and stretched and announced my intention to turn in as well.

Uncle Bob was sitting next to the radio, turned so I couldn't see his face, and he turned it off.

"You know, son" he said. "I volunteered for the Korean War."

I smiled and sat down again. I was ready to hear another of his stories. “Did you Uncle Bob?”

He turned around to face me and I could see the strain on his face. He made no attempt to hide his emotions. There were tears in his eyes.

“We’d been living with your mom and dad for a few years ...” he began, and pausing, shook his head slowly. “I volunteered three times ...”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just watched him. He didn’t seem to mind that I didn’t urge him on like I usually did.

After another moments pause, he smiled a little and shrugged. “They just wouldn’t take me.”

With that he sobbed a little more and we hugged.

I left the next week. Everyone was more emotional with their goodbyes than they had been for Laura or Nell. I was going to fight in a war after all. Uncle Bob’s tears didn’t stand out so much.

It was difficult to say goodbye to him.

I was a month into my tour when I got word that Uncle Bob had died in a hunting accident only a few days after I had left. The folks were certain it was only an accident, but I knew better. Uncle Bob had hunted big game in Africa, so I knew he would never put a rifle to his head while he cleaned it.

Today, Laura, Nell and I compare stories. Uncle Bob had some real beauts.

Aunt Margaret still lives with my father and mother, but we have never told them the stories he told us.