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Bobby the Bellboy

My uncle, Bobby Jellison, was a Hollywood actor. He played Bobby the Bellboy on *I Love Lucy*. He was married to my mother’s older sister, my Aunt Eleanore. All my life I wanted to meet Bobby. But for reasons I never quite understood, we never met until a few months before he died.

To me my uncle Bobby was a hero. He was a rebel who escaped the Upper Midwest for the dreamy world of Hollywood. Every Tuesday night my mom and dad and my older brother Pete and I sat down together in front of our brand new 17” RCA Victor television set and watched *I Love Lucy*.

For thirteen episodes my uncle was Bobby the Bellboy. “*Knock-knock. Mrs. Ricardo, it’s Bobby. Say, I’ve got that pretty Kelly green ballroom gown of yours all nice and dry-cleaned for you. Oh, and here’s another dozen long-stemmed red roses from Ricky.*”

Bobby became an instant celebrity. And my brother and I always expected we’d get an invitation from Bobby to come out to Hollywood and hang out on the set with Lucy & Ricky. My aunt and uncle didn’t have kids. My brother and I were their only nephews, but we never heard from them. No Christmas cards, no tickets to Disneyland, nothing. I figured there was something inviolable about the lives of the stars. I pictured my aunt and uncle living like Nick and Nora Charles in the *Thin Man* movies, dressed in black velour and silver lamé, driving a Buick Roadmaster through canyons of eucalyptus and bougainvillea.

My uncle started out in Chicago in the Golden Age of radio, acting in studios up and down Michigan Avenue – Mutual Radio, NBC, CBS, making magic in front of a microphone. He was Muggsy Modoc on *Girl Alone*, Buster Gunn on *The Great Gunns* starring Donna Reade, Calamity on *Tom Mix with Tony the Wonder Horse*. My dad said he wore double-breasted suits, fedora hats, and smoked Chesterfield Kings.

When I was six my Aunt Eleanore came through Minneapolis on the train, and as a present she gave me and my older brother Pete 8x10 glossies of my uncle reading a script into a big silver RCA microphone on the Danny Thomas Radio Show. Bobby's curly hair is slicked back, the smirk of stardom on his face. I thumb-tacked his photo to my wall next to a picture of the Rose Bowl-bound Minnesota Gophers Football Team.

With the rise of television in the early '50s Bobby's radio acting career dried up, and he and my Aunt packed up and moved to Hollywood. Bobby got an audition for Desi Arnaz on the new *I Love Lucy Show*. Desi liked Bobby's big ears, his curly hair, his funny rubbery voice, and he especially liked the fact that my uncle was shorter than he was. Initially he cast Bobby in bit parts – the plumber, the Western Union boy, but when Ricky Ricardo and his TV bride Lucy McGillacuddy moved to Hollywood to find work for the Ricky Ricardo Orchestra, they checked into room 315 of the Beverly Palms Hotel, and their uniformed bell hop in the pillbox hat was my uncle Bobby.

When I turned twenty-six I moved to California. By this time my parents had both passed away, we had a small family to begin with, so I wanted to reach out to my aunt and uncle.

I gave them a call. When she answered the phone my aunt said, "Oh, honey, you're uncle Bobby isn't doing so well these days. I'm not sure it's such a good idea for you to come over and visit."

“Aunt Ellie, you’re family, I’d like to see you again, and I want to meet Bobby.”

Reluctantly she agreed to let me visit. I was so excited about meeting Bobby, I wanted to interview him. So I packed my cassette tape recorder, and headed South on the Golden State Freeway from Berkeley to L.A.

Their two-bedroom Spanish-style garden apartment was just off Wilshire Boulevard near the UCLA campus. It was full of antiques and photos of Bobby. My aunt was a tentative, muddling version of my mother, nervous and rather formal. My uncle sat in the kitchen in a wheelchair, asleep, wearing white flannel pajamas. I recognized him immediately. But in person he looked so small, fragile, his nose was red and swollen. My aunt nudged him awake. Bobby stared at me with blood-shot eyes. “Who’s this?”

“It’s your nephew.”

“Give me a cigarette.”

“We don’t smoke with guests in the house.” My aunt poured us a couple glasses of grapefruit juice and left the room. Bobby stared off into the front hall to make sure Eleanore had gone upstairs, and he reached around the back of his wheelchair and pulled out a half-pint bottle of Kentucky Tavern Bourbon and took a drink. “Put your damned tape recorder away. I’m sick and tired of talking about *Lucy*. That red-haired bitch and her grease ball husband cheated me out of more money than I could ever dream of.”

“So tell me about your days in radio, Uncle Bobby.”

“No mystery there. All you needed to act on the air back then was a few lousy accents -- English upper-crust, New York gangster, maybe *Chinee* or *Paki*. Did you know that *I Love Lucy* was the first TV show ever shot with three cameras on thirty-five millimeter film? That made those people a gold mine in re-runs.”

He told me that in the fourth season of the show the Screen Actors Guild began

requiring producers to pay actors for re-runs. But before the union could get to Desilu, Desi Arnaz had each *I Love Lucy* actor sign a buy-out agreement, the terms of which were never made public, preventing the actors from ever making monetary claims on the future of the show. Then CBS Films syndicated the original one hundred fifty-three episodes of *I Love Lucy* earning over three hundred million dollars for the estates of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz.

When *I Love Lucy* finally went off the air Bobby was pushing fifty, which by Hollywood standards was ancient. He did some bit parts on later incarnations of *I Love Lucy - The Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Show*, *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour*, and finally *Here's Lucy*. After that Bobby sold clothes in a men's store on Ventura Boulevard in Studio City. And he drank.

Soon after my visit Bobby died of liver disease. I wished I'd had more time with him, I wanted to hear more of that voice - all marinated in Bourbon whiskey and cigarettes, and all those characters of his that came from somewhere. So I went to the UCLA Film, TV & Radio Archive. The Radio Archivist, a guy named Ron Staley, said, "Robert Jellison is your uncle?" He grabbed the sleeve of my jacket and led me down a hallway. He walked with a white cane. The radio archivist was blind. With a set of keys he unlocked a door to a room the size of a broom closet. Inside was a turntable and a stack of twelve-inch black acetate discs in paper sleeves labeled in Braille. He put his hand on top of the pile and felt his way down, working the stack like a terrier digging for truffles. He pulled a disc out of its sleeve, put it on the turntable, and said, "Your uncle performed the longest death scene in the history of serial dramatic radio. *Harbor Detective*. NBC Radio produced eight episodes in Chicago in 1948. I'm not supposed to, but I'll make a

copy for you.” Ron placed the tone arm down onto the disc. “*All right you rat. You’re through.*”

“*No, Vinnie, please, no. I didn’t squeal on nobody. I swear.*” It was the unmistakable voice of my uncle Bobby. “*I swear on my mother’s grave.*”

“*Proper cemeteries don’t bury people like your mother.*” BANG! BANG!...BANG!

“*A-H-H-H-H...N-O-O-O-O...A-H-H-H-H.*” KERTHWOMP, my uncle’s body falls to the floor. “*A-R-R-R-G-G-H-H.*” This goes on for a full minute. *Dum-dum-dum-dahhhhh*, “*Tune in again next week for another episode of Harbor Detective.*” *M-f-m-f-m-f - fog horn sounds in the distance - M-f-m-f-m-f-m.*

My aunt Ellie had Bobby cremated. No service was held. She placed his ashes on the bookshelf above his old RCA television set. I thought of offering her my cassette copy of Bobby’s performance in *Harbor Detective* as a memento to sit next to his ashes, but she didn’t need to hear a recording of Bobby’s extended death scene.

2012 is the sixty-first anniversary of *I Love Lucy*. The show still earns over ten million dollars a year in syndication. Bobby the bellboy appears on TV on every continent on earth. My uncle lives on in an unpaid electronic firmament of phosphorescent black and white pixels.