

GRANPA'S YARNS

Episode 1: Black Bart



Ingredients:

Truth80%
Imagination20%

Distributed by: LemonPyr8

I was eight years old when I first heard about Black Bart. I had no idea what he looked like or what he did, but the way my Uncle Jim acted when he talked about Black Bart made me a little scared. And very curious.

Uncle Jim lived with my grandmother in a house on McMahon Avenue. Our house was on Price Street, about a mile away. My mother visited my grandmother several times every week. During the summer months, when school was out, she always took me along.

One day my mother and grandmother were in the kitchen talking about family matters. They asked me to leave the kitchen and practice my piano for a while. I played songs for about 10 minutes, but then got bored. I couldn't find any thing else to do, so I went up the staircase to look around and see if I could find something interesting. I wasn't allowed to go upstairs without permission, but on this day I didn't have anything better to do. Besides, my mother and grandmother were deeply involved in their discussion and they just left me to my own devices.

When I got to the top of the stairs I could hear some noises coming from the bedroom at the far end of the house. It sounded like something or somebody was tapping on metal. So I tiptoed down the hallway to see what was going on. The bedroom door was open. I crept closer and closer. And then I saw ... Uncle Jim!

I rarely ever got to see Uncle Jim. He had gone to graduate school somewhere in the Midwest, earned his degree and now worked as an engineer somewhere in Philadelphia. He usually came home late, which is why I hardly ever saw him. When Uncle Jim **was** home, though, he almost always stayed in his bedroom, behind a closed door. He was rather tall, had a squarish head with dirty blond hair, and a cigarette almost always dangled out of the corner of his mouth. He seemed to inhale deeply before he ever spoke, and when he did speak, his gravelly voice made me a bit frightened, even though he never was unfriendly.

"What are you doing up here, kid?", he said.

I didn't know what to say. I was worried that I would get into big trouble if he told my mother that I went upstairs on my own. I was afraid to tell the truth, but terrified of telling a lie. Every adult I knew told me that people who had a habit of telling lies would spend eternity in Hell.

"Cat got your tongue, kid?", Uncle Jim asked. I couldn't tell whether he was angry at me or just messing around. He waited a few seconds before motioning for me to come closer and take a seat. I never was in his bedroom before. It smelled like smoke. There were books and magazines everywhere; the walls were covered with grotesque caricatures that he drew. In the corner was a ham radio set that he was building. A large window looked out on to the yard in the back of the house.

“Come here”, he whispered in his gravelly voice. “I’m going to let you in on a secret.” He craned his neck to look down the hallway to make sure no one could hear what he was going to say. Before saying anything else he squinted his eyes and pressed his lips together. “Can you keep a secret?” he asked me. I nodded, eager to hear what he was going to say. “Good! Above all, don’t tell your grandma. I don’t want her to panic.” Uncle Jim had me on the edge of my seat. I was anxious to hear what secret he was going to share with me. “I heard that Black Bart has been roaming around our neighborhood. He’s been burying treasure here and there. I think I saw him in our backyard last night.” Uncle Jim pointed out the window to the small grassy area lined by hedges.

Black Bart! I had never heard that name before, but to me it suggested a swarthy gunslinger or a runaway convict. I imagined a tall, wiry man with leathery skin, gnarled hands, and a steely gaze that would strike fear into any passer-by. I could just see him creeping along the hedgerows at night to avoid the watchful eyes of neighbors. Maybe he had his hide-out somewhere on McMahan Avenue. Perhaps down the street in Waterview Park, where all the tough kids hung out.

Before I could ask Uncle Jim any questions, he put his hand on my shoulder and whispered: “Why don’t you go into the backyard and take a look around. Maybe you’ll find where he buried some of his treasure. Don’t forget: finders keepers!” He put his index finger to his lips and said “Shhh!”

I was about to get out of my chair when Uncle Jim pressed down on my shoulder to keep me seated. He stared into my eyes: “Be careful, kid!” There was a palpable sense of dread in his voice, a sense that **we** were all in for **it** if I weren’t careful. What **it** was and why it had to be **us** just made Black Bart all the more mysterious to me.

I went back downstairs, walked quickly through the living and dining rooms to the kitchen. My mother and grandmother were still busy talking. I don’t think they even saw me head out to the backyard. I walked slowly and carefully, looking for anything unusual in the surface of the scraggly lawn. Nothing here. Nothing there. I was getting discouraged when all of a sudden ... there ... in a shaded corner of the yard near the hedge ... I saw a little mound of freshly shoveled dirt. I bent over and started to push the dirt aside. In a matter of seconds I found it! Two quarters! They were dirty and the features were worn, but they were quarters nonetheless. I was rich! Uncle Jim told me I could keep the quarters! And I could spend them too! I could hardly wait to get home and run down the street to Ann’s and Ed’s, the neighborhood Mom-and-Pop store where I bought candy and baseball cards.

By the time I got back into the house to tell Uncle Jim that I discovered Black Bart’s treasure, he was gone. The door to his bedroom was locked.

Over the next few weeks Uncle Jim was not home when my mother took me over to McMahon Avenue for a visit. He was still probably still at work. That didn't matter: I snuck into the backyard to look for more of Black Bart's hidden treasure. Sometimes I would find a nickel or dime, but almost always I came back into the house empty handed.

One afternoon, disappointed that I did not find any treasure, I went into the kitchen for a snack. My grandmother was standing in the corner at her ironing board, working her way through a basket full of clothes. My mother brought me a cupcake with chocolate icing and sprinkles—we called them “jimmies”—, and a tall glass of milk. As soon as I took my first bite, though, she asked me the question I hoped she would never ask: “Why in the world are you spending so much time in the backyard?”

I wasn't sure what to say. Once again, I did not want to tell the truth, but I was afraid of telling a lie. I mumbled: “Looking for treasure.”

“Treasure? What treasure?” My mother was as curious as she was amused.

I had promised Uncle Jim that I would keep our secret and not tell anyone else about it, **especially** my grandmother. But now I felt that I had been painted into a corner and there was no way out.

“Black Bart's,” I said, sheepishly.

“Black Bart's?! Who told you about Black Bart?” My grandmother stopped ironing.

Suddenly the cupcake stopped tasting very good. It seemed to get stuck in my throat. Washing it down with a big gulp of milk did not seem to help out much. I was surprised at the words that came out of my mouth:

“Uncle Jim.”

Then there was silence. It seemed to last an eternity, but it really could not have been more than a second or two. My grandmother blurted out a staccato “Hm” and resumed ironing. My mother simply shook her head and said: “Oh, that Jim ...” and walked over to the sink to wash some dishes.

One day, when I hid in the kitchen closet during a game of hide-and-seek, I overheard my grandmother tell my mother that one of her neighbors on Musgrave Street was killed a week earlier. The woman was standing at her kitchen window, washing dishes, when all of a sudden she was shot dead by a single bullet from outside. My grandmother suggested that the woman saw something she shouldn't have seen. Maybe she saw Black Bart burying his treasure! Maybe he wanted to make sure that no witnesses could inform the police. He must have killed her, I thought.

On the way home I asked my mother about the murder. She said she did not know what I was talking about. The silence that followed was awkward. Out of the blue she told me never to let “this nonsense about Black Bart” pass my lips again. Her demand just made me more and more curious about Black Bart. More and more he became a living figure.

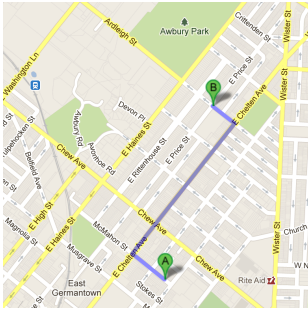
For the next couple of weeks I did not check out the backyard when we visited my grandmother. I felt that I had betrayed Uncle Jim. Even though I had told the truth, I felt that I was not worthy of finding and keeping any treasure. In fact, the words “Black Bart” never again were uttered by me or anyone else in the family.

This, however, was not the end of Black Bart! Towards the end of summer I discovered treasure in the backyard on three separate days. Oddly enough, each time I was practicing piano in my grandmother's dining room while she and my mother sat in the living room, watching soap operas on tv. Surprisingly, Uncle Jim was also home. He came downstairs and ambled into the kitchen for a snack. On his way, though, he walked over to the piano, cleared his throat, winked with his right eye, and pointed slyly with his index finger towards the back of the house. He must have seen Black Bart burying treasure again!

I finished playing whatever song I was practicing and then quietly snuck out to the backyard. There I found in the hedge—never in the same place!—a small tin can containing money. Once it was five dimes; another time I found five quarters. Best of all, on the last time I found a whole two-dollar bill!

I now had more money than I had ever had in my life. And this meant that Black Bart had less. Maybe he was upset that someone had discovered some of his hiding places and decided to move to a different neighborhood. Maybe the police finally caught up with him and put him in jail. Whatever the reason, I never again found any money in my grandmother's backyard, no matter how carefully I looked. Black Bart was not the only thing that was missing. The money was gone, too: I had spent it on baseball cards and comic books. And Uncle Jim was gone as well. He soon got married, moved out of his parents' house, and found a very prestigious, well-paying job in Florida. I never saw Uncle Jim again. I wish I could have asked him how he knew that Black Bart was sneaking at night through the neighborhood, or why Black Bart disappeared roughly about the same time as he moved away to Florida.

Documents



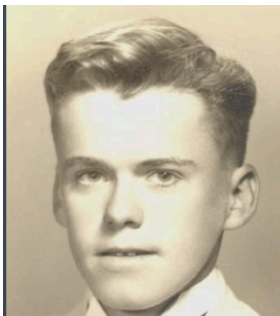
My grandmother lived at 5610 McMahon Avenue, marked with an “A” on this map. My parents lived at 913 East Price Street, marked with a “B” on this map. Chelton Avenue was the most interesting way to get to McMahon Avenue: we passed a German bakery, a Chinese laundry, a Sun-Ray drug store, a Filipino upholsterer, a Sinclair gas station, and a run-down movie theater. The worst part was walking up the very steep incline on McMahon Avenue



This is my grandmother’s house. On the ground floor you see the two windows of the living room (or parlor); the three windows on the second floor belonged to my grandparents’ bedroom. Once my grandfather passed away in 1957, my grandmother left it just the way it was on that sad day. She only went into this bedroom when she needed to dust. I was forbidden to go into that room (although I did sneak a peek a few times). The house ended up being way too big for one person, so my grandmother moved to an apartment in the early 1970s. A couple of years after she moved away the house was severely damaged by fire.



My father and mother are holding me in the backyard of my grandmother’s house. It was a very small yard, perhaps 15 feet by 20 feet, surrounded by a thick hedge on all sides. In the background you can see bay windows on the neighboring houses. Uncle Jim’s room had one of these bay windows that allowed him to see all the backyards in the neighborhood. It was a great vantage point to spy on Black Bart!



Uncle Jim as a teenager (about a dozen years before I ever knew him). Me as an eight-year-old