

Bob's Early Life

Robert Lee Slaughter was born April 15, 1922 in Littleton Colorado.

I didn't know much about my father's early childhood, except he grew up on a farm with horses and dropped out of school in the 8th grade, which didn't keep him from scoring 140 on his IQ test given by the Army, identifying him as highly intelligent. I also know he had a strained relationship with his parents, especially his biological father.

According to Bob he couldn't do anything right in his father's eyes and his mother was a cold, callus, angry person. Of course, that wasn't my experience with my American grandmother; she was affectionate and tried to protect us many years ago. I wanted to see her again. She knew things I needed to know.

In the summer of 1975, when I was 24, I drove to Englewood, Colorado to visit her. I was ready to learn everything I could to help me make sense of my life. She was welcoming and overjoyed to see me when I arrived at her front door. We gave each other the same bear hugs we gave each other back in 1960. Staying in the same house and sitting on the same couch that I did fifteen years earlier, was strange and that's when I started seeing movies in my head about my past. Grandma was ready, eager, and willing to answer all my questions. It felt like she had been waiting for me to ask for a long time. I asked her about St Clara's and if it was still there. She said it got torn down in the late 60's. That was for the best.

Grandma Phyllis told me my real grandfather, John Slaughter, was abusive, a heavy smoker, an alcoholic, and a womanizer; the apple didn't fall far from his tree. Phyllis left John when my father was ten years old, after he hit her one time too many.

Soon after her divorce from John, Phyllis met a tall lanky man named Earl who was loving and kind. Earl Bromley was the opposite of John Slaughter. He didn't drink or chase women and respected my grandmother. His passion was raising Palomino horses and growing fruits and vegetables on their farm in Littleton. For forty years his day job

was at the O.K. Rubber Factory, which my grandmother swears was the reason Earl got cancer.

Grandma said Earl didn't have children, and he loved her boys like his own. He taught Bob and John Junior about raising horses, farming, and the importance of hard work. Hard work was one lesson Bob never learned; he believed in the get rich quick way of making money.

When Bob was seventeen, Earl kicked him out of the house for yelling at my grandmother. Grandma said she caught Bob taking money from her purse and was arguing with him when Earl heard them. He tolerated a lot from the boys but disrespecting their mother was more than he'd stand for.

I asked Grandma to tell me about Bob's earliest years, when he was the ages we were when he took us. Didn't he understand what he was doing to us was wrong on so many levels? Didn't he realize he was ruining the lives of his children? Didn't he care?

Grandma said she never understood the second son; his bouts with anger one moment then completely charming the next. She said he was difficult from the time he was born. Growing up, most of the time he kept to himself and didn't have many friends. He fought constantly with his older brother, John.

There was one story Grandma told me that I found strange, but it did give me a small window into my father's state of mind when he was a boy. It was around 1930, when Bob was about eight years old. Grandma leaned out the kitchen door and called him in for dinner. He had been in the backyard all day and into the evening, arranging something in the dirt. He had a large tin box filled with little green army men along with assorted small cars, trucks, and plastic animals that he had collected.

Grandma called again but when Bob didn't answer, she went out back to get him. Bob had built a miniature battlefield that covered half the back yard, complete with trees, hills, fences, and roads. She was amazed at how meticulously he arranged every detail,

leaving nothing out. The farm animals were in fenced pastures, cars were strategically placed on well-defined roads and each soldier looked ready for battle.

Bob was so absorbed in what he was doing he didn't hear his mother calling. Bob was lying on his stomach placing each piece with such precision, she stopped and admired his hard work for a few minutes before tapping his foot. This startled Bob as he whipped his head back to look up at her. Grandma complemented him on what a great job he had done. She asked him to tell her about this incredible scene.

At that, Bob jumped up and without saying a word began kicking the battlefield over and over until it was nothing but a pile of dirt and rocks mixed with little green army men. Grandma was so shocked she was flabbergasted (her words), then without a word Bob ran into the house. Later Grandma asked him why he ruined his fort after working on it all day. He answered, "Because I wanted to."

Grandma never understood Bob. One minute he'd be quietly reading then for no real reason, would slam doors in anger. What surprised me most about what Grandma told me, was Bob having no friends and being a loner as a child. The man I knew didn't match this description at all; as a matter of fact, I knew him to be the complete opposite. Bob was what you'd call *a room full*. Wherever Bob went, he became the center of attention, by design. He talked, backslapped, and laughed more than anyone I've ever known. He was smart, engaging, and always had an audience. When in a restaurant he'd invite strangers to join us. He talked to anyone that would listen to his stories, usually inflated to make them more captivating. He was an expert at turning fantasy into fact at a moment's notice and strangers bought it hook, line, and sinker.

My grandmother admitted she wasn't the affectionate type as a young woman because it wasn't how she was raised. She never wanted children but with no birth control, it happened. Many young women who didn't want children were left with little choice but to keep them or give them up for adoption.

My grandma was born Phyllis McKay in 1899. In her parent's day, children were seen and not heard and I wondered if that played into my father's need for attention. Phyllis was hard working and a woman before her time. She worked outside the home, wore pants, and was opinionated. She said as a young girl, she felt more comfortable around other women. Phyllis was six feet tall and had a masculine look about her, and I often wondered if she might have been happier with a woman as a partner.

Grandma showed me lots of pictures of her best friend Ann. They were in bathing suits sitting on top of an old Model T. She said they'd drive into the woods where there was a stream, put their bathing suits on and take pictures with their brownie cameras. In the pictures their bathing suits covered them from head to toe which included black opaque stocking, topped off with a black bathing cap. It's hard to believe that was considered risqué. Grandma told me Ann took care of her when she had an abortion in 1919; Phyllis was 20 years old and almost died. My Scottish grandma was a warrior too like the rest of the strong women in my life. Phyllis stood up for herself and didn't allow men to abuse her, doing the best she could with what was allowed women in her time.

The year I visited my grandma, I told her Roe vs Wade had just become law. Phyllis lit up when we talked about how far women had come from when she grew up; a time when a woman wasn't allowed to vote much less choose family size. Grandma said all she ever wanted was a job, the ability to support herself, and to spend her money the way she wanted. I know many women today that want exactly what Phyllis wanted. How much has really changed.

I asked Grandma about the time we stayed with her after we were taken. She got quiet and hung her head. Grandma wished she could have done more but her hands were tied. I cried when she told me my mother was so close to finding us the year we were kidnapped. When we left Grandma's house and moved into our own apartment, she lost track of us after her one visit to the apartment. When Grandma went back to our apartment the following week like she promised, we were gone. Then with much searching she found out we were at St. Clara's Orphanage. She sent a telegram to my

mother immediately. Because it took weeks to get a letter, it took a month before Grandma could accompany the authorities to the orphanage. Mom had sent proof that we were her children, but we were long gone and the nuns refused to give out any information. The Belgium nuns at St Clara's must have believed Bob's lies. By the time Mother Superior was convinced, we were in another state with no address. It would be another three long years before we would be found.

After my visit with my grandmother I felt it was time to confront Bob on specific questions without fear of retaliation. I was no longer under his control or afraid and deserved answers.

Bob was pathological liar. He lied so much he couldn't discern between what was true and what wasn't. When you believe your own lies, it's easy to look someone in the eye and convince them too. He had a way of twisting the smallest piece of truthful information into a narrative that suited him. In his mind, if 1% of the story rang true, then everything following must also be true.

I know I sound cynical but as a young adult I wanted answers to the four forever years. I repressed those memories for a long time, but now I was ready to demand an explanation from Bob. Pretending those four years didn't happen wasn't working for me anymore.

Shortly after my return from Colorado, I learned from Valorie that Bob was seriously ill. He had cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and had lost his eye sight. I knew confronting him had to happen soon if I wanted my questions answered. I felt his answers were vital to my mental health and therefore my life.

Bob died December 17, 1974 in San Francisco of a massive coronary. He was 51 years old.

His untimely death took with him the answers to my burning questions. Why did he take us? Where did he go when he left us at St. Clara's? Why did he say Mom died? I

wanted him to apologize for abusing me and ask him why. These were just a few of the unanswered questions he took to his grave. I waited too long and now my only consolation was to believe his answers would have been lies too.

This brings us back to the beginning of my book. Any one of a dozen situations could have prevented my father from joining the army or taking the Jeepney my mother got on. If any of that hadn't happened, I wouldn't be here to write this book.

It amazes me how a slight shift in the wind can change the course of our life; like in the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*.

In spite of Bob, I have a wonderful life.