

My Uncle Ben

Uncle Ben lay in the large mahogany four-poster bed. He tossed his puny black arms a little, rolled his eyes fearfully, as if he were seeing something horribly evil, and muttered.

Just five minutes before he had been in his senses and had demanded to see his seven nephews and nieces. We had been sent for, although we had been listening through the walls to Uncle's mutterings. We were announced by names and Uncle had responded by going once more into incoherent mutterings.

Once I caught the word *duna* and almost tripped over my little brother Joseph in my haste to give him the water he wanted. He nearly choked, but I poured it down his throat slowly and he swallowed in long painful gulps. He came up again and started cursing in Spanish. I hadn't known it was cursing until my mother, her eyes red with weeping, rushed in and waved us out of

the room. I wondered if she had been listening through the walls.

Since the younger ones were shorter, they did not have to bend low to avoid the wooden ceiling beams blackened by smoke that constantly blew up from the fire-hearth. We did all our cooking and baking by the fire-hearth and before now I was always around it looking for something nice to eat. There was always some left-over fried fish and cassava bread to munch on, or the thick creamy gravy made of coconut milk which we called *lassus* to drink. But today, in addition to some smoke there was the heavy air of mourning.

In all my thirteen years I could not understand death. It was strange how it could change people. Take Ma, for example. Uncle Ben was her eldest brother and the laziest of the lot. They were always quarrelling. If it was not over money it was over Uncle Ben's laziness. Something always came up. Once it ended with Uncle Ben storming out of the house threatening loudly, "Through the Grace of God I gwen back to dat accursed place, I will go back to Panama and dead de and you neba gwen see me again." Ma just turned her back on him and slammed the door.

Although Papa, a gentle, peaceful man begged her to make it up to her brother before he did something rash, she was stubborn in her refusal. That night, Uncle Ben got drunk on a pint of rice wine and the next day at noon was home waiting for the meal to be dished out, as though nothing had happened. We were all pleased to see him except Ma who sniffed as though this was just what she had expected.

I was sometimes very sorry for Uncle Ben because he had to live this type of life and be made

miserable by Ma, so I encouraged all the younger ones—Christina, Dorothy, Meme, Joseph, Padua and Bernadette—to be very nice to him because he was persecuted. I liked the word persecuted which I had been taught by Uncle Ben once when he was in a teaching mood.

He liked to take us along with him and talk to us. We would take walks on the beach with him by the sea looking for *cindiri* or anything good we could pick up. I had once found a very old bottle made of pretty green glass with a silver stopper. It was shaped like a lamp and it was full of a dark red liquid. I was going to take it home to show Ma but Uncle Ben stopped me and said in a fearful tone:

"Child, does you know what evil spirits you carrying home in that there bottle?"

I got so frightened that I almost dropped it. Uncle Ben took the bottle from my trembling fingers. He put it into the tattered pocket of the coat he always wore, rain or shine, and he patted my shoulder to calm me down. When I was sufficiently calm, Uncle Ben suggested a walk to the railway where the bananas were run to the pier and we all agreed for we loved to see the little cars piled high with green bananas. On the way Uncle Ben began, "Once when I was in Panama that there same thing happened."

Uncle Ben always, in his stories, made some reference to Panama. He had been there for years working on the canal. It certainly seemed to have been an interesting and exciting time because anything of interest that happened to him seemed to have happened on the way to Panama, in Panama, or on the way from Panama.

"Yes," he continued. "One fella in my squad—dat's my workmate Abraham—he picks up a bottle by the river. One pretty bottle it was. He take the bottle to camp and everyone admires it and touch it. But me, I no touch dat, not me Benigno Joseph Martinez. I see dem tings already an' I 'fraid bad. So I shet me mout', don' say notting, but don' touch. Befo you knows it

Hey! Braweh!" Here Uncle Ben stopped his tale to hail some of his friends by the rail. We were in suspense to hear what happened but Uncle Ben seemed to have quite forgotten us as he ambled off, one hand thrust in his coat pockets, baggy trousers with a gun-point cuff rolled up at the bottom, and slippers flapping.

That evening, Uncle Ben came home stumbling, singing loudly, drunkenly waving the green glass bottle shaped like a lamp. It was empty.

I never did hear the end of that story but I learnt what persecuted meant. Uncle Ben said that the saints were persecuted and that's why we must pray for them.

"Uncle, they have saints in the temple?" I had asked him once.

He had not replied. Now, sitting in the parlour waiting, I thought about how Uncle Ben got sick. Sitting, waiting for Uncle Ben to die, I thought back on how this had come about.....

A relative held a *Dugu* a few days before he had gone and we all took part. All except Pa who said he was a Christian and did not believe in such heathen practices. Ma sucked her teeth, dressed us and marched us off to the *dabuyeba*.

I hoped I would see Uncle Ben at the temple but when we arrived the drumming had started low and sweet and the small room was packed

with people. I held on tightly to Ma's skirt. That night she and I were wearing the same colour skirt because we were a part of the family having the *Dugu*. I looked around and saw my mother's sisters there with all my cousins. They too were dressed up in the same colour skirt, and wore *mandau* on their heads. Uncle Ben was nowhere to be seen. I looked and looked. I could not see because the temple was lit only with kerosene lanterns hanging from the beam.

The only places that had electricity in the town were the police station, the District Commissioner's house, the fire station, and Wong Ton, the Chinese grocery. I did not mind the lanterns. The light that they gave off cast long mysterious shadows to every corner of the room and seemed to bounce with every slow thump of the drum, until the singing started. Then it seemed that the light became the music and the music became the light because my eyes were shut tight and I could feel what was happening in the room. We were all moving with the songs; I was not conscious of my feet moving, but when I opened my eyes I realized that I was halfway around the room from where I was before. The drumming had stopped.

Entering the temple from the inner room was the *Buye*. With her were three drummers. The room was hushed. The *Buye* had in her hands a pair of *sisera*. These she took in time to the music as she began singing. The singing was taken up by some old women who I knew always sung in the temple for the *Dugu*. High and strong they sang and the drummers beat a slow steady rhythm that pulsed the feet of the *Buye* as she danced in front of them. Dancing, she led the

drummers to the four corners of the temple and on reaching each corner she bent low and together with the drummers lowered the drums and *sisera* to touch the earth. Then, she continued singing and dancing.

The whole roomful of people sang. Then she filled her mouth with a liquid from a dark green pint bottle and spat to the different parts of the room as far as she could. Some of it touched me and I jumped, frightened. I rubbed hard the spot where it had touched me and then I smelt my hand. It was rum. Soon the whole room smelt of rum and sweat as we swayed and sang and drums joined in all together.

Someone passed a pint of rum around and I took a sip, liking the sweetish aftertaste; by this time I could not find Ma. The crowd in the room had become thick and she had become separated from me. I was not frightened for I knew my way home. However, I was not yet ready to go home. This was the first time I had been to a *Dugu* and I wanted to see if all the things people whispered about would happen. But the rum was making me sleepy, so I went outside.

There, more kerosene lamps were hung. Two long benches were placed under a strip of canvas and fat women were sitting on them, their children on their laps. Young lovers stood and whispered quietly in the dark yard. I watched them, fascinated as the girls giggled and the boys looked unhappy, their hands in their pockets. Ma had warned me often about boys, but it seemed to me that there was nothing in them to frighten me. Besides, I was used to talking with my brothers and my brothers were boys. When I told Ma these things she only sniffed.

As I sat on the bench watching the lovers and thinking, something happened inside and everybody rushed to the doors and windows to look. I went but could see nothing because of the crowd. Suddenly, the crowd at the door ran screaming and laughing as someone staggered out. It was a man. I thought he was sick first, because he was flinging his hands in the air and moving jerkily. Then he flung himself on the ground and began writhing in the sand. He tore off his shirt and began dancing on his bottom as strange sounds came from his mouth. I was surprised to see the crowd laughing and then a woman said, "Look he Oweha! Oweha!" Then I understood what was happening. According to Ma, when a person was like that, the spirit entered his body and made it do things the person would never remember afterwards. Something made me look at the man closely and when I saw it was Uncle Ben, I ran towards him but a woman pulled me back.

"Leave him alone" she said "or the spirit will be angry wid you."

I started to cry and ran inside to find Ma. The crowd was thick and I did not find her for a long time. When she saw me weeping she pulled herself outside the crowd, demanding to know what was wrong. I told her and to my surprise she burst into laughter. By the time she stopped laughing, I was gone. I rushed outside only to discover that Uncle Ben had also gone. His shirt was on the ground where he must have torn it off.

I picked it up along with his hat which I dusted off and started looking for him. The woman who had been pulling me back told me:

"You di look fi you Uncle gyal? He gone so," pointing up the street.

I ran to the corner but there was no one in sight. When we were ready to leave, I told Ma that Uncle Ben had disappeared. She laughed.

"That will teach him to talk bad 'bout tings he don' undastan'. Neba talk bad 'bout the spirit child, it could harm you an' mek yu sorry," she warned. "I always tell yu fada dat."

Next morning Uncle Ben did not appear for tea at six. This was strange because if he could help it, Uncle Ben never missed his cassava bread and fish. We all thought he was still shocked over last night's episode so we were not worried. Ma sniffed and said that he would soon show up if she knew him. Well, she didn't know him because he didn't come. Not for dinner at twelve, not for tea at six that night either. I felt sorry for him and asked Pa to go and look for him, but Pa had a headache and was too tired to go out.

That night I dreamt that Uncle Ben was floating down to the bottom of the sea and the fishes were nibbling on his fingers and toes. I heard him calling my name and when I reached out to grab him, he moved further and further away. Finally I managed to grab one of his fingers and started pulling him to get out of the water. I squeezed his fingers tighter and tighter and he seemed to be pulling away from me...

The sound of crying woke me up. I was breathing hard and covered with sweat. My heart was beating very fast and there were tears on my cheeks. Padua, who slept with me, was crying loudly.

Pa came into the room carrying a kerosene lantern.

"What happen, Padoo?" he asked. Padua was his favourite.

"Candida pinch me hard," Padua answered pointing at me, crying more loudly.

"Candida, why you did that?" Pa asked me sternly.

I couldn't speak. I was trembling and Pa noticed the tears on my cheeks.

He sat on the bed and held me in his lap, putting his hand on my forehead to test if I was feverish. I put my hands around Pa's middle and held him tightly until the trembling stopped.

"What happen baby?" Pa asked me softly. "Bad dream no? I tell yu mada 'bout carry you to da place. Un-christian."

"Pa," I began haltingly. "I dream Uncle Ben dead da sea."

Pa was silent. Then he crossed himself.

"Tomorrow I go look for him. You want to sleep with the lamp?" I nodded and he turned the lamp low before leaving the room.

The next morning Pa set out early with seven men with doreys and headed east. They left from the pier after searching the beach from the beginning of the town to the end. I watched anxiously from the pier until they were small specks in the distant grey dawn. That day no one was happy and everyone was wondering what was happening to Uncle Ben.

Ma was silent all morning. She did not scold the younger ones for the bad things they did. I could see that she was worried. All my aunts came to visit us that morning and all they talked about was Uncle Ben, the *Dugu* and what could have happened to him. They helped Ma peel plantains for dinner. After that was done, they helped to

chop firewood to stoke up the fire-hearth to make the fire to put the plantains to boil.

All our cousins were with us that day and they played marbles, hopskotch, and skipped rope with my brothers and sisters. All except me. Silently, I cleaned and scraped the fish for dinner, then I beat the plantain in the wooden mortar until it was soft and sticky. I cleaned the house, washed the younger children's clothes and polished the table and chairs in the house. Everything that I usually grumbled about doing, I did with a will so that I would not have to think about Uncle Ben.

When no one was looking, I went behind the bathroom and said two Our Fathers and one Hail Mary for Uncle Ben, crying silently as I prayed.

That night, Pa did not arrive and next morning, we all rushed out to the pier to see if we would see him but to no purpose. By afternoon, Ma had already cleaned the house and it was full of my aunts and other relatives who sat down on stools hunched together and spoke in low murmurs, their faces sad. Together, they prepared the meal like the day before, but this time there was no laughter. Even the children were quiet.

At six in the evening, Father Delaware, the wrinkled white priest, came in a long gown faded to the colour of his skin. He carried a Bible in his hand and proceeded to lead the Rosary. Everyone gathered in a circle and prayed until I thought they would never stop. Father would say a long prayer and they would answer a short sentence in Latin. We all stood with our heads bowed, but I could not pray a word. I just stood with my head bowed thinking that Uncle Ben could say prayers much better than Father Delaware because he

did not make you want to go to sleep. Uncle Ben would sing while this Father only talked, talked, talked like the parrot that we used to have, that Uncle Ben had taught to curse.

I wondered if Uncle Ben was cold where he was and if God could understand Latin, or if Carib was too cheap a language in which to ask him if he could please drop a blanket and bread from the sky like he did for those people in the desert. Then I felt myself nodding and soon I could not keep awake. I sat down on a chair and slept.

I was awakened by voices outside, one of which sounded like Pa's, and I jumped up. All eyes turned to the door as it was opened by Joe Melendrez followed by Pa. Some men behind came in carrying Uncle Ben.

"The Lord has answered our prayers," I heard Father Delaware saying, beginning another prayer. I could not pay attention for I was watching Uncle Ben.

His trousers were torn and he was soaking wet. Ma screamed and rushed to him crying loudly. "Nugushi! Nugushi!"

Then Uncle Ben was laid tenderly on the mahogany bed in the back room. Ma had spread the bed with brand new American sheets and pillowcases which smelt of camphor. She undressed him and put him in his new pyjamas that he had brought from Panama and never worn. All of us stared from the doorway as she rubbed him with some Bengue and lit a *fish* to keep away the mosquitoes. She then made us beat up some eggs, rum and cinnamon in a bowl for Uncle Ben to drink. He was trembling like he had chills and she rubbed his forehead with bay rum and *ruda*. After that, she covered him with a thick blanket.

In the kitchen Pa was explaining to Father Delaware how they had found Uncle Ben.

"Father, for some reason, my brother-in-law Benigno he go to sea. But he a cyant paddle boat. He too thin so he faint in the sunhot and so we find him. When he revive and see we, he jump ovah board. I no undastan him Father. I no undastan. You gwen to bless him?"

Father Delaware nodded, picked up his robes about him and went to the sick man's room to bless him. When he softly started a prayer, Uncle Ben opened one eye and muttered. He tried to fling off the blanket but Ma stopped him. At last, Father Delaware left, shaking his head sadly.

All the next day and the day after that, Uncle Ben would not eat or drink. At night either Ma or one of my aunts would sit by his bed and watch him. During the day relatives were in and out of the house to see him. All had heard about the *Dugu* and advised Ma to have the *Buye* visit him since it was clear that he had angered the spirit and was being punished. Pa refused to have the *Buye* in the house. Ma explained and pressed and argued and cried but to no avail.

Pa wanted to send him to Belize City to see the doctor since the nurse who ran the clinic had come to see him and had said she could do nothing. Uncle Ben would have to take the long trip by sea to Belize City as there was no road. Ma cried that her brother would die on the boat. Pa asked Father Delaware to come and counsel Ma and she drove him from the house. Father Delaware threatened to write the Bishop to have us all excommunicated for devil worship. Ma stopped eating. At last, Pa gave in.

That evening the *Buye* came. She spent three hours in his room. None of us children were allowed in the house whilst she was there. I sat by the kitchen door and tried to listen for any sounds but I heard nothing. I could not imagine what she was doing. Father Delaware called her a devil worshipper. Ma, Aunt Candelaria and all my mother's relatives believed in her powers and said she healed the sick. I did not think that to heal the sick was bad, but I did not understand why Pa disliked her the way he did.

Was something wrong with the drums and the music and the things that we did at the Temple? Which spirit had punished Uncle Ben because he did not believe? I could not understand any of it and there was no one I could ask except Uncle Ben, and now he was dying.

Before the *Buye* came out of the room, I knew. Uncle Ben was dying. I listened to Ma and my aunts wailing loudly in the yard as the *Buye* told them that Uncle Ben would die in two days.

I called Christina, Joseph, Bernadette and all my other brothers and sisters around me, and told them that Uncle Ben was going to die. They looked solemn and Joseph started to sniff.

"Don't worry," I promised. "I will tell you stories now. I will take you for walks on the beach to pick up shells and go fishing on the pier and everything." They nodded, saying nothing...

Today was the second day after the *Buye's* visit and Uncle Ben was still not dead. I was sorry in a way that he was not. For one thing, there was noise and crying everywhere, for another, I wanted him to die and haunt Ma, at least for a small while to punish her for her treatment toward him. But mostly, I didn't want him to die.

In the room where me, Dorothy, Padua, Meme and Joseph waited, I felt like going to comfort him and to tell him not to worry, that I would take care if he felt he had to die. His prayers, I felt sure, would help him since he knew so many. I started for the door but I stopped and went no further. I went back and sat on the bed again, afraid that my tears would sadden Uncle Ben.

Then finally, I got up, went to the wall and listened. Uncle Ben was cursing again.

