

A Bob Each Way

Two men called Bob, the best of friends – but they have very different fates. *Paul Mitchell* tells the story. (*The Big Issue*, 2015)

In the black and white photo, my father Bob and his best friend, Bob Day, are wearing striped bathing trunks. They're standing on a beach in front of a cobblestone retaining wall, cricket stumps held aloft in mock battle poses. Their wives, Barb and my mother Carol, sit on towels in modest floral bikinis, feigning damsels in distress.

As a kid I loved that photo. It made me want to have lifelong friends. Bob Day, a tall man, mainly torso, rises over Dad, his 'little mate'. Though the pair are play fighting, there's a protectiveness about the taller Bob's gaze through his horn-rimmed glasses. As if he's got my father's back. I imagine that's how it was when they rode the bus for an hour to school in Hamilton, when they played football together in their home town Glenthompson, and when they worked together at the same town's bank in their early 20s. I know it's true of how they played tennis together in a team Bob Day formed in the 1980s. The home court was on Bob Day's sprawling Ocean Grove property, where big Bob waddled the baselines.

When the beach photo was taken, the two Bobs had known each other 15 years. But their play fight was an omen of later friction. By 2004, 50 years after they'd met, the two Bobs were still living in Geelong, but no longer in contact. Five years later they parted ways altogether, when Bob Day left Geelong to spend the next 11 years in Loddon Prison.

I don't know when I met Bob Day. It's like trying to remember when I met Dad. The loud, jolly, brattish and opinionated man was always part of my life. He was there when I was an 18-month-old in nappies the day of the beach photo. He drank stubbies at my 21st, and again at my first wedding three years later.

In the 1980s, Bob and his family lived in Woodlands, a part of Ocean Grove. He ran a conveyancing business in Geelong's CBD, but shared his postcode with doctors, lawyers, big business owners and league footballers. Champion Geelong footballer Mick Turner lived next door. He often came over for a beer and watched the last set of tennis.

"Nice shot, Daisy," Bob would say from his folding chair. 'Daisy' Day was a decent player. But it wasn't until the match was over that he really held court.

"Now, who needs another beer?"

He'd hand them around, along with his wisdom.

"Nothing good comes out of Horsham, everyone knows that, Carol."

It was Mum's home town.

"Oh shut up, Robert. You're from bloody Glenthompson!"

Bob Day smirked. He'd read books my parents hadn't heard of, and had obviously made something of his life. You only had to look at his five-bedroom house, the tennis court, the caravan, and the acres of gardens.

Mum always tried to bring Bob down a peg, but it didn't work. He looked at her as if she were a child relating a fairytale. Dad didn't attack his mate, even when Bob had a dig at him. But Dad joined in the drinking. Mum drove us home from Ocean Grove to Belmont one night after a big tennis win. Dad had tried to keep pace with Bob Day and some equally sizable teammates. We pulled into the driveway and Dad shot from the front seat to throw up on the front lawn.

"That's what you get for drinking with the big boys," Mum scolded him.

In the first few years of his retirement, Dad impersonated that figure of ridicule from advertising campaigns: the man who is derided for getting in his wife's way. Golf was out due to a back injury so Dad booked a daily seat in front of his widescreen TV. He bet small on big races, and read the newspaper.

"I don't know what to do about your father," Mum said when I visited. She's a five-foot-one, red-haired firebrand.

"Take him out the back and shoot him."

“I don’t need jokes.”

“Yeah, I know. It would mess up the flower bed.”

She sighed and took the wooden spoon from the cake mix.

“What about volunteer work?” I asked.

“Oh, he won’t be bothered with that.”

My parents went to counselling. They didn’t talk much about it, but not long afterwards Dad became a volunteer loan consultant with the Geelong branch of No Interest Loan Scheme (NILS). The organisation helps people from lower socio-economic backgrounds buy essential items.

“Well, at least he’s doing *something*,” Mum said. “But he won’t use his hearing aid.”

In late 1980s Australia, business moguls Alan Bond and Christopher Skase had yet to crash. Bob Day moved from Woodlands to the exclusive Geelong suburb of Newtown, into a more expensive ranch.

“How’s he doing that as a conveyance clerk?” Mum wondered.

At our social gatherings, Bob Day’s attacks on my parents’ conservatism increased. “You’ve got to go higher risk, Bob,” he’d say. Then there was the problem that Dad wasn’t, like Bob, self-employed; he was a bank manager, a puppet for the man.

Day appeared vindicated when Dad was retrenched in Geelong’s Pyramid crash of the 1990s. He ended up working at a petrol station as a console operator (my first job while at uni). At later social gatherings, Bob and Barb were found in corners with their beers, quietly observing and only nattering with those who approached them. Soon they weren’t there at all.

By the early noughties, Dad had accepted, without animosity, the loss of his friendship with Bob Day. But Mum seemed annoyed. She’d talk with Barb on the phone from time to time, but soon Barb didn’t return her calls.

Then Barb received a phone call that changed everything.

She and her husband were on holidays in London in 2004, when Bob Day was phoned and told Grove Conveyancing Services had collapsed.

Investigations had begun and police wanted to chat with Bob. Barb returned home, but Bob remained in the UK.

Mum caught Barb on the phone upon her return.

“I don’t know why they want to talk to him, Carol,” she said. “It’s a very difficult time for us.” She didn’t know her husband, over 15 years, had stolen \$6 million of his clients’ money. Some of those clients were elderly, others disabled. Many were trusted friends.

Bob Day had charmed people into investing with him, then used their money to cover his investment debts, interest charges, credit cards and lifestyle – including overseas holidays. And putting his kids through exclusive private schools. He came out of hiding and surrendered to police in May 2008. He entered the Geelong police station with a newspaper covering his face.

“Couldn’t you have found better things to do this morning?” he asked the waiting photographers. But Bob’s victims thought the media were in the right place. Especially wheelchair-bound widow Mavis Avery. Bob owed her \$414,000, her life savings.

“I only ever met the man once and he told me he’d look after me. He did know that I lost two dear family members,” she told the *Geelong Advertiser*.

There was a mere \$200,000 in Grove Conveyancing Services’ trust account at the time of its collapse. Police investigations never located the rest of the money.

When Bob was tried and sentenced, having pleaded guilty to 182 charges accounting for \$6 million of the missing funds, I talked to Dad about it.

“What do you think of it all?” I asked him as he tended slow cooking sausages on his electric barbecue.

“Not much.”

“He was your mate.”

“Well, people make their choices.”

“How do you feel about it?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“He was your best friend.”

Dad turned the sausages. Case closed.

Mum was in touch with Barb during Bob's sentencing.

"He says he's innocent."

When I contacted Bob in jail, he didn't want to be interviewed. But he wrote me a letter. There was no talk of guilt or innocence. Just disappointment no one had visited him.

Dad lost much of his life's savings in the Pyramid collapse of the early 1990s, as well as his job as the financial sector was rocked. But he didn't go down with Bob Day. No way.

Bob Day's now lonely in a provincial prison cell. Dad has retired to a home in Belmont. He's gone down a suburb from Highton, but his garden produces tomatoes, he has time to fish and travel with his wife and sons, and can get to know his grandchildren. And he still volunteers, helping the poor, disabled and elderly get fridges and washing machines.

"Why doesn't your father use his hearing aid?" Mum asks me when I visit and I tell her I don't know.

"Take him out the back and shoot him."

"I just might," she smiles. But I reckon some people who get NILS loans would be on her doorstep if she did.