

Missa Pro Defunctis

by Peter Sexton

I recently learned that we lost one of our own while on the job. I was told that *all* voting members of the local painters' union were expected to be present at the memorial service. I had only recently joined the union.

"Sure," I said. "I'll be there."

"Of course, you will," my job-site foreman, Dave Stewart, said. "Everyone *loved* Bob."

Right, yeah. Of course. Everyone *loved* Bob. Still, the question rattling around in my head: *Who the hell was Bob?*

So I ask.

"What do you mean, 'Who was Bob?' We *all* worked with Bob on the gymnasium job at the community college. *Bob.*"

I nod. "Oh, *right*, Bob."

Not a clue.

I ask, "Where's it gonna be?"

"Cosmos."

"That rooftop place?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"Odd place for a memorial service," I say.

"Not really. It was the first job Bob ever worked on."

I nod. I guess it makes sense.

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Cosmos.

They'd done the place up nice for the occasion. Everywhere I look there are flowers and photographs; as well as ladders, spray guns, step-stools, brooms, paint rollers. It looks like it could be an active job-site and we're all just taking our lunch break. Every picture features some sturdy guy showing his best smile, some clutching onto various tools of our trade. It's an impressive turnout. Everyone from every job I ever worked is here.

Dave makes his way across the rooftop toward me. *Has he been shedding tears?* He reaches out and takes my hand, shakes it awkwardly. "Glad you made it, kid."

"Of course."

He shakes his head, looks up at the stars, and takes a couple deep breaths of the cold night air. After a moment, he spies Father O'Flanagan stepping off the elevator. "Excuse me, will you, kid?"

He hustles off and the two men talk in quiet tones a moment before Dave returns.

"Better get yourself a drink. We're about to start."

I order a beer then find a place off to the side. Everyone gathers around. Then Father O'Flanagan moves next to the large portrait and even larger arrangement of flowers ... and begins.

"Bob would have been pleased by this great turnout, but most certainly troubled by all the sad faces."

Following Father O'Flanagan's remembrance speech, several men step up and offer their personal stories. It's all pretty nice and sweet, but honestly, it's starting to drag on. Suddenly, Dave points at me and says, "Get on up there, kid. Share some of your memories about Bob."

Seriously?

I quickly glance around, hoping someone might save me before I have to actually step up to the microphone.

No such luck.

I'm so nervous that I don't even look at the large picture of Bob as I step around to address everyone. I stare at all the faces before making eye-contact with some people who nod and offer gentle smiles, waves of encouragement.

Now if I only knew who the hell Bob was.

"What can I say about Bob?" *Seriously, what can I say?* "He was a hard worker, devoted to the job, loyal." I take a short breath. "I remember working with him on the McCartney

Gymnasium at the community college. We put in long, hard hours together on that job, and not once did I hear him complain.”

I hear a chorus of “Right on!” and “Here here!” Then Dave calls out, “You said it, kid!”

Suddenly, my anxiety is gone. I’m actually starting to get into this. It’s almost as if Bob and I truly *were* old buddies. I continue.

“A word that comes to me when I think of Bob is family. Bob was like *family*. I never actually *met* his family, but I’m sure they were devastated by his passing.”

I just run with it, talk about his family, and how they would certainly miss him, and how I wish we had spent more time together outside of work, how I would have liked to have invited him out for beers. I even say how Bob was a credit to humanity. Then I crank up the dramatics another notch. I turn to the large photograph there, next to the giant flower arrangement, and am just about to say something more when I finally get a good look at the picture. I thought it was a picture of Bob, but it wasn’t. It’s a picture of *Dave*. In it he has a wide smile on his face and he’s holding ...

Oh, shit!

That’s when I notice the name carved into the handle of what he’s holding: BOB.

Bob is a paint roller, not a person at all. I try and remember everything I just finished saying about family and wanting to go out for beers and wishing I had a brother like him. I turn back to find staring, confused faces. I try to play it off with a wave of my hand and a shake of my head, then hurry away from the microphone.

After what seems like forever, the crowd starts to clap and cheer. I dash to the bar for another beer, and Dave is suddenly at my side.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Bob was a paint roller,” I say.

“Of course Bob was a paint roller.”

“I thought he was an actual person.”

Dave lets out a burst of hysterical laughter. “Is that why you said all that stuff about family?”

“Well ... *yeah!*”

“Oh, man. I thought you were poking fun at us. I was about ready to shut you down and wring your neck.”

“So this whole memorial thing ...”

“An excuse for us to get together and have a few drinks.”

“And Father O’Flanagan?”

“It gets him away from the rectory, and he gets his fill of booze.”

Just then Father O’Flanagan walks over and I notice the beer in his hand. The three of us clink our bottles together and Dave says, “To Bob,” and we all laugh hysterically.