

Bathtub Bob

At home in the morning, or whenever he woke, Bob let the tub fill with hot water, while he made himself a light breakfast. Taking his toast and coffee, a pencil and pad to the bath, he lounged for a couple of hours in the cooling soapy water. There he would think and scribble notes for his Pulitzer Prize winning novel, the book that still lived mostly in his head and on scraps of paper. Bob thought his best writing ideas occurred while sitting in the tub, nursing a hangover.

Bob covered the night desk at the Syracuse Herald Post from four p.m. to midnight. When I was a graduate student at the local University, I interned as his summer re-write assistant back in the early 1970's. I was a know-nothing kid. Bob was a seasoned reporter and a damned fine writer. I don't think he ever graduated from high school, but any news writer would learn volumes sitting at Bob's feet.

Not really my boss, he more often played the role of uncle and teacher. When I wasn't calling him "Bathtub Bob," I referred to him as my News Uncle. He often conducted a game, "to further your fancy but meager education," he told me, while we waited for the evening reports of mayhem and carnage to arrive from the highway cops and hospitals. From the other side of the bullpen, he shouted, "Fire truck takes turn too fast and plows into an orphanage. Give me the headline, Dave." I'd start and stop and stutter, and he would laugh and sing out a head and the first 10 lines of a story that would have made H.L. Mencken jealous. Then he would give me time to think about it. I'd spin it and he'd shout, "Who? Go back. When? Or, "Bottom! Bottom!" referring to the practice of putting non-essentials at the end of the story to make it easier for an editor ... or even the linotype operator ... to cut it for length.

"OK, Bob," I shouted, "how about 'Christmas Comes Early for 149 Kids Who Asked Santa For a Fire truck!,'"

"Go home, Dave," he laughed. "Pack up your pencil box, take your baloney sandwich and get on the bus right now. You just cost us forty gazillion dollars in lost advertising."

Bob learned to write news at the Associated Press office in New York City's Rockefeller Center, where with no education he got a job as a typist just after World War II. News leads and stories arrived on the eighth floor of the 49th Street building from all over the world. Editors polished up the copy and passed it to Bob, who hunched over his keyboard and sent the stories out on the teletype to newspapers and broadcast stations throughout the country. Learning his craft, he revised and rewrote and sometimes made up details on the fly. Garnish, he called it.

"A bit of garnish can save a story from the tyranny of facts," he'd say. "Or an incompetent editor." Bob learned quickly, and it wasn't long before the AP promoted him to an editor's job.

In the late 1940's, some of the more famous reporters would call in and speak as little as an idea to Bob and he would write it up under their byline. Come Christmas time, bottles of booze arrived at the AP for Bob from appreciative reporters in far-flung locations around the world. He drank the booze up by New Years, and then bought more. His career sagged and finally collapsed. Bob eventually landed in Syracuse, and now sat across the bullpen from me, bathed in the red glow of a setting summer sun. It warmed the colors in the newsroom, but cast a disconcerting finality over every inanimate object in the room, including Bob, who was just then snoozing at his desk. Bob could be amusing to work with, and he was a great teacher, but as the summer progressed, his mood deteriorated with each nip he took from the bottle in the top right drawer of his desk.

Toward the end of my internship, I often covered for him when he came up missing at the beginning of our shift. Finally arriving, he often smelled of booze. "Sat too long in the bathtub," was all he ever offered as an excuse.

Bob evidently lived with a woman and thought the world of her. Whether they were married or not, I didn't know, because he seldom offered any details about her or their relationship. So, one evening he made a comment that I found intriguing.

"If it weren't been for Julie," he said, "I'd be drunk all the time." I wondered if he was ever sober, but I didn't say so.

"How did you meet her?" I asked him.

"In a bathtub store."

I looked doubtful.

"I wanted to replace the faucet on my tub," he said, "so I stopped at Miles Lumber company, where there's a bath department."

I couldn't imagine Bob playing plumber, but sitting in the tub for hours each morning, he sure was around plumbing a lot.

"It was the first time I saw Julie. There she stood, behind the counter, framed by an upended bathtub behind her, just like a Blessed Mother shrine in the front yard. The most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, all warm and cuddly and red looking."

"Red?" I asked.

"Yeah, her skin was red from the neon sign over the counter."

"Oh," I said.

"Well, it was rather erotic."

"Uh huh. What did the sign say?"

"I don't *know* what the sign said, Dave. 'Toilets' or something."

"OK, I see."

I saw why the Great American Novel was taking so long to write..

"The only girl worker in the place," he said. "She could sell you a load of two-by-fours, but her real purpose was to wait on the well dressed ladies who came in to look at bath accessories. You wouldn't want Fat Frankie the plumbing guy to wait on the darlings, even if you could rip that smelly cigar from his teeth."

Thoughtful marketing, I had to admit.

"She ignored me, looked right through me, like I was a ghost. I wanted to look down and see if I was still all there, but I couldn't take my eyes off her. But, you know me, Dave, I'm persistent. I went back to the

lumber yard almost every day. I bought nails and paint brushes and angle brackets and tools and great piles of stuff I didn't need, just so Julie would wait on me. My kitchen cupboards were filling up with hardware, instead of

food. But she wouldn't talk to me, except to tell me my purchase total and to give me my change. Every time she said "purchase," her lips would pout and I'd almost swoon. But I was running out of cash. Not to mention space in my cupboards."

That's when Bob decided to pass a note over the counter to Julie on his next visit.

"I wanted to tell her I was interested, and to ask her out to dinner. Everything would be riding on that note, so it had to be perfect."

A writer always wants to get it perfect, and often thinks he has.

"I stayed up all night at the kitchen table with a pad of paper. I'd write a short note, then ball it up and throw it on the floor. It sounded as if I was walking through leaves when I'd get another sip of bourbon from the bottle on the counter. Finally, at five in the morning, I wrote it, the perfect note ... my soul on paper."

Bob stood up and folded his hands as if in prayer. He looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath..

"Roses are red. Don't talk to me, I'm dead."

I looked for the hint of a smile on his face. None.

"That's it?" I said. "That's what you came up with, after writing all night? With your heart in the balance? And the specter of a long, lonely life without the woman you loved? Not to mention doing your own laundry forever?"

"Uh huh," he replied.

"Why not, "rub a dub dub, let's hop in the tub?" I laughed.

"Gee, that would have been great, Dave. Why didn't I think of that!"

"Oh, I get it," I said after a moment. "You were trying to appeal to her sense of humor... or pity."

"No, the note said what it needed to say."

I thought I heard a little derision in his voice, as if I wouldn't know good writing from bad. I started to burn.

"Listen, Bob, if you expect me to believe that story, you're crazy. Or YOU were crazy when you wrote it."

"No," he said. "Actually, I was drunk."

"Well, that makes more sense," I said.

"And I was still drunk a few hours later when I walked into the lumber yard and handed her the note."

"And she still married you?"

"No, she called the cops and had me arrested."

Now, I was confused.

"Well, you always talk about her, Bob. I thought you married her."

Bob came over to my desk and sat down on the side chair. He gave out a little sigh.

"I guess I'll have to explain the note to you."



"I guess you will, Bob."

He leaned back in the chair and interlaced his fingers behind his head.

"I know I look like a sane person to you, happy go lucky, without a care in the world," he said.

"Not really, Bob, but you're always entertaining."

"A troubled person," he said, "pulls someone to them with one hand and pushes them away with the other," he said. "I wanted Julie and I didn't want her at the same time. I knew the booze would have to go if she came into my life. I sat down to write the note that evening, because I wanted her badly. But by five in the morning, the booze was pushing her away. It was as if me and the bourbon co-authored the note."

Bob's face looked like he was working hard to solve a problem. The conversation turned serious, and I felt awkward.

"You still drink, don't you?" I said.

"For a while I didn't. I cleaned up my act. I won't forget the afternoon I walked into the lumber yard and apologized to everyone ... even Fat Frankie. And Julie, of course. Eventually she warmed to me. Thank God! I had 150 pounds of roofing nails piling up under the kitchen table. We got married. It was beautiful for a while, then it went sour."

"I'm really sorry," I said.

Bob looked down at his hands and then back up at me.

"She drank herself to death," he said. "She's been gone two years now."

Bob's eyes were empty as he turned his head and stared off into space. Then he squinted as though trying to see something in the far distance.

"I think I taught her how," he said. "To drink, to kill herself. She started boozing with me the second year we were married. Surprise! Julie could really put away a lot of liquor. But it was like she got on a faster train than me. By the time she was ten years out of the station, so to speak, her insides were shot. She was sick all the time and then she was dead."

I didn't know what to say. I could think of nothing to offer, but I tried.

"Your drinking won't bring her back, Bob. Maybe you could get some help from somewhere ... a doctor or maybe a clinic or something."

Bob stood up and walked back to his desk. He sat and stared at his large cluttered blotter and scraps of note paper for a moment.

"Bob," I said, "there are groups that can ..."

"Roses are red," he interrupted. "Don't talk to me. I'm dead."

And he meant it.

The fun went out of our banter that night, although Bob kept up the games and the cracks for a time. The air turned brittle, however, and we were more careful with each other. I was now privy to a secret that he probably hadn't intended to share. We no longer went out for a beer after work on Fridays, I guess he felt uncomfortable drinking with me, now that he'd opened the curtain on his misery for me to see. Bob began to show up at the newspaper later each day, when he came in at all. The managers said nothing, and merely slid a substitute in behind his desk.

When the summer ended, I returned to my classes at the University in town, disappointed to not have seen Bob during the entire last week of my assignment. I wanted to say good bye, and I was holding out some small hope I might see him begin to improve instead of get worse.

It was a particularly snowy winter, with slush constantly in the street. A foot or two of snow at a time would be dumped out of the central New York sky on a regular basis. But spring came and with it my graduation. I hung around the city for a while, trying to decide what I wanted to do next. The Herald Post called me for fill-in work. I took it, since I hadn't landed a full time position. They put me on the evening shift again, with a magnanimous raise of seventy-five cents per hour. I guess education pays.

Just as I settling in at my desk on the first night back, Bob came bursting into the bullpen. He looked great, even healthy, and I almost hugged him. I was so glad to see him still alive. Fit as a fiddle, he had evidently mastered his circumstances and found his way back to a life. The banter started all over again as we got down to work. I wondered what person or agency or God was responsible for this miracle.

Halfway through the evening, he looked up to see me staring at him, smiling.

"Forget it," he said, "You're not my type."

"What happened?" I asked. "I thought you'd be in a box underground by now."

He leaned back in his creaking chair and thought a moment.

"Roses are red," he said.

"What?"

He came over to my desk and sat down.



"I never cleaned out the closet after Julie's funeral," he said. "I don't know, I couldn't bring myself to throw her stuff out. And I loved walking into the bedroom and smelling her scent, even though it tore my heart out."

"Must have been in early September, I rolled out of bed one morning feeling so hung over that for the first time in a hundred years, I prayed. Not to God, but to Julie. It was like shouting into the void, like calling out at the edge of the ocean, when you can't see anything for miles. I can't explain the feeling, but I knew everything was over. She wasn't coming back and I wasn't coming back. That's when I noticed her smell was gone. Completely. I went to the closet and opened the door. I stepped in between her dresses and blouses and coats. I sniffed and sniffed and I grabbed the jacket she wore most days and shoved my face into it. I pulled it over my head. I stood there and cried."

Bob was animated. Every muscle in his face worked to pull his features tight. As he relived that moment in the closet, I became afraid he would break down and sob.

"A little gold case fell out on the floor," he said. "I picked it up and opened the tiny lid. Inside, neatly folded up, was a scrap of paper. I unfolded and read it. 'Roses are red. Don't talk to me, I'm dead.'"

On the other side, she wrote, 'I will love this man till my last breath. And beyond, if I can.'"

"So what did you do then?" I said.

"Attempted suicide," he said, deadpan. "I got in my tub and got ready to slit my wrists."

"Holy shit!" I said. "You didn't, did you?"

"Nope."

"What the hell saved you?"

"Me, I guess. Or maybe a higher power. I sat there with the water all around me, and the tub brought back memories of the lumber yard."

"And Julie?" I said.

"No, Fat Frankie. That damned bastard would have laughed his ass off when he read my obituary. I jumped out of the tub and called some people I know who're in recovery. I felt like an idiot, but I was scared to death."

Bob got up and went back to his desk. The chair creaked as he sat down and laced his fingers behind his head, leaning back..

"You know, Dave, sometimes the elevator goes all the way to the bottom before it can come back up."

"Sounds like it's coming up," I said.

"Yes, with a little help from my friends."

Bob shot forward toward me and shouted across the desks, "Drunk almost slits wrists in bathtub! Give me the headline, Dave!"

"Dimwit Drunk Dunks Death!"

"That's terrible, David!"

"Dim Bulb Sees The Light!" I tried again.

Bob laughed, a rolling belly laugh.

"Roses are red and he ain't dead," I shouted again.

"No, said Bob, "I ain't dead yet."

David Griffin

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