

BY MARC FORGET



## Salute to Bob

**We've all met** or worked with that one person who, through no fault of their own, is stalked by misadventure like a hunter after a prize buck. I have Bob (not his real name), who has dealt me many an ace card for break-time conversations with fellow tradespeople. Bob is a good man and friend and a solid worker but, when the fates were spinning the thread of his life, they put in some knots and tangles for variety. Moments of laughter are important, even vital, to get you through a day's work. Bob would be the first to share these and other stories; there is no filter or unnecessary pride with Bob, a true open book.

One day, while we were leaving a jobsite for lunch, Bob realized that he had not put the spare key back in its spot in the garage. I quickly turned around in the cul-de-sac, and he hopped out to square the key away. Looking through the passenger window of the truck, I watched Bob open the garage's side door and recoil in terror. Then he began maniacally dancing and flaying about, but as if I were watching a silent horror/comedy, I couldn't hear the squeals or stream of profanity. By Bob's telling, legions of flies had gathered at the garage door's window and, when the door opened, they all flew to freedom, directly into Bob's unsuspecting face. It took some time before I could catch my breath after watching him perform his interpretive dance. I paid for lunch that day; it seemed fair.

Among our crew, friendly wagers and competition were always part of the workday. At one point, Bob and another co-worker came to a bet about who could find the cheapest tin of smoked oysters for lunch. This went back and forth for weeks until Bob found the golden ticket with a tin for 17 cents. The co-worker conceded defeat and paid out the promised donut. Victory was short-lived, however, as later that day, Bob's digestive system took to violent revolution. When the carnage of revolt eventually subsided, casualties included three days' wages, a lost weekend, a set of work clothes, and 8 pounds of body weight. As part of the peace treaty, eating contests in general—and tinned shellfish, specifically—were banned from the jobsite. Legend has it that the cursed portable toilet of that day is still in service, and you can still hear Bob's cries from its blue walls.

For the final story, we need to go to a hot, summer day a number of years ago, when Bob and another worker were gutting out an old home for renovation. Old lath and plaster create an evil kind of dust. The base coat of this plaster was mixed with horsehair and

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ash along with what was suspected to be asbestos. (This happened before stringent regulations and testing, so safety ranked third after production and awesomeness.) Precautions were taken, though: full Tyvek suits, cartridge masks, goggles, and gloves, along with pump sprayers containing a mixture of water and PVA glue for spraying the walls to keep the dust down as work proceeded.

Bob began working at a fast pace, but then his sprayer started to clog up. Getting frustrated, he secured the sprayer between his feet and furiously worked the pump handle to clear the blockage. The built-up pressure was too much for the unit, and the release valve shot away into Bob's below-belt area. Bob's yelp of pain was followed by a torrent of glue and water that covered him from stem to stern. The co-worker fell to the floor to dodge the spray and try to catch a breath from laughing, while, with muffled profanity, Bob frantically grabbed the unit to staunch the spray, only making it worse.

After the pressure finally subsided, Bob—now in a wet, sticky cocoon—gathered himself and helped clean the area before trying to remove his now-adhered suit. Working in a Tyvek suit is like boil-in-the-bag cooking, so Bob was down to his skivvies underneath. His barely recovered co-worker had to help cut him free. Now, Bob is a furry fellow, and some of him peeled off with the suit, to add real pain to the hurt pride. He did not want to put clean clothes over his gooey self, so we silently watched a mostly naked Bob march with surprising dignity through the site in his matted shorts, down the street to his car, then home for a shower.

Part of what makes a good crew is getting along well, not just being technically proficient. A good story well told or a shared laugh on site always makes a day run smoother. So here's to Bob and all the Bobs out there who inspire the stories that brighten our days.

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