

The Eulogy

Short Fiction for Guests of the WordFeeder

Sunday, October 18, 2009

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Herbert never did like his first name and had labored his entire life, from elementary school until today, his 24th birthday, to have people, especially his closest friends if he'd had any, to call him anything but. To be precise, he detested "Herb" and especially "Herbie," too. "Bert" reminded him of "Ernie." ... "Jake." That's what he wanted people to call him, thinking it was cool, manly and cool, a name that the ladies would find compelling. ... "Jake," because he needed all the help he could get.

Lying there in his hospital bed, the expression on his face was somber. His eyes closed, arms by his side, he was surrounded by a handful of his coworkers from The Acme Inventions Company wondering what took the life of their colleague. Herbert was dead. It was official now that the nurse had turned off the equipment that had been monitoring his condition just a few minutes ago. The flat-line tone they had heard in the hallway still lingered in their heads. Don, the group manager, was standing at the end of the bed, as far from Herbert as he could be without seeming as if he didn't really care, even though he didn't. Lisa was to the left about even with Herbert's shoulders. Denise was at her side, between Lisa and Don. Joanne was to Don's right, and Robert was on her right, across from Lisa. They were just standing there, still wearing their coats.

"So, uh, what did the doctor say," Robert, who had the carrel next to Herbert's, had been the last to arrive, "...killed him? Was it... Did he..."

"Kill himself?" Denise always said what she was thinking, however irreverent or impolite. They'd all been thinking the same thing, but only Denise had the balls to put the idea out there.

"Of course, not." Joanne was the only one in the room that was really upset, her eyes glistening with the anticipation of tears she couldn't rationalize, not yet. Joanne was the unrequited love of Herbert's life. Everyone knew it. The way he looked at her. His inability to speak in whole sentences when they were at a meeting together. The way he waited for her to go the lunchroom refrigerator so he could happen to be there at the same time. The supposed-to-be-casual invitations to join him for dinner when they were working late that she never, ever accepted. Well, you get the picture. He was crazy about her. He wasn't exactly what she had in mind.

"If anything," Lisa looked up at Joanne, blaming her for Herbert's current situation, "I'd say he died of a broken heart. ...Maybe if you'd..." she thought a dramatic pause might help make her point. "Well, it's too late now, isn't it?"

Herbert was bright. Very, very bright, and exceptionally creative. In fact, he was the only one of their new products specialists who actually developed his own products, working evenings and weekends in the unfinished loft where he had his laboratory and shop, and where he slept on the futon that was the only piece of real furniture he had. None of them had much money.

Inventions were a labor a love, and a lot like prospecting. Some would search their entire career and never make any real money, addicted to the dream of striking it rich.

“Well, you know,” Don, their group leader was emotionless, “he’d been struggling lately.”

“Maybe we should have asked him to go out with us after work,” Joanne wondered out loud. “Once or twice. How bad could it have been?”

“They’re not sure,” Lisa had spoken to the nurse. “His cleaning lady found him passed out when she came in this morning. By the time the paramedics got there, he was already in a comma until a few minutes ago, until his heart stopped. Short of opening up his chest, they tried the usual to bring him back. Nothing.”

“And then we got here.” Don gave them off to go the hospital. It was the right thing to do, and they weren’t that busy anyway.

“Didn’t they open him up, you know,” Joanne, for reasons she didn’t understand, was having trouble holding it together, “massage his heart? Hook him up to machines to keep him alive the way they do on TV?”

Robert offered her an open pack of Kleenex he’d had in his back pocket for who knows how long. Robert had chronic nasal drip, and there was lint on the top one she would have taken. Joanne faked a polite smile and waved him away, preferring to suck it up, literally, instead.

“He had one of those ‘Do Not Resuscitate’ cards in his wallet. ‘No Extraordinary Measures.’” Lisa always had the tone of instant authority that made her less likeable than she thought. “And he’s not an organ donor.”

There was a spontaneous moment of silence while the five of them just stood there, contemplating their own mortality.

Denise was first to talk after the break. “Here today,” was as far as she got.

“I think he died of a broken heart,” Joanne seemed to be blaming herself. The other four looked at her, and then at each other.

“I don’t know,” Robert thought it was time to say something nice about the recently departed. “I thought his ‘Bagel Cheese’ and the ‘Bagel Cheese Roll’ for delis had potential.”

Denise had had lunch with him once. “He was such a perfectionist.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Don butted in sarcastically.

“I remember,” Denise continued choosing to ignore Don, the way they did at the office, “how he would cut off the corners of the cheese squares they gave him, and the hole in the middle to keep the ratio of bagel to mild cheddar constant over his entire sandwich. He just overestimated the market.”

“‘Soap Pits.’” Lisa had her personal favorite.

The other four nodded their concurrence in unison.

“Who among us,” Denise took the lead, but they had all helped Herbert with the story boards for the presentation, “doesn’t find the find the little pieces of soap that are left over when the bar is nearly done annoying?”

Joanne kept it going without losing a beat. “You can try to smoosh them into a new bar, but that’s unsightly, and they don’t stay attached. And, in the meantime, they turn yellow in your soap dish.”

“Or you can try squeezing several of them together to make a bigger piece.” That line had been Robert’s contribution, and he was proud of it.

“Mostly,” Joanne would never forget the ending, “I just try to put several of them in my hand and use them all at once to make enough suds – and then one or two slip out and get stuck around the drain in my sink. And then,” she continued, the lump in her throat making it hard for her to swallow, “and then I have to ask myself, do I pick it up and save it, or try to push it in all the way, raising and lowering the drain cover to make it go down?”

Even Don was impressed, although he wasted no time distancing himself from the idea as soon as Lever Bros. turned it down. “Our solution is to make the bar of soap with a cheap, disposable, but recyclable hollow plastic center – a bar customers could use right to the core, which would still be a convenient size, and there wouldn’t be any remnant pieces.”

“We call these core’s ‘Soap Pits,’” Joanne finished up, the pride rising in her voice as she did, “like the pits in a peach, while your brand name materializes in raised letters and contrasting color.”

“Herbert even thought producers could put prizes in the pit that would encourage customers to use the soap more quickly.” It was an important detail Robert thought he needed to add.

“Brilliant,” Joanne and Denise said, lowering their heads.

“On the other hand,” Don couldn’t suppress his need to remain superior, at Herbert’s expense, of course, “there was the ‘I Stink!’ line of bad breath mints and ‘odorants’ for people who wanted their significant others to break up with them, rather than having to do it themselves. ...What was he thinking?”

“Everyone,” Robert turned toward Don, coming to Herbert’s defense, “has an off day.”

“Had he lived,” Joanne mused, “it would have been remembered has his original work with alternative fragrances. Who knows where that research would have taken him?”

“I’m just saying you can’t...” Don was too insecure to leave even mild criticism unchallenged.

“Don,” Lisa looked at him, and then over at Joanne who was sniffing and fumbling through her pocketbook that she’d set on the side of Herbert’s bed. “Give it a rest.”

“Well,” Joanne lifted her head, giving it one final sniff, having found what she was looking for, “I think we will all miss Herbert. ...Certainly, I will,” she added, punctuating that thought with a deep breath. Opening a plain, unmarked tube of lipstick, “Robert,” she demanded while looking carefully at the glistening red surface of what rolled out of the tube, “give me one of those Kleenex.”

He paused, and then reached into his back pocket to comply. “Here.”

She took it, wiping off the lipstick she was wearing, and began applying the lipstick from the unmarked tube.

“What is that?” Denise wanted to know.

Joanne quickly finished applying the new, electric red gloss, and returned the tube to its case. “It, uh... Well, as it turns out, it was Herbert’s last project. He’d been working on it for weeks and gave me a sample on Monday. It’s a new product he called ‘The Lovestick.’ He... He told me it had special recuperative powers. This is the least I can do.”

“Is she serious?” Don thought he must have missed something.

Rolling her lips together, Joanne was determined to do this. “He joked and... and told me that only on the lips of the perfect woman would his formula realize its full potential. I want him to know... Well, excuse me.” And she pushed Robert aside, taking two steps toward the head of the bed. Bending over slowly, she gave Herbert in death what she denied him in life, a firm kiss on his lips, the classic lip stain of his latest and last invention evident on his mouth, it’s aroma rising up his face and into the room.

“Wow,” was all Denise could say.

“Fragrant, isn’t it?” was Lisa’s comment, having watched the kiss from the other side of the bed.

One sigh to punctuate the moment, and Joanne was done. “Let’s go,” and she turned, herding Robert in front of her, and Don in front of him toward the door.

“Hey,” Lisa was still bedside. “He wasn’t smiling before, was he?”

They stopped and looked back for a moment. “...Nah,” Robert and Denise agreed, and the four turned and resumed their exit, Lisa hustling up to join them.

Three weeks later...

What? You were expecting Joanne’s kiss was going to bring Herbert back from the dead? As if that were even possible. Well, doctor-patient privilege prevents me from telling, but you should know that Joanne, after an unexpected knock on her apartment door two Saturday mornings later, resigned from the Acme Invention Company that afternoon via an e-mail to Don – and then canceled her e-mail and cell phone accounts and left keys to her condo with an agent on her way to the airport for a week of unwinding at one of the \$10,000 a day cottages at Nassau’s Ocean Club – where more than one member of the luxury hotel staff complimented her on the

extraordinary fragrance of her luscious red lip gloss, to the pleasure of her friend, “Jake,” who had made the reservation for the two of them.

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