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Into the Black and out of the Red

by Dan Judd

Looking back, it was just madness the steps Dave Clarke took in the pursuit of happiness. The parties he went to hoping to be lost in the crowd. The intention to just have one drink 'to take the edge off'. One drink to give him that Colgate ring of confidence. But the one was rarely just the one. His inner demon would kick in as a cacophony of noise overwhelmed him.

Some would say that he just hadn't developed the social skills to cope with a large crowd. He wouldn't know when it was his turn to talk. If a pause was coming up, big enough for him to add his twopenneth, he'd end up fluffing it. Missing his chance. Worse, he'd talk over someone else. There'd be a time crash with him left as the carnage. Washed-up on a planet of doom when only another 5 pints could save him.

They never did.

He'd achieve some degree of happiness, of course. After a few more pints. He'd become chatty and loud enough to nab every passing gap; the Time Lord victorious! Amusing, brilliant, sexy even. And the greatest dancer. But it was only just teetering on a precipice, staring into the abyss. One more pint, vodka or wine and he'd fall.

Not literally, although that was a possibility, later when he'd stumble out into the cold night air. In the meantime he'd love everyone. Tour the room. Loving everyone. Flattery wining some over. With luck they'd take him home, save him from himself. But he'd rarely see them again.

Passing out was not a good look, apparently. A couple would linger longer until the next time when the shine of having the life and soul of the party on their arm became a chore, just by them being less drunk, this time around.

If by luck he'd survive the party with his dignity intact, there'd be a disaster waiting just around the corner. Normally involving a cash machine, a lost bag or a dropped wallet or a set of keys. A walk of shame to get stuff back or to fetch a spare set from a long-suffering friend would follow. Endless calls to cancel cards and to see if anyone had handed his lost life in. Nationwide on speed dial. The pain numbed with the repetition of what was essentially the same night out.

The thing was the sheer amount of alcohol would act as screen wipe. He'd black out. Not in the falling over way. He'd just forget everything after a certain point. The devil was in the detail and so, with no memory of the bad points of the evening their impact was lost. Luck may have played a part and led him to leave the party at the life and soul high point, but this so-called luck meant no one would chastise him. How could you feel guilty about something you don't remember doing?

So, he'd carry on. It would become the new normal.

It was easy to laugh some of it off. There were not only good times but bloody hilarious ones. Tinged with sadness and despair of course, but you could cover them up in the edit.

That party when Sky was welcoming Barry Norman to its fold. Poached from the BBC and promised a flagship show not shunted around the schedules. His team all suited and booted for a Bond-themed do. Roulette, dollybird croupiers (this was Sky after all) and martinis shaken and stirred in his stomach until he weaved out of Teatro into Shaftesbury Avenue.

A danger to himself was how the police described it. They arrested him on that basis. Threw him in a cell to teach him a lesson. It didn't work. The secret of comedy isn't just good timing but in the telling. Airbrushing out the bad bits. Accentuate the positive or at least make 'em laugh.

He'd tried to bribe the duty desk staff with the cigars his female colleagues had given him to look after as they had no pocket. The same ones who he'd taken the rise out of earlier for fawning over the 70-year-old film pundit as if he was Brad Pitt.

There in lay the humour. He took the best bits and missed out the bad. He neglected to mention the shouting in the cell for not knowing why he was there. Missed out the taxi ride home covered in vomit and Mr Wu's special sauce. Hey presto he had the first of a rapidly extended list of anecdotes he'd trot out at other parties. Parties where the roulette of fate would once more turn. Red faced or blacked out. Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen. But Dave's luck, if it was even there in the first place, would one day run out.