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Mr Cellophane

by Dan Judd

“Did I tell anyone my name last night, or did I not to tell anyone my name?” I bellowed up the stairs.

I couldn't recall. And for once I couldn't lay all the blame at the bottom of a glass.

The thing is, I had just wanted to slip in unannounced, incognito, like some masked marvel but less marvellous. Not quite the superhero, more a secret agent, intent on keeping my true identity top secret.

I know people would take a double take. Think they'd seen me somewhere before but it was highly unlikely. They'd maybe have seen me in photos, sometimes in the press, perhaps in the likes of Hello or OK! or glimpsed in social media posts and reposts, full of loathing and self-entitlement. The double-takers wouldn't have been introduced not now and not then. For that's the way Prentis liked it. Insisted on it.

I'd become accustomed to staying in the shadows or, if that wasn't possible, tip my head like Princess Diana and hide my features. Long-term fans, with the passage of time, could have played spot-the-difference and noticed the growing bald patch of the bloke just behind the main man. But probably not. I was Mr Cellophane. People just saw right threw me. Never knew I was there

I used to be amazed how if you were universally loved the press left you alone. At most you'd be mentioned as their manager. Some of Prentis' peers had got married to their real one. Smoke and mirrors, darling! And who doesn't want a best friend doing all the dull stuff and flattering your ego in the twilight hours, when the cheap wine had reached saturation point, just before the less than glowing reviews hit the fan.

At the (very) private funeral Prentis got the best notices of his career. His best mate and the one who'd known him longest gave a pitch-perfect eulogy. Inclusive but not in the modern sense. He just made us all laugh with a Chow Mein of memories. Laugh so heartily that the tears were turned back. Afterwards, in the pub, everyone tipped out their tales. It was a heady cocktail.

Everyone there knew, if not my name, then at least who I was. My purpose. Even those a little bit on the devout side. Purpose maybe wasn't the right word. Not today anyway. I felt useless, towards the end of his life and especially now.

Last night, was the wake for the industry. Expected by all, demanded by some. I didn't want to go. To me, it sounded too like a party but without the usual life and soul. Doubly felt when I realised, he wouldn't make his 50th nor mine. Snuffed out too soon.

But it wasn't just that. I'd have to listen to anecdotes from those who considered them to be his best friend. You know the type; the ones who post pics of dead celebs, boasting of that one fleeting moment they met or worked together. Sometimes this could be funny. Paul may have been loved by all but he bitched about many. Behind their backs of course. Not too-faced more single-minded. They just weren't worth his energy and he might need their kind words one day.

One day. Sadly, that day had come. Worse, he wouldn't hear them. I would and it was just too bloody soon.

Prentis didn't need to get married. Didn't want to. Didn't even want to mate. Just a mate. So, they were friends with benefits. On a good day. There were others, of course. Being in the shadows suited me. My life was my own. My private life private. But stood there on my own at the party, I felt like I couldn't hide. And for one fleeting half-hour I didn't want to.

"You were nothing to him!", "He loathed you with a passion", "Jesus Christ, shut the fuck up!"

Words he didn't utter. Prentis wouldn't want that. The party was a celebration of his public side, not the murky waters beneath. So, I timed the half hour to the exact second and slipped away.

In the twilight hour it was me scrabbling for the notices, good or bad. I may, or may not have disgraced myself at the bit of a do but I had flooded any memory of it with cheap wine. Wine Prentis had bought that last time he stayed.

But then it dawned on me. Prentis wouldn't have cared what I'd said or done. If not immediately pretty soon as maybe. Prentis was a friend so full of life, a constant companion. An earpiece, a coach and a daft old sod. Always there with a glass of 'splishy-splashy' and a line of wit, wisdom or something else. Fucked up like the rest of us. A life worth mourning and yet a life truly lived. It was time to start doing the same. Living.

"More wine anyone?"