

The Mystery Guest

Apparently face blindness is all the rage. People can now walk straight past friends and family in the street without fear of being of being deleted from their will because they have a bona fide condition that prevents them from recognising anyone they haven't met in the past ten minutes. In extreme cases this is shortened to ten seconds. I've had a mild form of it for years but normally get round it by asking oblique open-ended questions. Quite often though I can give the game away before it's even started.

The amiable bloke who approached me recently during the interval of a show outside a theatre must have seen through my look of faux recognition as I greeted him. I was deep in thought about my review when he appeared and stood next to me.

"Decent enough production," he said, "not that I'm trying to put words into your critique," he added, making the word 'critique' sound like a sacred scroll.

"Suggestions are always welcome," I said, smiling at the bloke and failing completely to recognise him. Which was odd because he acted as if we had known one another for years.

"You probably don't recognise me in civvies," he said smiling back, "that's an occupational hazard I would imagine."

We laughed but I was trying to work out what else he would be wearing if he wasn't in a jacket and tie. He bore a slight resemblance to a joiner who did some work for us a few years ago. I supposed he could have gone bald and decided to adopt an extreme comb-over. But then the joiner was Welsh or maybe his name was Welsh?

"My wife keeps telling me I'm not very good with faces," I said.

"I've heard it could be hereditary," replied the bloke.

He had a point. My father who was at sea most of his life once insisted that the film star Gregory Peck was in the TV programme Crossroads. Nothing could convince him otherwise so we just went with it. "Old Greg Peck must have fallen on hard times to be in this rubbish," he would say and we would all nod in agreement. "They must have some budget before they can afford him!" he continued.

"Been busy lately?" I asked my new old friend.

He took a long, slow intake of breath and shook his head before answering.

"Not since the accident," he replied gravely.

This presented quite a problem. Had this accident happened to him or to a member of his family? It certainly sounded serious but being clueless I blundered on.

"Of course," I agreed nodding, "must have been very difficult for you."

"It was and I don't care what anyone says, compensation is no substitute for a job," he said looking at me darkly.

"I can imagine," I lied, because I couldn't imagine what that compensation might have been for. Then he brightened up.

"To be honest there's no comparison!" he declared and we both laughed.

"Actually," he continued, "I was thinking about starting up my own company."

"Good for you!" I replied, "would you call it after yourself?" I added hopefully.

He laughed and said it would have to be something more dramatic. He had an unusual name as I knew, so he didn't think it would sound right.

"Absolutely," I agreed "something more dramatic."

We fell into an awkward silence, which I determined not to break because I was hoping he would suddenly remember he had to be somewhere else, like for instance the theatre bar. Then an acquaintance that I did recognise turned up and fortunately they introduced themselves to one another.

The strange thing was I didn't recognise the bloke's name at all and when the acquaintance left I was very tempted to go with him, but I was somehow magnetised to this bloke. He wasn't particularly threatening, I just had a feeling something else was on the horizon, something that I wasn't going to like.

"This must be the second or third time you've reviewed this show?" mused the bloke, "the last time of course you didn't think too much of the male lead."

This was news to me and I said as much.

"A 'galant performance' was how you described it," continued the bloke without missing a beat.

I couldn't honestly remember and the word 'galant' didn't sound like an expression I would ever use.

"Let's just check shall we?" said the bloke.

I knew what was coming next but even as he pulled the newspaper cutting from his inside jacket pocket I was hoping he would burst out laughing and point at me saying something like, "Ha, ha got you!" But he didn't. Instead he carefully unfolded the cutting, produced a pair of specs and read the word 'galant' outloud, then my name. Then he read it again and flicked the cutting with the back of his hand.

"Guilty as charged," I said, "have you got anymore?"

"How long have you got?" asked the bloke with a poker face, then produced a second much larger cutting.

"This one always baffled me, and I quote, 'there was nothing the lead man could do but sing boldly for his supper,' that's a queer one isn't it?" he declared, then repeated it in a strange squirmy voice as if it was meant to be me I think.

I had no recollection of writing that either so I took the cutting from him and read it myself. It was an eight year old review of a musical production in which the lead male role was played by a bloke with a very unusual name.

"So this is about you?" I asked.

"Who did you think it was about?"

Before I got a chance to answer I was saved by the bell, or so I thought.

"I couldn't help noticing you have an empty seat next to you," said the bloke, "would you mind if I joined you, I'm sitting off to the side and the view's not great."

Resistance would have been futile, perhaps even childish and in any case, we would be sitting in a packed theatre, although so was Abraham Lincoln. Once in our seats he made himself comfortable and then waved to someone as the curtain was going up. On the far end of the balcony a woman with red hair and a red face was grinning and waving back enthusiastically.

"Right now," said my new pal, "this is fun isn't it."