

He is Alive

'Look,' whispered John, 'I know George makes mistakes, but please, *please* just let him get on with it. You know how bad he was after Marjorie died. It's taken him this long to even get out of the house. Don't criticise him, whatever you do. It'll only take a nudge to push him over the edge again.'

Sally looked through the doorway to where a bald-headed man in faded braces was bent over the desk, working. 'All right,' she said with a sigh. 'You're the boss...'



In a quiet semi half a mile away, a rather younger man stared at a pale yellow envelope which had just landed on the doormat. He took it into his study – a tiny alcove with a computer perched between shelves of textbooks – and scabbled about amongst the papers for the letter-opener. Ah, here it was... Inside the envelope was a single piece of paper, the size of a compliment slip, on which were written three words: *He is alive*.

The man furrowed his brow and scratched his head. He took his glasses off, and rubbed his nose where, over the years, their weight had carved two grooves. Like the weight of time, he thought to himself. He put them back on, and peered at the paper again. Three handwritten words... *He is alive*... Who would write to tell him someone was alive? He swallowed, and looked around the room. Was this message really meant for him? He looked again at the envelope, its slit-open mouth showing a row of serrations, like teeth. *Graeme Lafrenais, 2 The Sycamores, Littlethorpe*. The address was right, for sure. Even his name was spelt correctly. Who would know he lived here?

He looked at his watch. There were hours before Jessica came home. *He is alive*... Roger? He'd been thinking about Roger a lot recently, it was true, but obviously this message couldn't be referring to him. It was just some hoax. He walked to the sideboard and poured himself a whisky-and-soda. Peering through the amber liquid, he remembered how they used to drink the stuff, just like this, together in his rooms at Trinity. They'd been inseparable then, Roger always taking the lead, always the one with the ideas, the schemes. It wasn't until later, when Roger's career was just taking off, that Graeme had realised just how much he meant to him. How much more than friendship... His guts contracted as he remembered the night he'd told Roger how he felt, and how his friend had simply smiled and said, 'that's good...'

Five wonderful years, but only five. That was all they'd had together, but they'd been the happiest of his life. The times they'd shared: the daily routine of returning from work and preparing their meals; the holidays in Europe, the trip to Australia; the support Roger had given him when his father had died... He sighed, and took a swig of the whisky. So many times he'd wished himself back to those days, and so many times he'd told himself it was useless. Nothing would bring Roger back. He remembered how it ended: the

argument – he couldn't even recall what had started it, now – Roger storming out and declaring that he was going ahead with his trip to the Andes, whether Graeme was coming or not; he, Graeme, never believing Roger would go without him; the one postcard from Lima; the vague rumours of a climbing accident; the years of silence. If Roger was alive, who was writing to tell him? He shook himself.



There was a knock on the door, and Sally walked into the office. 'I thought you ought to know,' she said. 'I've found fifty of these in the drawer.' She waved a bundle of brightly-coloured leaflets.

John looked up from his computer and frowned. 'I thought everything had been posted,' he said. 'George was quite positive.'

'Oh, everything else has gone,' said Sally. 'All the envelopes, all the slips, and all five hundred stamps. Looks like he's sent fifty of them without the leaflets.'

John groaned. 'Do you know which ones he's missed?'

She nodded. 'I'm pretty sure it's the first lot. I'll get him to re-do them.'

'You won't –?'

'I'll be gentle. I'll say we're sending more stuff out. I'll give him a hand, too.'

'Thanks, Sally. You're a treasure.'

Yes, she thought, and when are you going to discover me? Out loud she said, 'I'll get them in the five-o'clock post.'



Graeme muttered to himself as he mopped up the milk from the kitchen floor. 'Mustn't get careless. No-one needs to know. If Roger calls, I'll just say I've moved on. I don't care why he's spent twenty years in South America and never called me once. Why should I care? I've moved on...'

He put the mop away, and picked up the muesli again. Then he put it down: he didn't feel like eating. On top of the fridge was a sun-faded photograph: himself, Jessica, and their two adopted sons. The photo had been taken a few years ago; now the boys had left, and he and Jess were alone. Alone, and cold... from the beginning Jess had never shown much interest in men, but despite this had always – even Graeme could see – ached to be a Mother. Had he married Jessica just to get Roger out of his head? Or to spite him? Or because he himself was lonely? Then he and Jess had adopted, and it had worked well until the boys left. Now – well, nowadays Jessica was always out at some meeting and Graeme couldn't stop thinking about Roger. Especially since that anonymous letter had arrived. The old photo albums had been taken down and leafed through; the boomerang and wooden mask had been removed from their boxes and touched, felt. Memories still clung to them like dust.

The letterbox clattered. With a sigh, he padded down the hallway, rubbing his nose as he went. He bent to pick up the letters: there was a gas bill, another credit card offer, and – he started, and swallowed – another pale yellow envelope, just like the first. ‘Roger!’ he gasped, staring at the address, written just like the first. And the postmark was the same...

His hand shook as he splashed soda into the glass. Blinking, he downed it in one and poured himself another. Only then did he slump down in the chair and stare at the envelope. What would this one say? That Roger was on his way back home? His heart beat faster at the very idea. To know tenderness after all these years, to hear that masterful, reassuring voice – oh, that would be bliss! To get away from this dull existence, this cul-de-sac with a bare blank wall at its end...

But then another thought came to him. He couldn’t do it. It wasn’t that he cared for Jessica so much, but he couldn’t subject her to the humiliation... and the boys, still in their twenties, still impressionable... He thumped his glass down on the table, nearly breaking it. No, if Roger was back, he’d stand by his old friend. Love conquers all, love is what matters. That’s what they’d told each other that night in Paris, and Graeme had never forgotten it. Or have I, he thought? Roger deserted me all those years ago, but I’ve been just as guilty... His eyes clouded over. He tried to think. Someone was going to get hurt: Roger? Jess and the boys? What was most important?

An hour later, swaying slightly, Graeme stood in the hallway. He hated himself for this, but, he reflected, it was quite in character. All his life this was what he’d done whenever there was a problem, whenever the going got tough: he’d run away. Now he knew why Roger had got fed up with him and walked out of his life forever: he was a coward, and Roger had been too kind to break it to him. If Roger was coming back, Graeme wasn’t going to let him waste his time. He wouldn’t be there. And Jessica, too – she’d be better off without her husband moping around the house, a silent, half-known acquaintance; better still, she’d never know what Roger had been to him...

He picked up the suitcase and slung the rucksack on his back. Glancing into the lounge, he saw the letter still lying on the table. He didn’t need to open it. He knew what it said.



Sally put her head round the door. ‘I’m off now, vicar. Anything else you need’ she said.

‘No thanks. Just make sure the church is locked as you go past, would you?’

‘Will do. Good luck with the meeting tonight.’

‘Thanks. Quite a good response, twenty people coming. You see, George did all right in the end.’

‘With a little bit of help,’ she said, with a grin.

John frowned. ‘You’re not coming to the meeting?’

‘Wednesday. Brownies tonight.’

‘Of course. Well, some other time...’

'I'm not doing anything tomorrow,' she said.

'Um, why, what's happening tomorrow?'

'You've got the day off.'

'Oh.' He scratched his head. Why did it bother him so much that she wasn't coming tonight?

'I'll give you a ring,' she said gently. 'In the morning.' Then she walked up to him, kissed him on the top of the head, and went out.

John found himself smiling as he swung his chair back to the desk. Nice woman, that, he thought. Now, tonight's meeting. He took his copy of the bright leaflet out of its pale yellow envelope and, glancing it over, nodded to himself. *This* was the right way to inject life back into the parish. "Are you bored with your faith?" said the leaflet. "Want to know what other people think? Want to do something about it?" Then there were a few lines giving the places, times and dates of the meetings, and finally the slogan. John was quite pleased with this: "Jesus is among us," it read. "Today. He is coming." Then, on a separate slip in a word-processor script which looked remarkably like handwriting, he read the three words: "He is alive".