

I NEEDED TO SEE YOU

By Graham Crisp

Who the bloody hell invented messaging? You know, WhatsApp and texting, 'cos if I could get my hands on them, I'd bloody throttle them.

We broke up over two years ago, OK, so I did think about changing my phone number, but then again, why should I? It would mean transferring all my contacts, and stuff, which would be a pain, and I was working at the time, so all my work connections would have to be updated.

So, I just left things where they were.

Amelia and Mariam told me, well more like instructed me to block his number. But, after a couple of glasses of Andrea's finest cheap plonk, their commandment disappeared in a mist of Italian red, and now I am where I am.

Phone vibrating: "I NEED to see you."

His capitals, not mine.

It's funny how just five words can set off a timeline of memories, but that's exactly what his words did.

We first met at a funeral, perhaps not the most romantic place to find your ideal partner. Looking back, it was sort of ironic that the death of my cousin, and his work colleague, could throw us into a rather intense relationship that was destined to last for nearly two years. Ironic because our last meeting was in St James's Church, Sussex Gardens, where we mutually agreed to go our separate ways. He said he had been instructed to take up a new position in Adelaide. As there was no mention of me moving with him, and anyway I was in no mood to up sticks and fly halfway around the world, that was the end.

He graciously said that I could stay in the flat for the time being, but as it didn't belong to him, I would have to move out eventually. We shook hands goodbye. There were no tears. Well, not until I got home.

I certainly didn't miss being dragged along to numerous Pretenders gigs, just to satisfy his lust for Chrissie Hind, sometimes I felt like a bloody gooseberry with him ogling the leather-clad lady and singing (out of tune) 'Don't Get Me Wrong'. Mind you he always made it up to me afterwards, with a sumptuous pasta dish made by his fair hand.

He was a good cook.

I tried very hard to be lecherousness with male artists, you know, like, Gary Barlow, Mark Owen, Justin Timberlake, et al, but I just couldn't bring myself to keep up the pretence.

I simply just loved him, and only him.

I remember when I moved into his place. He had a nice apartment in a modern building overlooking Hyde Park; handy for both our workplaces. It must have cost a fortune, but I later found out it didn't belong to him. We never discussed money; I had a generous income from my PR job, and he worked for the Government in the foreign office. His precise role was a bit of a mystery. I did try to quiz him about it but his expression made it plain he didn't want to discuss it. So I gave up.

We were never in each other's pockets. I had a brood of friends, with whom he encouraged me to keep in regular contact, and he was often away 'on business' sometimes for weeks on

end. Where he went was never discussed, I'm embarrassed to admit. But I did sometimes check for lipstick marks etc. But I never found any signs he was cheating on me.

Anyway, back to his message: 'I NEED to see you'.

That is all well and good, and perhaps I would be predisposed to meet again. Except for one vital fact:

I had been informed of his death six months ago.

He had been swimming in the sea just off the coast of Henley Beach when he was struck on the head by an out-of-control speedboat and was killed instantly. A colleague of his had found my name and email address on his laptop and thought that I should be informed.

He was cremated at the Western Region Crematorium after a short service attended by a few work colleagues. (I still don't know what he did for a living). He had remained single and lived alone.

A 'Richard Campbell', presumably one of his colleagues, emailed me a picture of him in a multi-patterned sleeveless shirt, looking very casual. He had aged a little, there were definite signs of greying; he had grown a beard and was lightly tanned. It was him, no question.

And there lies my dilemma. Do I message back? Can you even message a ghost? Was this a cruel hoax? But why me? Why now?

Mariam was intrigued We were sitting in a Costa, sipping coffees, when I showed her the message. She ran her fingers over the screen as if the letters were embossed. She reckoned, like me, that it was some form of hoax, or just...maybe...he was for real. Had he faked his death? We searched the crematorium records. His funeral was listed and had gone ahead. Had someone got hold of his phone and was trying to prank me? We both agreed that it was be a very sick joke. Neither of us could think of anyone who would do this.

As we drained our cups my phone vibrated.

'I REALLY need to see you. Please message me back, and I'll tell you where and when...and why.'

Marian just looked At me and nodded.

I texted back: 'Ok. But only on a Saturday or Sunday. I'm busy at work.'

Marian ordered two more coffees while we waited for a reply. Mariam annoyingly drummed her fingers on the wood-topped table.

The reply came: 'York Minster. Round the back. There is a row of benches. 3.00pm this Saturday, the 9th.'

York Minster! What was he on about? Marian screwed up her eyes and shook her head.

Another text: 'Come alone.'

We stared at each other, not knowing what to say. Marian cautioned me against going on my own and I agreed. Meeting a blast from the past or indeed, a ghost, miles away in some garden at the back of as church? No chance.

I replied: 'No bloody way am I coming on my own. Forget it.'

My phone remained silent. We finished our second coffee and prepared to leave. As we stood up, Marian pointed to my phone. She made me agree that if anything transpired I was to get hold of her immediately. If it started to get weird I was to block the number.

It was Sunday the 10th and there had been no more messages, apart from Amelia asking me to meet up with her and Mariam this afternoon for dinner later at The Golden Lion, St James's.

Mariam had told Amelia about the messages and, after we had been shown to our seats, I told them to forget about it and that it was just someone trying to be funny. I hadn't heard anything for a few days, so I assumed me saying I wouldn't go to the meeting on my own had probably scared off whoever it was.

Our meals were delightful. We ordered a jug of Pimm's and settled down to chat. But we were interrupted by a text.

'Ok, I understand. Bring your friend, Mariam with you. Next Saturday, the 16th. Same place and time. You'll be ok. Promise.'

I sent back a reply to agree but warned that we would contact the police if there was any funny business.

The two-and-a-half-hour train journey was mainly a silent one. Marian had popped in her ear-buds to listen to her Mandarin lessons and every so often would speak out a phrase in the language that baffled Amelia and me, and probably the rest of the carriage. There was a discernible tension between the three of us; we were, after all, going into the unknown, to meet a man who had died several months ago.

We decided to walk from the station to the minster. Google had estimated about fifteen minutes; it was a relief to stretch our legs after sitting for so long. Mariam asked me three times what I was going to say to him and three times I just shrugged and said it depends.

I asked my friends to drop back behind me as we approached the entrance to the grounds. I told them to keep me in their range and come running if I shouted. Amelia had tapped in 999 into her phone ready to click if necessary. I saw the row of benches at the far side of the grounds and also noticed a figure sitting on the last bench on the right. He was hunched over but I could see he had a dark hood pulled over his head.

My instinct told me this was him. I walked purposely straight in his direction. He glanced up and beckoned to me.

I sat down next to him. It was undoubtably him. With darker eyes and craggy skin and I noticed his hands were shaking slightly. His clothes were unkempt as if he had been sleeping rough and I spotted a hole in the top of his shoe.

At first he stated the blindingly obvious: that he was not dead. His 'death' and funeral were part of a detailed plan. He refused to give me any other information about how and why and barely looked me in the eye. He told me that I was the only person he could trust and would I do one small thing for him. For which I would be rewarded.

I somewhat reluctantly agreed; he did have the smell of desperation about him, and he assured me that I wouldn't be doing anything illegal that could get me into trouble. He slipped an envelope into my pocket that felt like it contained a key. He whispered that all my instructions were in the envelope. Then he leaned across, brushed his lips against my cheek and stood. Before I could say anything he had jumped over the fence behind us as if he was making a swift getaway.

Mariam and Amelia, who had been hiding behind a buttress, dashed over. I explained what had passed between us and showed them the envelope, resisting their calls to open it straight away. I told them that I would do it all properly when I got back.

We rode the train home and were back in London just before seven. I turned down the offers of drinks from my friends; I just wanted to get back to my place. And when I did arrive home, I made myself a cup of tea and opened the envelope. It did indeed contain a key; also a type-written note, which gave instructions and an address in London. It went on to say:

‘The password to gain entry is ‘Piggery127’. Open the safe and remove all the contents. There will be a pile of papers and some cash. Clear everything. As soon as you get home burn the papers. Make sure nothing is left. Throw away the ashes. Keep the money. Tell NO-ONE about this. Make sure nothing is left. Throw away the ashes.

Thanks, R. x’

What’s the term? ‘It does exactly what it says on the tin’ Well, I did exactly what it said on the paper and everything went accordingly. Papers burnt, ashes scattered, and cash pocketed, although I was a tad surprised to find almost £10k in ten-pound notes, it crossed my mind that they may have been forgeries, but so far no one has refused to accept them.

There were no more messages, I didn’t block his number, so he could still get in touch if he wanted to; but back in York, he had looked like a changed man, with preoccupations I can only imagine. I was sure that I’d not hear from him again.

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It was about three months later when Mariam came over for an evening of Netflix and wine. We were just about to switch over from the news when our mouths dropped open in disbelief. There he was handcuffed and bundled into the back of a police car. Mariam grabbed the remote and turned up the sound.

‘... on suspicion of selling sensitive information on Britain’s new nuclear programme to a hostile country, probably Russia or Belarus ...’

Mariam and I just stared at each other. Oh heck, what have I got myself into?