

My Friend Peter

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My memories of Peter stand out large and clear, in technicolour. Memories of friendship, fun and laughter, of faith and miracles. Peter, my fellow-teacher in New Ireland, young, bearded, good-looking. The missionary. The friend.

The present fades to grey and silver tones, gleaming around me as I talk to him...

'Hello! Anyone home?'

We looked towards the open door, where white fluorescent light spilt out, turning the tropical palm trees to ghostly shadows. Then a jovial, brown-bearded face appeared in the doorway.

'Come in,' my friend Glen and I greeted the man in surprise. Unfamiliar expatriate visitors were rare at the mission station in Kavieng.

Over coffee, we learnt Peter's story. Like me, he was a teacher. He had a Catholic background and was keen to mix with other Christians. Could he come to some of our meetings?

But after that first meeting he disappeared for several months. I glimpsed him at inter-school sports-days but received only a quick greeting. He later told us he had been avoiding us as he was not ready to be a 'full-on' Christian. In what we later found was typical Peter-style, he even hid from us behind rows of tinned food in the grocery store.

Little did we realise, the errant Peter was a man God would use in several countries. That he would be gifted with real faith and take light and life wherever he went.

Peter's wife, Marion, and I discussed his frequent adventures when I visited them a few years ago.

'Do you think something in Peter actually attracts these extraordinary events?' I asked.

Marion laughed. 'We wonder the same.' After many years of sharing Peter's happy, faith filled – and colourful – life, she's well aware that dramatic or side-splittingly funny things, even miracles, happen when he's around.

Later that year, in New Ireland, I taught in the same school as Peter. He had returned wholeheartedly to God. For three idyllic months, in beautiful Madina School in the jungle, Peter and I had lunch together most days. We discussed school life and the various aspects of being a Christian. We often visited my sister and her husband in a seaside native village, where we talked, ate and prayed together, and gazed at the tropical paradise sea a few metres from the window. We were all in our twenties. Life and the world lay ahead of us; we had eternal life and felt energetic and invincible.

I look at him now. Nothing has prepared us for this diminishing in the latter part of Peter's life. This fading. Or the giant paradox of watching a vibrant, faith-filled man succumb to a cruel illness.

Back in Brisbane, Peter went to Bible College and would come to visit me at my mother's home at Burleigh, often bringing friends. Soon he began going on missionary trips. He prayed earnestly for 'the right wife' and soon married the delightful, attractive Marion. They worked together in Bougainville, running a Bible College for the local people. Four lovely children followed over the years. Peter had become what we used to joke about – 'God's man of faith and power'. And his family adored him.

Decades later, Peter was back in Brisbane. I sometimes met him in the city for lunch. He was growing quieter. His dark hair and beard were now almost grey, and his effervescent personality was dimming.

Then he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

'I believe God will heal me,' he told me.

In heaven or on earth? I wondered silently.

The last time we met for lunch, he had to go home early, exhausted.

Over the following years he became frailer. Painfully stooped.

About a year ago, I visited him. He was in respite while Marion, who had become his carer, had a holiday.

At the respite centre, his voice was barely a whisper, as the muscles in his throat and chest were affected by the disease. But his face shone with inextinguishable joy.

'I've asked God what his purpose is for this season of my life,' he rasped.

Purpose? In this? I wondered for a treacherous second. My mind wandered as he talked, so quietly, till I was again flooded with memories...

We were travelling around New Zealand. 'If you want to see Mt Egmont, you'd better pray,' Peter's vigorous voice resounded through our car, our orange Amazing Gracie, waking the other four of us. 'It's only a few miles along on our right.'

We looked in dismay at the unyielding walls of cloud and prayed without much faith.

But soon the clouds rolled back, and we gazed in wonder at a clear blue sky, and Mt Egmont gleaming white with snow.

Peter's whispery voice called me back to the pretty garden setting of the respite centre, where we sat sipping tea.

'God spoke to me from an old prayer book,' he said. 'He told me that in this season he wants me to glorify him and enjoy him forever.' His face glowed gently.

It seemed to me we were on holy ground, with a tangible presence of God enveloping us. Peter was happy and fulfilled, even here. Even with his diminished faculties.

I felt humbled.

I focussed on my cup, trying to emerge from the avalanche of memories, struggling to embrace this new expression of God's love in Peter's life...

'I'm afraid your car's had it,' the garage man said of Amazing Gracie. 'It needs a part they don't make any more.'

Peter looked in the car window at us and whispered urgently, 'Pray!'

We prayed. How could our miracle-studded holiday end like this – in the middle of nowhere? We'd have to catch a bus. A let-down after the fun and laughter in our orange capsule, which we'd cheerfully pushed on and off the car ferry, and along a main street. Our car which had broken down so often in appropriate places.

Peter walked around the dusty car yard in his sandals. He stubbed his toe on something hard and bent down to look at it, then showed the garage man a dirty old metal object. 'Would this be the part we need?' he asked.

The man was flabbergasted. 'Where did you...?'

'It was here in the dust.' Peter smiled. God must have hidden it there – for years.

After a short time, Gracie sputtered to life and off we went, cheering and singing towards Christchurch.

The next time I see Peter, he can barely talk at all. I have to crane my head to hear fragments. He's obviously distressed about it. And yet he's still the old Peter, loving God. So many miracles, big and small, stand out in my memories of him.

'A lady here asked me why my light was on at two o'clock this morning,' Peter whispers, his aging face straining to speak.

I notice his thinning hair, his grizzled beard.

He smiles. 'I told her I was just enjoying God's presence for a while.'
Gentleness fills the air.

For a brief moment after our visit, as we drive away and wave, I see Peter just as an old man wandering among the rose bushes. But the image changes quickly to a vibrant young man, larger than life, who has trusted God as he's taken giant steps through many countries to spread the gospel; before his faith, clouds have rolled away, mountains emerged from the gloom, and non-existent car parts emerged from the dust. There are endless miracle stories, all just part of life for Peter. Other people will have their own Peter stories, well...God stories.