***A Change of Address***

Three old friends meet for coffee and an exchange of news.

‘When are you moving?’ Bruce, the retired accountant, placed a cappuccino on the table and seated himself next to Leo.

Leo had broken his diet and was drinking hot chocolate with cream. ‘Friday, in time for Harvest. I did give you a note of our new address, didn’t I?’

‘Cheer up. Once it’s over, you’ll be able to relax.’

‘Dora’s breaking my heart. She goes around saying “goodbye” to each room. She wants to know if I remember when our son was eight and tried to scoot down the stairs on a tin tray, or when we built a snowman on the side lawn and it lasted for two whole weeks.’

The third member of the trio brought a black coffee to join them. ‘Finding it hard to let go, Leo?’ His worn, lined face was smiling, and the others turned to him as if to a light.

‘Kerry!’ said Bruce. ‘Thought you were away visiting your daughter in New York. How did you find the Big Apple?’

‘I’m glad to be back. I find I’m out of step with the pace of big cities, nowadays. So, Leo: how are you coping?’

Leo grimaced. ‘We ought to have done it years ago. Such a big house is not practical, nowadays. It was all right when our son moved back in with his family and we could divide up the house between us. But now he’s got a new job and has moved to the other side of town. We’ll miss them but, as I said to Dora, it means a lot less work for her in future. Plus the garden was getting too much for me.’

He was putting a good face on it, but the others could see what a wrench the move was going to be.

Bald and brown, Bruce tried to look on the bright side. ‘You must be pleased that the old house has been sold to a company who appreciates it and will put it to good use.’

‘That’s it,’ said Kerry. ‘We need to be of use still, even if we’re past the official age of retirement.’

‘Never fear,’ said Leo, trying to smile. ‘I’ve never been one to sit in an armchair and demand to be waited on. I’ve got more than enough to occupy me, as property steward at church. There’ll be no need to get the car out to check on that dodgy boiler, because I’ll be able to walk there in five minutes.’

Kerry swirled coffee in his cup. ‘That’s what it’s all been about, these last few years, isn’t it? Finding what God wants us to do in the next part of our lives.’

After his wife’s death, Kerry had turned his big old house into student accommodation, only to find himself stretched to the limit, acting as house father to a volatile group of youngsters. He was often perplexed to know what to say to them, but had come to the conclusion that if he let God talk through him, it seemed to work out all right.

Bruce fingered his own empty cup. ‘I don’t know how I’d cope, if we had to move. I’ve lived in our house all my adult life. Luckily it’s not too big for Sally and me to look after, and she adores the garden. She’s a wonder with plants, you know. The stuff she’s got earmarked for Harvest, you wouldn’t believe.’ He said this as if it amused him, but his pride in his wife shone through.

‘I’ll be all right. Of course I will,’ said Leo. ‘No need to worry about me.’

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Kerry stopped to rest half way up the hill. He wasn’t particularly tired today, although the flight back from New York had been an hour late and he’d only had a couple of hours sleep. It was half term, and many of his students were away. He hadn’t expected any of them to wait up for him because he knew he’d be returning in the early hours of the morning. Even so, his homecoming had been unexpectedly dreary. There should have been a security light left on in the hall overnight, but for some reason it wasn’t on. And the house had felt cold. Even, unwelcoming.

He told himself not to let little things get him down. The bulb in the security light had blown and not been replaced. Someone had fiddled with the timer for the central heating and it had failed to keep the house at an even temperature. Such little things ought not to have upset him. But, hauling his suitcase up the stairs to his flat at the top of the house, he’d wondered for the first time whether his daughter was right in saying it was time he gave up this big house and moved into an old people’s home.

She, Judith, knew of just the place, where one of her husband’s elderly aunts was very happy. They had outings, visitors came to conduct sing songs, and you could share a bedroom if you needed the company.

She’d always been a bossy boots, had Judith. Always known best. ‘Take it from me, Dad, you need to make the move before you’re too old to adjust. I’ll make an appointment for you to go round Greenacres. And don’t say you can’t afford it, because when you sell that White Elephant of a house, you’ll be quids in.’

Kerry had shuddered at the thought, and returned some non-committal reply. But, being a conscientious soul, had not dismissed the suggestion out of hand. Was she right? Was it time for him to sink into a high-backed chair and be waited on, instead of him doing the waiting on others? How many years did he have left before he became a burden to others? Would it not be right to go now, while he was able to arrange a gracious retirement?

As ever, he put it to God in prayer. ‘Could you spare a minute, Lord? I’m not at all clear about this. I don’t want to give up my job here, making a home for students who are far from home and often in need of a word of advice, or a shoulder to cry on. Sometimes all they need is a word of encouragement or appreciation. I have people coming in to do the cooking and cleaning for me. I don’t feel I’m finished yet, Lord. You put me into this line of work. I am being useful to you where I am now, aren’t I? Do you really want me to stop?’

Perhaps it was because he was so tired, but he couldn’t seem to hear God’s reply. That did happen occasionally. A blank time. A testing time. A time when you had to have faith that sooner or later the answer would come.

Meanwhile, he could pray for others. ‘Dear Lord, be with Leo and Dora in this move. He was born and brought up in that house, and Dora has lived in it all her married life. May their change of address bring them peace, and a more restful time in their lives.’

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Bruce picked up some shopping on the way home. Since his official retirement he only did the books for one or two old clients, and had learned to cook when he understood that his dear Sally hated housework but adored gardening. Just lately he’d been working almost full time trying to save a client from bankruptcy, but things had worked out pretty well, on the whole. He shopped and cooked, and did the housework when he got round to it.

He thought of himself as a good plain cook, no frills or furbelows. Meat and two veg at lunchtime, with a sandwich and soup for the evening meal. Fish on Fridays. Pasta if he remembered to buy a good sauce to go with it. Steak for a treat.

The only fly in the ointment – or snake in the garden, if you preferred – was Sally’s overbearing sister. Fiona always ‘knew best’ and told everyone ‘what’. She could reduce her little sister to tears in ten minutes flat. Bruce smiled as he recalled how he’d managed to stop her moving in with them. Life would have been unendurable if . . .

He let himself into the house and froze, as Fiona’s voice floated down the stairs in full scold. ‘Will you just look at this, Sally! When did you last clean the shower! It’s filthy! And the laundry basket is stuffed full of—’

‘Yes, but just lately Bruce has been working flat out for a company that’s in trouble and he hasn’t had time to—’

‘You’re always making excuses for him, but it won’t do!’ Fiona thumped down the stairs, her face red. ‘Ah, Bruce. There you are. Now, what have you to say for yourself! This place is a tip!’

‘Oh, it’s not as bad as all that.’ Yet his conscience suddenly woke up and accused him of neglecting his duties. The extra work he’d undertaken recently had indeed taken up much of his time, and he hadn’t noticed what had been happening to the house. There was dust on the table in the hall, and the carpet hadn’t been hoovered for a while. Now that he came to think about it, he’d left a lot of papers all over the dining-room table, and he really ought to have done something about the coffee he’d spilled on the sitting room carpet.

Fiona’s hands settled on her ample hips. ‘My sister deserves better than this, and if you’re not capable of looking after her properly, then I’m going to do something about it. I’ve sold my house and moving into a flat in the next road, so I’ll be able to come round to check on you at least once a week in future.’

Bruce winced. ‘I admit I have been rather lax lately, but—’

‘Did you or did you not promise to provide a decent home for my sister when you got married? I am not having her living in a cess-pit. If you can’t do better than this, I’ll have to take steps to rectify matters. Hah!’ Out of the door she went. And slammed it behind her.

Sally let herself down onto the bottom step with her hands over her face. Bruce knew his Sally well. She could be either crying or laughing. But which? He went to sit beside her, and gave her a hug. ‘Sorry, Sal. My fault.’

‘Oh, Bruce!’ She lifted her face for a kiss. She had been crying. ‘Fiona simply wouldn’t listen when I tried to tell her how hard you’ve been working lately, and she was saying the most awful things, and it’s all true! I am the world’s worst housekeeper. I don’t cook for you or make sure you have clean clothes and how you can put up with me, I don’t know. She says I’m a complete failure as a wife, and she’s right!’

He kissed her, and wiped the tears from her cheeks. ‘You’re my own sweet darling, and I wouldn’t want you any other way.’

‘But I ought at least to make an effort to keep the place tidy. She says that if I don’t improve we’ll have to move into sheltered accommodation, and I love this dear little house and the garden. But she’s moving to a flat just round the corner and – Oh dear, oh dear! – we’ll never have a minute’s peace in future.’

‘I don’t like to admit it, but she’s right. I have let things slide. I know you didn’t want anyone else coming into the house, but I think we’ll have to get a cleaner in for a couple of mornings a week.’

‘I hate the thought of having someone else in the house, banging and crashing about.’

‘We’ll get someone reliable, someone we can trust and, while she’s here, I’ll take you out shopping or for a coffee or something.’

‘She’ll upset all your papers, and disturb my plants.’

‘I’ll just have to be tidier, and we’ll tell her not to touch anything that grows. I’m sorry, Sal. I ought to have noticed that we’d been letting things slip. But at least she doesn’t want to move in with us any more.’

At this, Sally got a fit of the giggles. ‘She doesn’t like cooking any more than I do.’

Bruce got to his feet, creaking a bit, and gave her a hand to help her up, too. ‘So which of us is going to clean the shower, and which cook supper?’

‘Guess!’ she said, and made off up the stairs to deal with the bathroom.

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Leo got up early on the morning of the move. He hadn’t slept well and he knew Dora hadn’t, either, but they both pretended to be fine. He made his way through the almost empty house. Most of the furniture had already gone, either to their son’s new place, or to the auction house. Floorboards echoed to his footsteps as he passed through into the garden, making his own farewells, his throat raw with the effort of not giving way to grief. He’d lived in this house all this life. It was going to be a wrench to leave. He knew it was the right thing to do, but . . .

As he stood in the vegetable garden, he thought of the many years in which he’d raised fruit and vegetables for Harvest Festival. He’d gathered up armloads of fruit and flowers the previous day, and taken them to the church. Next year he wouldn’t be able to do that. By this time next year, in fact, there would be a new building going up on the site of his greenhouse. He nearly cracked up at the thought.

He lifted his face to the sky above. ‘Dear Lord, I know this is a trivial matter for you. In less than the blink of an eye, you care for millions of people in far worse condition than me. I have no right to complain of my lot. I am not short of food or drink. None of my family is ill. I am indeed a fortunate man. I must put my trivial sorrows behind me, and look forward, not back.’

He heard a blackbird sing on the topmost branch of a tree his father had planted long ago, in a different age.

He said, ‘Dear Lord, all glory, praise and honour to you. Thank you for birdsong.’

As clearly as if someone were speaking at his side, he heard, *do you think that I am here, and not there?*

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Kerry rang the bell and waited to be let in. Judith had made the appointment for him to go round this old people’s home, and he felt obliged at least to go and see it. First impressions were good. There was parking on the forecourt, which was edged with flowering shrubs. The paintwork on the windows was clean and fresh, and there was even a hanging basket in the porch. Admittedly the flowers in that were plastic, but it was a pleasant touch.

The house was probably Edwardian, and the reception rooms had been divided into smaller spaces to allow space for an office and a reception area. A notice board gave details of events, and a visitor’s book showed a good number of people calling.

He was greeted by the manageress wearing a uniform which looked fresh from the laundry, and shown around. The day room was in several sections; in one the residents were watching or snoozing in front of a giant TV, in another the residents were chatting with some visitors, and the third part was like a giant conservatory surrounded by a pleasantly designed garden.

Kerry saw that it was good, but he couldn’t imagine himself moving in and being waited on hand and foot. Granted; there would be people to chat to, books to read and television to watch; there would be good meals served on the dot, and visitors to look forward to; he could spend time in the garden, or have a game of chess or dominoes.

The manageress explained that a minister from a local church visited on a regular basis, and would be bringing them gifts of fruit and flowers which had been donated by church-goers in thanksgiving for Harvest Festival. Were there any other questions?

No, there were not. Kerry thanked her for her kindness in showing him around.

The manageress smiled. ‘You aren’t ready to come here yet, are you? Perhaps sheltered accommodation might be more suitable?’

He left, wondering if he really was at the point when he ought to consider giving up his big house and the stress of looking after students. He didn’t feel ready to give up yet, but perhaps he was not the best judge of his talents? If so, perhaps God would make it clear to him what he should do.

His mobile phone rang. One of his students, in tears. Her boy-friend had had words with the lad with whom he shared a room and they’d come to blows. Where was Kerry? Could he get back quickly to talk some sense into the boys?

He killed the call and set off home. A change of address was not for him. He had work to do, still. For which he thanked the Lord.

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Bruce let the cleaner into the house. She was Polish, young, strong and bright of eye. He’d taken up her references, and believed he could trust her. ‘You don’t mind if we go out while you’re here?’

She said, ‘Let the dog see the bone.’

He wondered where she’d heard that saying. Wasn’t it something his mother had used to say? He called out to Sally, ‘Are you ready? We don’t want to be late.’

He put Sally, the cold box and the bunch of flowers into the car, and set off . . .

. . . for the ground floor flat into which Leo and Dora had moved that day.

Leo opened the door.

‘Surprise!’ said Bruce. ‘We brought you some supper!’

Sally thrust the flowers into Dora’s arms. ‘They’re in a bag filled with water so you don’t have to find a vase for them.’

Leo said, ‘I can’t believe it, but we’re almost straight already. Dora decided where everything was to go beforehand, and the family turned up to hang pictures and make up the beds.’

Dora was showing Sally around. ‘I’ve always wanted a kitchen like this. Isn’t it just perfect? And look! There’s masses of storage space, and blinds everywhere, instead of those manky old velvet curtains . . .! And, you won’t believe this, but a friend from church has already knocked on the door and invited us round to see her orchids. She says the back windowsill here is the best place for them. I’ve always wanted to grow orchids, but there wasn’t the right spot for them in the old house.’

Bruce looked around. ‘Your furniture fits in beautifully. I brought my took kit, just in case. Is there anything I can do to help?’

Leo laughed. ‘Believe it or not, it’s all done.’

There was a ring at the front door, and there stood Kerry, with an acquaintance from the next road. ‘I met Tom on the way over,’ said Kerry. ‘He lives next door. He’d heard you were moving in today, and wondered if you’d like to join his bowling club.’

Leo said he’d think about it, while Dora started to unpack the cool box.

Kerry said the grace, ‘We ask a blessing on this place and all who live in it. When we find ourselves taking a new direction, may the Lord continue to be our guiding light. We pray that He continues to make use of us in whatever way he thinks best, so that when the time comes for Him to harvest our lives, he finds they have been fit for his purpose.’