DOWN-SIZING

 *Three retired friends meet for a coffee and a grumble*

Leo carried his usual mug of hot chocolate to the table along with a slice of carrot cake. Leo was a big man, who fought a losing battle to keep his weight down.

 Bruce said, ‘You’ve taken leave of your diet?’ Bruce was bald and brown, and supposed to be the brains of the group. In this instance, he’d failed to recognise the signal flagged up the cake.

 The third member of the group had a gentle, lined face, who understood straight away that Leo wanted comfort food because he was in trouble. ‘It’s this cold weather, makes you crave sugar.’

 Leo took an enormous bite of his cake.

 Kerry continued to make small talk. ‘I’ve been looking forward to seeing the spring bulbs come up, but I think the squirrels have had most of them. No crocuses. Not one.’

Bruce said, ‘My dear Sally wants a bird bath in the garden, which means a trip to the garden centre this weekend.’

Leo finished off the cake and turned his attention to his hot chocolate. Frowning. Kerry continued to distract Bruce’s attention. ‘I’ve been trying to find out how many

of my students will be with me for our lunch on Easter Sunday. You’re all coming, I hope?’

Kerry was a widower who’d turned his big house into student lodgings, reserving a flat for himself on the attic floor. He was more than just a landlord, providing ad hoc meals, cups of coffee with tea and a sympathetic ear for those who needed it. Kerry could see that Leo was in trouble, even if Bruce couldn’t.

Leo emptied his mug and sat back with a sigh. ‘Dora had a fall this week, came off the kitchen steps, clearing out a top cupboard. She’s all right. Shaken but not stirred, as they say. But she’s got to take it easy for a while. I tell her to rest but our cleaner’s gone on holiday and Dora’s fretting about the housework. She keeps getting the vacuum cleaner out. So,’ he forced a smile, ‘We’re going to sell the house and move into a flat. We’re not as young as we were, and the garden’s getting away from me.’

Silence. Now even Bruce could see through Leo’s assumed cheerfulness. ‘That’ll be a wrench.’

 ‘I love that house,’ said Leo. ‘But it’s time to let go.’ He took out a handkerchief and blew his nose.

 The others looked away, allowing him a moment of privacy.

 ‘I was born there,’ said Leo. ‘We brought up our son there. We’ve loved having him and his family come back to live with us after he lost his job. We’ve had the house adapted so that they had the top two floors and we kept to the ground floor, although it was hard work stopping Dora from doing all their housework as well as our own . . .’ He shook his head. ‘The thing is, my son likes everything up to date and modern. He’s been offered a job on the other side of town. He said that if I sold the house, I could give him half the money and get him started on the property ladder again.’

The other two frowned, but it was Bruce who said, ‘He did have a place of his own once, didn’t he?’

‘Yes, but there were debts and his tenant offered to buy him out. It seemed a good idea at the time but now he hasn’t enough to make a down payment on a decent house. This way he can afford something better for them.’

Kerry murmured, ‘He doesn’t understand how deep our roots can go.’

‘Oh, he’s right,’ said Leon, with a wave of his hand. ‘Dora and I don’t need so much space nowadays, though what we’re going to do with my mother’s lovely furniture and the bits and pieces we’ve collected over the years I . . .’ He stopped himself. ‘These things are not important.’

But they meant a lot to him.

He said, ‘The garden is . . . has been my pride and joy, but it’s time to let go. I’ve more than enough to do, being Property Steward at church. My son’s had an estate agent come round to look at the old place. He says a developer would leap at it. He’ll probably want to pull down the old house and build blocks of flats.’

‘I’m so sorry, my friend,’ said Kerry.

Leo blew his nose again. ‘It’s the way of the world. We’re hogging a site which could provide housing for maybe twenty people, and sitting on a pot of gold which will solve all our problems.’

Bruce was the financial brain. ‘Did you sign up to the estate agent?’

‘No, no. My son got him to visit, didn’t tell me about it till afterwards.’

‘You won’t act in haste?’

Leo shook his head. ‘I said we’d have to look around first, see where Dora and I could go. We must stay locally. We’re too old to move away, make new friends.’

Kerry sighed. ‘This is a day for breaking bad news. Tell him, Bruce.’

Bruce said, ‘I suppose it’s good to share. You know my wife’s appalling sister, who can’t open her mouth without making a hurtful remark? Well, it seems Fiona had such a good time when she visited over Christmas that she plans to sell her house and move in with us.’

Leo couldn’t believe it. ‘But she’s poison!’

‘I know. I said, “Over my dead body!” Sally doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. One minute she says we ought to take Fiona in because she’s family, and the next she’s in floods of tears because she can see we’d never have a minute’s peace if we did.’

Kerry said, ‘How guilty will you feel if you don’t?’

‘Not guilty at all. Fiona owns her own place outright. She has more than enough money to live on, a good pension from her job and now she’s getting royalties from those books which I helped her to get published. She’s hale and hearty and has a voice which can drill through wood. If we took her in, she’d have Sally in tears within twenty-four hours and me reaching for a blunt weapon. Do you think I’d get away with a plea of provocation, if I did her an injury?’

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Kerry trudged up the hill, his mind on his friends’ problems. Out of habit, and not really because he needed the rest nowadays, he paused to sit on a low wall half way up, and looked back over the town. For many years he’d been plagued with a dodgy knee, but a physiotherapist had recently given him some exercises which were helping a lot. He’d been told it was best to keep climbing stairs and, as his flat was at the top of his house, he continued to do so. So now he rubbed his kneecap, and had a chat to his best friend.

 ‘Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for giving me sufficient health to keep on helping others. I am so grateful that everything that’s been wrong with me so far, could be put right. More or less. And oh, what a great sight, the sky so blue . . . how did you ever come to think up such a fantastic blue . . .? There’s nothing in nature like it. Well, I suppose some of your flowers come close. It fills me with awe. What is mere man that you can be bothered to care for us, poor creatures that we are, filled with our own tiny concerns . . .

 ‘Such as how many we’re going to be for lunch at Easter. Bruce has a nasty problem there. Dear Sally is the sweetest person alive but I can’t see her standing up to Fiona who, you must admit, is a little difficult. Perhaps she was never loved enough as a child? When you were on earth, Lord, you were deeply loved as a child but because you stooped to become human, you can also understand how bitter some unloved people can be. Help us to help her. But not, I’m sure you’d say, at the expense of Bruce and Sally’s happy married life.

 ‘And Leo? Yes, I appreciate that that house and garden has become too big for him and it would be a relief to Dora to down size, but they shouldn’t be pushed into an unsuitable place, should they?’

 Kerry smiled, thinking of big Leo blundering around in a small flat, overturning chairs, knocking things off shelves. ‘Leo needs to have room enough to swing a cat. And let’s face it, he’s still got years of use in him, working for the church and for others. He needs decent sized rooms and a study, somewhere to lay out his papers. Ah, but he’s going to miss the grandkids when they move away, even if it is only to the other side of town.

‘How much should the older generation sacrifice for their families? We like to give our children a good start in life, but should that mean we have to reduce our standard of living when we’ve worked hard all our lives to get where we are? And if we do make sacrifices for our children, how much should we give? Don’t we need our comforts in old age? Then again, do children value money given to them when they’ve made no effort to earn it? It’s a puzzle.’

He’d rested long enough and went on up the hill, still talking to Jesus. ‘I think we can rely on Bruce to sort out Fiona’s problem, but Leo needs some help. If you could just give me a clue?’

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Bruce found the house quiet and empty when he returned. Before he could panic, he spotted Sally in the garden, dressed in her old mac, hacking away at the dead stalks of herbaceous plants at the end of the garden. He tapped on the window and she came in, trying to smile. ‘Isn’t it too cold for you out there?’ said Bruce.

 She kissed his cheek with chilly lips. ‘I’d rather do that than cook. What’s for lunch?’

 ‘What’s this?’ Bruce had spotted some papers on the table. ‘Fiona’s been here?’

 Sally looked defensive. ‘She came round to measure up. She says we can move into the back bedroom so that she can put her own furniture in the master bedroom, and she wants to set up her computer in your study.’

 Bruce held onto his temper with an effort.

 Sally got rid of her mac and washed her hands at the sink. ‘We’re to have both rooms redecorated and she’ll bring in a carpenter to put up lots of shelves and make her a built-in wardrobe. She says our television is out of date, so she’ll bring hers instead.’

 Bruce put his arms around Sally, and held her close. He could see she’d been crying.

He said, ‘Over my dead body.’

‘She’s family. We can’t refuse to take her in. She’s got so little, really, and we’ve got so much. I’m not referring to money. She needs us more than we need her. We’ll manage.’

 ‘You might,’ said Bruce, ‘because you’re loving and giving. But I’m the great big bad wolf who drives invaders from the door.’

 Sally giggled. ‘I wish!’

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Leo arrived home to find Dora taking off her coat. He was shocked at how tired and pale she looked. ‘I thought you were going to take it easy today. Sit down. Let me make you a cuppa.’

‘Don wanted to show me a flat he’d found for us. It’s on the ground floor,

with double glazing. There’s plenty of cupboards and a communal garden at the back. There’s no garage but it’s quite near a bus stop into town, and it’s very reasonable.’

 Dora’s son was the light of her life but, as a long-married man, Leo knew by her tone of voice that she hated the place. ‘What’s wrong with it?’

 Dora subsided into a chair. ‘There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s true that the rooms are on the small side and none of our furniture would fit. Don doesn’t want our stuff but, as he says, we could always get some new furniture. We’d have to put in some sound-proofing, as you can hear everything from the other flats next door and above, but that wouldn’t be difficult to do. We don’t know anyone in that part of town but we’d soon get to know people, wouldn’t we? True: it’s on a run-down estate but, as Don says, it’s cheap and I’m sure it will be all right if we just make up our minds to it.’

‘Don wants us to move into a badly-built shoebox so that he can buy a big family house with our money?’ Leo put the mug of tea in her hands. ‘No can do. I’m not rushing into anything, neither to buy nor to sell.’

‘But he needs—’

‘He doesn’t have to move before he starts his new job. He can commute from here and the girls can stay on in their present school until he finds the right house for them. We can take our time about finding something which we would like to live in. First off, it’s got to be within walking distance of the church so that I can attend to problems there as soon as they crop up. Perhaps one of those big new flats in the town centre? Huge rooms with a balcony. Cafes and restaurants on the ground floor.’

Dora twitched a smile. ‘I’d like that, but—’

‘Drink up, and have a rest before supper. I’ve got some paperwork to do.’

He went to his study, but not to work. ‘Lord, if you’ve got a minute, I could do with a spot of help. Yes, there must be plenty of work for Jesus and his followers to do in this place Dora’s just seen, but I fear we’re too old and lack the energy to make a difference there. Dora needs a good rest and help with the housework. Yes, I know there’s always grace to be had when you set us a new task, but . . . No, I really don’t think this is what you want us to do. Is it? I’m relying on you, Lord, to give me a push in the right direction, OK?’

He got down to paying some bills.

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Kerry was on Skype, talking to his newly-married daughter. She was in New York, and he was back home, but the picture and the sound were as clear as if she were only next door. She was full of her work, and of what her husband was doing.

Judith was looking good. Marriage suited her. She asked him how he was, and didn’t listen to the answer. That was all right. She was out in the brave new world, going to conferences and . . .

 Conferences. The word seemed to hover in capital letters before his eyes.

 A conference centre with spacious grounds. That was what Leo’s house could be. Where else could you find such a large, solid house in a good part of town? He could see it all. The reception rooms would be ideal for smaller meetings, and they could build out at the side over part of the garden to provide a larger conference room. The kitchens would be adequate, perhaps with a refit. A stair lift would be needed for the upper floors, perhaps? The top floor could be living accommodation for staff. Some of the outbuildings could be turned into offices. Or a big firm would like it for prestigious offices, as there would be plenty of room for a car park.

 Judith was saying she had to hurry, as she was going out somewhere. Kiss, kiss.

Of course. Kiss, kiss.

 Kerry switched off the computer. ‘Now, Lord: who would be the best person to approach on Leo’s behalf?’

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Bruce arranged a meeting with Fiona at her house. He had a file of papers under his arm, and a determination not to lose his temper. ‘I think we should get everything down on paper, how we share the housekeeping and utility bills, so that there’s no misunderstanding about who pays for what. A three-way split, right?’

 ‘Oh, but I thought . . . well, you can’t expect me to . . .’

Bruce held her eye, and she almost blushed. She said, ‘I’ve put my place on the market already. The estate agent says it should sell in next to no time.’

 ‘Excellent. Now I want to be quite sure that moving into our house is right for you, who are, let’s face it, something of a celebrity, and who needs privacy and quiet for her work. You did say the publishers were expecting another book soon? Will you have enough room in my tiny study to lay out all your research papers? We don’t have wi-fi, I’m afraid.’

 ‘No wi-fi? How on earth do you manage?’

 ‘I’m sure that can be arranged. Now I always get up early to empty the dishwasher, and that’s when I put the telly on for the news—’

 ‘I’m a late riser and need peace and quiet in the mornings.’

 Bruce produced his best hang-dog look. ‘I’m getting on, you know. I’m afraid I can really only manage to do the housework first thing in the morning. Sally doesn’t mind how much I bang and crash about the place. She gets up later and organises the house and garden. Then I make my phone calls. I shouldn’t need the phone in the study for very long or very often – perhaps a couple of hours? I’m still doing a certain amount of work, you know. I did wonder if you might like to pay for a second line to be put in.’

‘Oh, but—’

‘What worries me is the cooking. You know Sally doesn’t really cook any more. I do it, mostly pasta, baked beans and sausages. But now you’re coming we can share the cooking, can’t we? The only thing is, Sally and I have talked about going vegan. Would you mind cooking for two vegans as well as for yourself?’

 Fiona’s mouth dropped open. Fiona was of a substantial build and liked her meat. She said, ‘You’re right. We need to consider carefully before we make any decisions that we might come to regret. You can’t ask me to jeopardise my career in order to cook and housekeep for you.’

 ‘No indeed. Such a sacrifice . . . I do see how selfish it was of us to even think—’

 ‘I shall take my place off the market and look around for something smaller in due course.’

 ‘Perhaps after you’ve finished your next book? Yes. Sally will be disappointed, but I’m sure I can make her understand how it is.’

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Kerry loved to play host for his friends, especially at Easter, which was his favourite time of the year. A time of rejoicing. A celebration of new life. Of new beginnings.

 Of all those gathered round his table today he knew there were some who might not be with them in a year’s time. Sooner or later Leo’s family would be moving away, for Kerry’s contacts had stirred up considerable interest in buying his big old house. Leo and Dora planned to stay near their church and were looking at suitable flats in the vicinity. Fiona had come with Bruce and Sally, but had an invitation to give a series of lectures on a cruise ship. Some of his students would get their degrees and move on.

 There would always be room at his table for newcomers.

 He said the grace.

 ‘For food in a world where many go hungry,

 For friends in a world where many walk alone,

 And for faith in a world where many walk in fear,

 Father, we thank you. Amen.’

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Veronica Heley’s latest book is FALSE ALARM, from Severn House.