***‘We’re all going on a summer holiday…’***

***by Veronica Heley***

*Three old friends meet for a coffee and to discuss their holiday plans*

‘I’m so tired, I can’t think straight. I need a holiday. But where?’

Leo, the retired sales manager, stirred sugar into his hot chocolate. ‘I used to racket around Europe, getting on and off planes, where’s the hotel, where’s the taxi rank, give me a wakeup call . . . breakfast conferences, phone calls . . . which country am I in today? I can’t say I miss that life. In any case, a lot of that sort of business is done on Skype now. When I had time off I spent it in the garden and catching up with family. I never want to step on plane again.’

Bruce, bald and brown, eyed Leo’s antics with the sugar with amusement. ‘Didn’t your wife threaten to go away by herself if you didn’t arrange a holiday for the two of you? And, didn’t you promise to go on a diet?

Leo rolled his eyes. ‘Dora has this fantasy of going to some far-flung Pacific island to sit under a palm tree and be served meals she hasn’t had to cook. I understand she needs a rest from housework but I can’t see myself lying on a beach getting roasted by the sun, and with nothing to do. And, let me add, I have no intention of donning a swimming costume at my age.’

The third member of the group was Kerry, whose gentle manner and deeply lined face made him look older than the others. After his wife had died, he’d turned his big house into lodgings for university students. He sipped his espresso and sighed. ‘I have to admit to feeling a little tired, too. I usually arrange to go away for a few days every summer while maintenance work is being done on the house. I book myself into a quiet hotel by the sea somewhere, do some bird-watching, look up an old friend or two. I find it most restful.

‘But this year it’s the turn of the plumbing and electrics and I have to move out as there won’t be any water for three weeks at least. My daughter wants me to join her in New York for the summer but I’m not keen.’

The other two looked at him with concern.

Leo said, ‘She’ll be at her high-powered job all day. So what will you do with yourself?’

‘I know. I’ll be a fish out of water. She says I’d love to go to the museums and the art galleries but I must confess that neither appeals to me much. New York is buzzing with life, but it’s not my kind of life. It’s all about stimulation. Rush here, rush there…’

Bruce quoted, ‘I’m late, I’m late, for a very important date?’

‘Exactly. No time to stop and stare. Take no notice. I’m sure it will be good for me. I must learn to practice patience,’ said Kerry, which made his friends smile.

Bruce scoffed, ‘You could give master classes in the exercise of patience.’

‘Oh, I’ll survive.’ Kerry tried to laugh it off. ‘So, what about you, Bruce?’

Bruce grimaced. ‘You know that my sister-in-law has been asked to give some lectures on a cruise ship? Her books are selling well and now she’s receiving the adulation she feels she deserves . . .’

‘Hah!’ said Leo, knowing how demanding Fiona could be at times. ‘Don’t tell me! She wants you and Sally to go along, too, to act as errand boy and maid of all work?’

‘Unfortunately,’ said Bruce with a straight face, ‘my darling wife only has to look at the sea to feel ill. The truth is that Sally doesn’t want to leave her beloved garden just as the herbaceous border is coming into its best. Fiona thinks Sally’s making excuses not to go on the cruise . . . and of course she’s absolutely right. She is.’

Kerry looked concerned. ‘You’ve had a busy year, Bruce. You don’t complain but I know you’ve been working all hours, helping that friend of yours whose firm got into financial difficulties. And didn’t you take on the treasurer’s job for a local charity? All work and no play. You could do with a break.’

Leo spooned the last drop of his cup of chocolate into his mouth. ‘We ought to swop. I should take Dora on a cruise, Kerry should go on a gardening tour of the South West, and Bruce should go . . . where should Bruce go?’

‘To the States?’ Bruce shook his head, laughing. ‘Been there. Done that. No, Kerry’s right, I need peace and quiet.’

Kerry said, ‘Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. Bruce, you should take Sally on a gardening tour of Cornwall. She’ll enjoy it and you’ll get a good rest.’

Leo looked back into the past. ‘We used to holiday down in Cornwall when the children were young. We hired a house in what used to be a fishing village. What was the name, now? I’ll remember in a minute. It was safe for the children to roam the streets and they could get to the beach and back by themselves. It’s a heritage village now, I think. Picturesque. Only two shops but the ferry draws up onto the beach to take you into Plymouth for shopping. Cawsand, that was the name. There was a church built on a rock. I wouldn’t mind going there again, but it’s not what Dora needs just now.’

Bruce said, ‘The Eden Project’s down in Cornwall, isn’t it? And I seem to remember there’s other famous gardens down there which can grow semi-tropical plants. Do you know, I think you’ve solved it? Let me have the details and I’ll run them past Sally.’

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Kerry paused half way up the hill to take a breather and look back down over the town. A conveniently placed wall of the right height allowed him to sit and rest a while, and there were some well-kept gardens to admire. He often found himself lingering there to talk to God. The scent of a climbing rose drifted across to him. Children were on a trampoline nearby. Such energy . . .

He’d put a brave face on it before his friends but he could admit to God how much he was dreading the trip to New York. His present life was so full, looking after the students, caring for them, praying for them . . . busy, busy . . . What would he do with himself for six weeks?

Ever since his wife died he’d been on the go, never giving himself time to stop and think. Theirs had not been an ideal marriage and of late years she had been, well, not quite herself. When she’d died there had been a dreadful financial mess to clear up but, with the help of his friends, he’d battled through and now he was fully, gainfully employed looking after his students. And, useful.

He talked to his best friend about it. *Dear* *Lord, help me. I’m so afraid that if I stop being busy, I’ll fall to pieces. If there’s no reason for me to get up in the mornings, no structure to my days, I’ll not get out of bed at all. My father was like that. Once he retired and stepped down from the chairmanship of the Rotary Club, he said there was no point in going on living. He stopped eating. Then he stopped drinking. And then he died. The doctor’s note was gobbledegook but what he meant was that he died of a broken heart. The students have given me a reason for living. And now it’s being taken from me. What am I to do?*

Answerthere was none. He listened. Hard. And then came a small, still voice . . . ‘Do you think I am here and not there?’

What sort of reply was that? Why wasn’t God listening to him?

He struggled to his feet, feeling the burden of years descend on his shoulders. His knees were playing up. He must get on. But without direction from above, he wasn’t sure of his future. It was like taking a step in the dark.

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Leo turned his key in the lock and called out, ‘I’m home. And no, I didn’t forget the bread.’

Dora sang out, ‘I’m on the phone!’ He dumped his purchases on the kitchen table, made himself a cup of instant coffee, found a couple of biscuits and joined her in their pleasant sitting room.

Dora was doing a jigsaw puzzle while listening to someone on the phone. ‘Yes . . . how dreadful . . .Oh dear, did she really say that? Well, I suppose youngsters nowadays . . .’ She pulled a face at Leo and mouthed the name of their daughter-in-law. Leo nodded. Teenagers *were* difficult to deal with. He collapsed into his big chair and, for want of anything better to do, leafed through some of the travel magazines which Dora had collected.

White beaches, parasols, rum punches. You’d have to share the waters with crocodiles or sharks, and your money would go on sunburn treatment.

Cruises. How ever many changes of clothing did you have to take with you? The food looked delicious, and there didn’t seem to be much to do other than eat. Or go on excursions. He sighed. He’d never been keen on sight-seeing and Dora would never let him indulge his passion for good food on a cruise.

Art galleries. Pictures of fat women, and he might have a fuller figure himself but he didn’t fancy that sort of women. Classical concerts . . . a few bars of a wailing violins went a long way with him. Mountaineering . . . he wasn’t going to haul his bulk up a one in four slope at his age, not he!

Which left . . . not much.

The seaside? He agreed with Bruce’s wife, Sally, who felt seasick in a punt on a river. Flying to some far-flung city? He’d had enough of that. He leafed through leaflet after leaflet and chucked them all aside. At this rate they’d be staying at home all summer, which would drive Dora mad. She needed a holiday.

They could go somewhere by Eurostar, perhaps? Dora was still listening to their daughter-in-law’s woes. He would keep well out of it. He folded his hands over his stomach, resting his head on the back of the chair. Was there anywhere he’d been on his travels in the old days, which he’d want to see again? Paris, Munich, Oslo . . .

His eyelids drooped as he drifted off into a doze. And then opened again. Now there was somewhere . . .not a capital city, not a place to rush around in. There had been water. No, not the sea. Not Venice. Somewhere he’d spent only a few hours in, years ago . . . on his way to a conference? Beautiful place, lots to see and do, good food. . . better not mention how much he’d liked the food to Dora! He’d always intended to return one day but never had.

He scrabbled among the leaflets on the table, and found the place in several of them. Dora came off the phone, sighing and smiling. Shaking her head. ‘Our granddaughters don’t want to go on holiday with their parents. Leo, are you listening?’

Leo slapped a leaflet in front of her. ‘How about this, eh? Boat trips and romantic horse-and-carriage rides. Good shops, family-run restaurants. And everywhere you look, it’s a sight for sore eyes. There’s a special procession, too. A sort of miracle play on wheels. We could get seats to watch that. Medieval costumes and shire horses. What do you say?’

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Sally threw her arms around Bruce. ‘The Eden Project? A trip to look at all those wonderful gardens? You wonderful man! But what would you do with yourself all day?’

Bruce grinned. ‘Monitor your spending on plants. Sit by the sea and catch up on my reading. Visit some of the oldest churches in Britain. And perhaps we could have a project to find the best ever Cornish cream tea?’

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Bruges. Ascension Day. Leo and Dora hadn’t known what to expect but had been advised to book a couple of chairs on the pavement outside a cafe to watch the Procession of the Holy Blood. They were told that the tradition for it had started in the 13th century and continued ever since.

Dora exchanged greetings with a lady from Ghent and a family who’d come all the way from Brussels to see the event. As drums began to roll in the distance, the Belgians explained that each scene is introduced by men carrying flags from the ancient guilds, backed by musicians, dancers and singers, all in colourful costumes. ‘First we have scenes from the Old and New testament . . .’

Dora clapped her hands in delight. ‘Look, there’s Adam and Eve! And oh! Children dressed up as animals in the Garden of Eden! What a sight! Moses with the tablets of stone! And don’t those canny dogs keep the sheep in good order!’

Some of the scenes were acted out on the road and some on huge, decorated floats.

Dora clutched Leo’s arm. ‘There’s a real live baby in Mary’s arms and, what do you know! There’s even camels . . . do you think they come from a zoo?’

Children, twirling and dancing . . . and how about that bare-faced trollop, Salome, making eyes at Herod!

Riding horses, brilliantly caparisoned . . . and some giant horses, similar to the British shire horses, pulling the carts on which the tableaux were played out. And here came the thump thump thump of the Roman soldiers marching . . .

What a pity the day was so overcast!

The sun broke through and everyone cheered.

Leo’s neighbour leaned over to him. ‘God has turned the lights on!’

Everyone got to their feet as the precious reliquary containing the Holy Blood of Jesus was borne past them . . . the crowd respected the Christian faith and responded accordingly. Finally two men, also dressed in medieval costume, cleared up after the animals and received a special round of applause.

Later, in the cafe, Dora said, ‘That was quite something, wasn’t it! I’m so glad we came.’

Leo ordered a hot chocolate with cream for them both. He remembered his neighbour saying that God had turned the lights on. He wondered how many people’s childhood memories of the Bible had been confirmed and deepened by taking part in or watching the procession. So seriously undertaken, so beautifully carried out. The remembrance of it must surely become part of their everyday lives.

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Sally was suffering from a surfeit of Cornish sunshine and, perhaps, too many cream teas? ‘Let’s take a rest today?’

Bruce said, ‘There’s a board outside the Church on the Rock advertising a coffee morning. It says everyone’s welcome. Let’s drop in and see what’s going on.’

He loved the way Sally could talk to anyone. In five minutes she was deep in conversation about gardens with a couple of about their own age, whereas he was somewhat at a loss. He sat down by a man in a wheelchair, and asked if the church happened to be open. Apparently not.

‘The church at Rame is open all hours,’ said the old man, whose shaking hands could hardly hold his cup of coffee. ‘It’s a fair old climb up that hill. I used to find it hard going in the old days but now I close my eyes and I’m there. There are not many services now. No electricity. The organ is hand-pumped. But people pop in for a short visit, seven days a week. The man who opens the church every day, he’s not one for going to services, but he knows what’s needed. You should try it. You can sit and be quiet and pray up there.’

‘That’s what I want,’ said Bruce. ‘A place to pray in.’

The old man smiled. ‘Once you’ve been, you’ll remember. Then, like me, you can go there any time you like.’

The next day, while Sally was out with her new gardener friends, Bruce climbed the steep hill to reach the exposed, windy headland. When he passed through the lych gate and entered the ancient church, he understood what the old man had been trying to tell him. Sometimes it’s hard to feel that God is everywhere; but in that church you *knew* that he was. Bruce sat in an ancient oak pew and allowed himself to relax for the first time in a very long while.

Words such as Respite, Quietness, and Holiness came into his mind.

He found the visitors’ book and noted there was never a day passed but someone sought out that church. Many noted the extraordinary quality of peace within the ancient walls.

Later still, Bruce sat outside in the churchyard among weathered, lichened gravestones. He marvelled at the view of bay and sea below. A lighthouse stood out like a pencil on the horizon. Yes; he would remember and yes; he would return many times. Sometimes in person. Sometimes in his mind’s eye.

When Bruce looked back on that holiday, he felt refreshed. The search for the perfect cream tea hadn’t been a bad idea, either.

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Kerry found his seat on the plane, and adjusted the air conditioning and lighting to suit himself. He felt depressed at the thought of the long, boring hours of the flight ahead of him, to be followed by six weeks of enforced leisure.

He told himself that, as he had time to spare, so he had time for prayer.

Perhaps God was trying to tell him he should be taking time off, to pray? Prayer was already part of his daily routine, but perhaps he was meant to put in some extra praying time during this enforced time of leisure?

Someone jogged his elbow and apologised. A middle-aged man, over-thin and with hands that fidgeted. His eyes sought Kerry’s in what the older man recognised immediately as a plea for help.

One minute before, Kerry had been complaining to God about having nothing to do. Now, he felt that the last thing he wanted was to have to take on someone else’s burdens. He told himself that as he had a window seat, he could turn his head away and concentrate on the view outside the window. Once they were airborne, he could make some excuse, bury his head in a book, doze off.

The plane shuddered, preparing for take-off. His neighbour clutched the arms of his seat and closed his eyes. They were shooting down the runway and . . . yes, they were airborne.

Still the man next to Kerry did not relax. He opened his eyes and sighed. He turned his head back to Kerry. ‘I hate flying. If my son were not so ill . . . he’s dying, you see. All by himself. In a hospital in New York.’

Kerry knew that by the time they reached New York, he would have heard the man’s life history and have learned why his neighbour was so fragile and why he was looking for support. He realised that if he volunteered to help, he could say goodbye to his free time for the next six weeks.

He could refuse to listen. Of course he could. But, if God had given him another job to perform, perhaps he’d better get on with it?

He said, ‘Do you think God has a sense of humour?’

The man’s face broke up, and he laughed. ‘Yes, I do. Are you a Christian? I prayed I’d meet another believer today . . .’