*Unfinished Business*

Three friends meet to discuss their New Year’s resolutions

A short story by Veronica Heley

Leo, the retired sales director, stirred sugar into his hot chocolate which had been topped with cream. ‘Making New Year’s resolutions is a waste of time. Every year Dora tells me I should make a resolution to go on a diet. So I try – and fail. I think the longest I’ve kept to a diet was ten days. Life’s too short to worry about how many calories there are in a cake—’

‘Or in hot chocolate?’ Bruce, the retired accountant, bald and brown, was gently amused at Leo’s putting sugar in his hot chocolate.

Kerry, the oldest and frailest of the three, also smiled. ‘There are some habits which are hard to break.’ Kerry had had a narrow brush with death some months before which had resulted in his friends stepping in to run his hostel for students while he was in hospital. Leo had taken on the job of handyman and Bruce saw to it that the bills were paid while their wives looked after everything else. Kerry had recovered after a fashion, but his friends were still concerned about him.

Leo patted his impressive frontage. ‘I’ve been losing weight steadily since I started running up and downstairs at the hostel . . . which reminds, me, Kerry. I’ve found a new light fitting for the cupboard under the stairs. I’ll be round to fit it tomorrow.’

Bruce leaned back in his chair. ‘New Year’s resolutions? I suppose I could resolve to be kinder to my sister-in-law, but I doubt if my patience would hold out for long. I don’t mind her telling me what to do – I can switch off and think of something else – but she reduces my dear Sally to tears.’

Kerry looked off into the distance. ‘I suppose I could always spend more time in prayer.’

The other two frowned. They thought, perhaps selfishly, that Kerry needed to be connected more firmly to the affairs of this world, rather than dwelling over much on the next.

Kerry smiled. ‘It’s all right. God tells me I’ve still got some work to do for him here. He says it’s unfinished business, though I can’t think what he means.’

Bruce echoed, ‘Unfinished business? I suppose that at our time of life, we all have some of that hanging around. Do you think he means making a will and such?’

‘Making up an old quarrel?’ said Leo.

‘Forgiving an old hurt?’ that was Kerry. ‘Failing to help someone through a bad patch? I wonder if that’s what he means. I’ll have to pray about it.’

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Back home, Leo told his wife that he didn’t intend to make any more resolutions to lose weight. ‘I’ve done that every year since I turned fifty, and it’s never worked. After all, you love me as I am, don’t you?’

‘I don’t want to be widowed early because you refuse to eat a sensible diet.’

Leo ignored that. ‘Kerry was talking about dealing with unfinished business for the New Year. I can’t think of anything particular that I should have done, and haven’t. I suppose it’s a good time to search your conscience, to take stock of your life, that sort of thing, but I’ve never fiddled my tax returns, always turned in a good job, never cheated a tradesman. No, I haven’t broken any laws that I can think of.’

Dora was tight-lipped. ‘What about broken promises?’

Leo blinked. ‘Me? No way.’

Dora swept out of the room, shutting the door behind her with more force than was necessary.

‘Now what have I done?’ said Leo.

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Bruce drove home on automatic pilot. Unlike Leo, he was much more aware of opportunities missed. There were regrets, here and there. He said, ‘Ouch!’ to himself once or twice, remembering a tactless remark here, a refusal to respond to a request there. He recalled, with an ache in his heart, the year in which his first dear wife had faded away and died. She’d been a brave woman and her faith in the hereafter had been strong. She’d gone with a smile into her future, and he’d fallen apart. And then his dear Sally had waltzed into his life and turned it happily, crazily, wonderfully, upside down.

He smiled. He still found it amazing that Sally could love him, faulty and inadequate man that he was.

Over lunch, he told her about Kerry’s suggestion that they look at unfinished business on New Year’s Day. ‘I’m not sure it’s a good idea. I know *you* don’t like to look back over the years when you weren’t happy and I don’t think I want to, either.’

She picked up his hand, and kissed it. ‘You are the best thing that ever happened to me. Just think; if you hadn’t come to my rescue when I was being bullied by my family, I’d have been gobbled up for breakfast. But I admire Kerry so much that I’ll take his suggestion seriously. It’s not a bad thing to take stock of our lives, isn’t it? I suppose I could be more forbearing of my sister’s little fancies. What do you think?’

He smiled. ‘You mean that when she wants you to run an errand for her, you ought to run and not just walk to do her bidding?’

She blushed. ‘Well, she’s all on her own, and she’s very busy and . . . no, you’re right. She does expect me to do a lot for her, but I don’t mind, really. Or, not very much.’ She played with his fingers. ‘You think I’m weak?’

He kissed her cheek. ‘I think you are loving and giving, and that I’m a very lucky man to have you. But, well, what do you think of her latest demand? She wants me to do her tax returns for free.’

Sally giggled. ‘No, of course you mustn’t. You spent hours last year helping her with this and that, and she can well afford to pay an accountant. Perhaps we should both be firmer with her in future?’

Bruce reflected that chance would be a fine thing . . .

Sally settled down to watch a programme about gardens, which were her passion in life, while Bruce picked up the local newspaper. The Mayor had visited an exhibition, some disabled people had taken part in a fun run for charity, two councillors showed some children the architect’s drawings for a new primary school. Routine items of news.

He let the paper drop. Unfinished business. His mind drifted back to his schooldays.

He’d been small for his age and clever while Darren had been a well-grown, handsome lad who cheated at games and bullied others to do his bidding. Bruce had been Darren’s favourite target. Bruce had survived, just. He’d gone on to university, after which he’d entered a firm of accountants and had risen to be a partner in the firm before his retirement a few years ago.

Darren had entered his father’s firm making . . . carpets? Importing them? Something like that. They’d seen one another occasionally at functions, but never spoken. Never needed to. They didn’t move in the same circles. Darren had married well, played golf at weekends, bought himself a fine town house and . . .

No, not just a house. Many years ago he’d bought a small market garden from a client of Bruce’s, with the intention of developing the site for housing. That was some years ago. Bruce passed the place every week on his way to the supermarket and he’d never noticed any activity on it. But then, sites were often bought and left fallow for some years in the hope that the price would rise. The question was, who now owned that site?

Bruce picked up the local paper again. Councillor Darren Ball and friends were pictured showing some children the architect’s plans of a new school which was shortly to be built on the site that had been sold by Bruce’s client so long ago. Presumably Darren had passed it on to someone else years ago and had no further interest in it. Or had he? Because if he still retained an interest in it, he shouldn’t have been involved in the negotiations to sell it, should he?

Bruce told himself that he had no reason to believe that Darren had behaved improperly. It was wrong to suspect the man of wrongdoing just because he’d been a bully and a cheat at school. Besides which, it was nothing to do with Bruce, was it?

He went into his study and switched on his computer. It wasn’t difficult to find out who owned which property nowadays. Perhaps Darren had, in good faith, sold the site on and there had never been any need to inform the council that he’d once owned it.

An hour later he had his answer.

Darren had sold the site on to a company which made a speciality of buying up odd pieces of land here and there for redevelopment. Darren Ball was a director of the company which had bought the site. He was also a director the company which had been contracted to build the new school. The question was; had Darren disclosed his interest to the council?

If he had concealed his conflict of interest he’d reap a double bonus, first when the council purchased the land, and second through his directorship of the firm contracted to build the new school. It might all be above board, but . . .

One more phone call, and Bruce had an answer to that, too. The council had no idea that Darren had ever owned the site, or that he held a directorship in the firm which was going to build the new school.

Bruce sat back in his chair. He asked himself if he were still afraid of Darren? On balance, he thought not. But, to spread muck on Darren’s name now would smack of revenge, and Christians were supposed to forgive. Bruce had tried to do so. He’d buried the memory of the bullying he’d experienced at school deep.

He needed to pray about this. And then, maybe, ask Kerry and Leo for their advice.

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Kerry checked through his Christmas cards before he sent them off for re-cycling. Most were from students past and present, giving news of what they were doing now. Golden lads and lasses who’d stayed with him for a while. Some had struggled with their courses, some had faced sorrow, broken relationships and failure, while many had done well.

There was one exception. He picked up a card with a hand-painted picture of a black cross on it, slashed with crimson. Not the usual image with which to celebrate Christmas. Inside was a photograph of a young woman.

He sat back in his chair, studying it. It was two years since he’d last seen Tansy, who’d been heartbreakingly anorexic. She’d clung to him as if to life itself . . . and he’d reacted by arranging to have her sectioned.

He’d always regretted that. He should have been more understanding, tried harder to help her. She hadn’t written any Christmas greetings in the card, just the telephone number of the place in which she was staying. Did that mean she wanted him to contact her again? Was this the unfinished business that God wanted him to attend to?

He reached for the telephone.

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Leo looked forward to supper time because Dora was a good cook. That evening she served him with a pork chop, apple sauce, roast potatoes and two vegetables.

‘Yum,’ he said, picking up his knife and fork. Then he saw that she only had a plate of salad for herself. ‘Are you trying to make me feel guilty by eating rabbit food?’

‘Not at all,’ she tackled her plateful with relish. ‘You’ll hear no more from me about your going on a diet.’

That took his appetite away. Or, almost. He pushed the roast potatoes aside and got on with the rest. She made no comment. She served him apple pie and cream for afters, while making do with a yogurt for herself.

He protested, ‘You don’t need to go on a diet, Dora. You’ve got a wonderful figure.’

‘It’s not bad for my age, but it could be better. I want to start a new exercise class, to keep my hips and knees from seizing up. I have to think how difficult it would be for you, if you had to push me around in a wheelchair.’

He put his spoon down to stare at her. Then he grinned. ‘I see. You’re trying to show me up for not going on a diet.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’ She cleared away the supper things. ‘By the way, I’ve been enquiring about a life insurance policy.’

He loosened his collar. ‘For you, or for me?’

‘For both of us. I don’t want to end up as a penniless widow, and if I die first, you’ll need to get someone in to look after you. The terms seem a bit steep, but they assure me it will be worth it.’

He pushed back his chair. ‘Dora, we’ve been married for nearly fifty years, and I can tell when you’re angry about something. What was all that earlier about broken promises?’

‘That’s for you to say, not me. Now, do you want me to break open the box of chocolates you bought today? Or perhaps you’d prefer a couple of biscuits to finish up with?’

She was planning to kill him with kindness? But no, there was something else behind all this. What was all that about broken promises?

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The consultant at the hospital was a sensible-looking man in his fifties. He welcomed Kerry into his office saying, ‘I am sorry you’ve had to come all this way. My secretary tells me you didn’t know Tansy was here for a while.’

‘She sent me a Christmas card with your phone number on it, so I imagined she wanted to see me. Perhaps you can you give me her new address?’

‘She spoke of you with fondness, talked of returning to the hostel some time. How was she when she stayed with you?’

Kerry talked about Tansy, her sweet ways and her obsessions. ‘But,’ with a sigh, ‘I had other calls on my time, other students to attend to. I ought to have been more patient, done more to help her. Eventually she moved into a different world and I was unable to help her.’

The consultant lifted his hands. ‘Don’t beat yourself up. We all try to help these youngsters but sometimes they slip away.’

Kerry was alarmed. ‘Why, what has happened?’

‘Somehow she managed to avoid taking her medication several days running. Her condition worsened. She thought she could fly. We found her at the bottom of a flight of stairs. She had become very frail. Her heart gave out.’

‘Ah, what a shame, what a terrible shame. The funeral is . . .?’

‘Last week. None of her family came. They were informed, but they’d given up on her long ago. It happens. Sometimes families can’t cope. Her parents, schoolteachers, people at the university . . . you and then the professionals . . . there’s a long list of people who tried to help her. There have been medical advances which have helped some people, but not all. Sometimes we have to accept that we are not the masters of life and death that we would like to be.’

‘That’s terrible. If I had understood earlier, known more about her illness. Do you have time to tell me what signs to look out for?’

The consultant was happy to oblige.

Kerry nodded, taking it all in. ‘You have a difficult job to do. Would you mind if I put you on my prayer list?’

The consultant did not reply, and avoided Kerry’s eye.

Kerry wondered if he had offended the man. He looked at his watch, thinking he’d taken up too much of this busy man’s time. He thought that Tansy was safe with Jesus, now. He personally had done his bit, and now he must let her go. Yet . . . ‘It’s a strange thing. I thought God wanted me to come here today. And now, it feels as if I’ve taken a false step in the dark, because Tansy no longer needs me.’ He tried to smile. ‘I mistook my directions.’

The consultant took a deep breath. ‘This is a tough job and there have been times recently when I’ve wondered what on earth I was doing, battling away against the odds. And it seemed that outside these walls nobody much cares what happens to our clients. Last night I wrote out a letter of resignation.’ He gestured to an envelope on his desk. ‘I was going to post it this morning . . . and then you came to remind me that there are other people out in the world who do care for those I am trying to help, that it is a worthwhile job that I’m trying to do, and that I must never stop caring, never stop trying. So, you see, your journey was not in vain.’

He tore the letter up. ‘Yes, please pray for me . . .’

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Leo grumped about the flat. Whatever did Dora mean by treating him as if he were a small boy? Killing him with fatty food, insuring his life, talking about broken promises . . . Huh!

What broken promises, eh?

Oh. Yes. Well . . . that!

But it wasn’t important, or he’d have done something about it.

Or would he?

Er, no. Now he came to think of it, he’d said they’d do this and that together on many occasions, and never found it convenient to redeem his promises. She’d been a wonderful wife to him and – with a wince – he’d neglected her.

He found her in the kitchen. ‘All right. I know when I’m beaten. I promised you we’d go dancing one night a week, didn’t I? And have days out walking in the country? What else do you have in mind for us to do together?’

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While he was waiting for the others, Bruce opened the latest edition of the local newspaper. The headline was ‘COUNCILLOR CHEAT!’ And underneath, in smaller letters, ‘Fraud Squad Alert!’

The picture showed Darren, who had just resigned as a councillor, hiding his face as he ducked into his car.

‘I’m glad you took our advice.’ Kerry put his Americano on the table. ‘And equally glad that the press did something about it. Good.’

Leo arrived. He placed a bottle of Diet Coca Cola on the table and eased himself into a chair. ‘Once the contracts to build the school had been signed, the only thing to do was to name and shame.’

Kerry slipped into the next chair, saying, ‘I see that Darren has resigned all his directorships—’

‘Not that that will stop the Fraud Squad now they’ve been alerted to his misdeeds.’

‘Unfinished business,’ mused Bruce. ‘At long last. The underdog gives the bully a bloody nose. Not that I think of myself as an underdog, exactly.’

‘We know that,’ said Leo. ‘It makes a satisfactory start to the New Year. As for me, I have resolved pay more attention to my health and to my wife, though only God knows how long I’ll be able to keep it up.’

‘Sometimes,’ said Kerry, ‘God prompts us to do something, and we can’t understand why. Maybe we never find out. I suppose that doesn’t matter. What counts is to keep praying, and keep listening. That seems to sum it up.’

‘Amen,’ said Bruce and Leo.