***Saying ‘Thank you!’***

 *Three retired friends meet for coffee and a chat*

***by Veronica Heley***

Leo pulled a face as he tasted his herbal tea. ‘Horrible stuff!’

The other two regarded him with amusement. Bruce, bald and brown, said, ‘There are alternatives. If you’ve really decided not to drink hot chocolate with cream and sugar during Lent . . .’

‘I feel this stuff’s doing me good,’ said Leo, patting a frontage which was not as commanding as it once had been. ‘So I’ll stick to it, while reserving the right to say “It’s horrible”. What I really wanted to say was that retirement can be the pits or not, as we choose. One minute we’re working all hours, have a position in the community, never have to think about domestic matters, and the next we’re sitting at home, getting under our wives’ feet and wondering how to fill the hours till our favourite programme comes up on the telly in the evening. I think we three have managed retirement pretty well.’

 Bruce, the retired accountant, sipped his cappuccino. ‘Leo, nobody could accuse you of idleness. You’ve got involved in all sorts of ventures since you retired officially. Hasn’t your Dora been saying you should relax and spend more time with her?’

 ‘She has, and I am. What with Old Time dancing, and one day a week dedicated to going out and about with her, we’re having a ball. *And* the diet she’s put me on is working.’

 The third member of the group said, ‘I don’t think we say “Thank you” often enough.’

 The others looked at him with a mixture of amusement and respect. What was he on about now?

Kerry had a gentle manner and a lined face which made him appear older than he really was. On retirement he’d turned his big old house into a hostel for university students, and his wise and caring concern had made a difference to the lives of all who came under his roof. He’d had a health scare recently and, to the observant Bruce, it seemed to have loosened his hold on life. Leon, rushing around as usual, hadn’t noticed.

 Bruce prompted, ‘We were talking about retirement?’

 ‘Ah yes,’ said Kerry. ‘Retirement has meant different things to each of us, hasn’t it? Leo has thrown himself into helping others in practical ways, while you, Bruce have never really stopped being an accountant, even if you have cut down your workload.’

 Bruce protested, ‘I have cut down. I do nearly all the cooking at home nowadays, and I’m beginning to learn about plants and to appreciate the garden that my dear Sally has created. I had no idea that making compost could be so fascinating. No, I’m serious,’ he said, as the other two looked sceptical. ‘There’s a lot more to composting than tipping the used tea bags into the bin.’

 Kerry smiled. ‘She’ll make a gardener of you yet. What I wanted to say was that I don’t think I have ever really thanked you, either of you, for everything you have done for me. Neither of you has mentioned the hours you and your wives put into keeping the hostel going while I was ill. Bruce kept the books immaculately and liaised with the university, and Leo, you were a godsend with your tools. I don’t think there’s anything you can’t make do or mend. The people I’ve taken on to replace you two do half the amount of work, and grumble all the time.’

Leo almost blushed. ‘Jack of all trades, that’s me.’

Kerry said, ‘I want to say “thank you” before I forget.’

‘No need,’ said Bruce, watching Kerry with narrowed eyes.

‘Yes, there is. There’s nothing in particular wrong with me, but I’m wearing out. I’ve come to the end of my useful life as Warden of the hostel . . .’ He raised his hand as Leo protested. ‘I’ve talked it over with my daughter. She’s long wanted me to sell up and go into sheltered housing. I didn’t like the idea of it at first, but now it seems an attractive proposition. I need a good rest.’

Leo blurted into speech. ‘Well, you could have a good holiday and then—’

‘No,’ said Bruce, accepting Kerry’s judgment. ‘No, Leo.’ And, to Kerry, ‘What can we do to help?’

‘The university is buying the house. They will appoint another warden and will continue to run it as a hostel for the time being. In the long run they plan to pull it down and put up a block of purpose-built student accommodation. I’ve arranged to leave after Easter and go into sheltered accommodation.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Leo. ‘I mean, you’ve done it for so long, you’ve made such a difference to the students’ lives . . .’

 ‘Yes,’ said Kerry, ‘It’s time to go.’

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Bruce pressed the ‘Send’ button on his computer, and stretched. He’d kept on the accounts for a few clients since he’d retired, but some were trickier to handle than others . . . and then there were appeals and frantic busyness. Well, that was another one put to bed.

 His wife Sally arrived in the doorway, saying ‘Phew! There’s a horrid cold wind out there, and it’s started to rain.’

 Bruce said, ‘Have you a minute?’

She came to sit beside him, removing her gardening gloves.

 He said, ‘Kerry’s dying.’

 ‘Yes, Dora thinks so, too, but Leo refuses to acknowledge it.’ She took his hand in hers. ‘It’s all right to grieve.’

 ‘We three have known one another for so long. I’ve always gone to him with my troubles. He’s so wise. I can’t think of anyone who can take his place. Though we’re not separated by so many years in time, I’ve always felt that I was the child and he was my parent.’

 ‘When your parent dies, you become the wise one. You’re his natural successor, Bruce. Only think how many people come to you nowadays asking for advice.’

 ‘On tax matters, yes.’

‘And on how to deal with life’s other little difficulties.’

He attempted a smile. ‘You mean, like how to cope with your demanding sister, who would like us to run around after her from morning tonight just because she’s had a couple of books published?’

She smiled. ‘Well . . . yes. And please note that I no longer burst into tears when she starts on at me. Oh, but Bruce! She’s got a new bee in her bonnet. You know her latest book is coming out in paperback next month? Well, she says that as she’s so busy and that we “have absolutely nothing whatever to do but enjoy ourselves”, we should do the publicity and organise the refreshments for her next talk in the local bookshop.’

Bruce was, almost, stirred to indignation. ‘If she thinks we have nothing to do . . .!’

‘I know. It will be time-consuming and drive you nuts.’

‘Better that than have her upsetting you.’ He thought about it. ‘Kerry says we don’t say “thank you” enough. Perhaps he’s right. I find it hard to tell you how much I love you . . .’ Here he looked away, up to the ceiling, ‘. . . though I suspect you know.’

She ironed out a smile. ‘Well, it’s good to have you put it into words now and then.’

‘Right. So I’ll do as your sister suggests, on the clear understanding that any time she starts on you, you refer her to me.’

She stroked his cheek. ‘Thank you. Now, before you get back to your computer, have you any thoughts about lunch at Easter? We’ve always gone to Kerry before, but I don’t think he’ll want to be bothered this year.’

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Leo also took his troubles home to his wife. He found Dora in the kitchen, laying out a salad for lunch.

 When she saw his face, she said, ‘Here’s a wet weekend. What’s up now?’

 He threw himself into a chair. ‘Kerry’s selling up and going into sheltered accommodation.’

 Dora nodded. ‘About time, too.’

 ‘But . . . ‘he waved his arms about.

 Dora put the plate of salad in front of him. ‘Turn that frown upside down. You haven’t forgotten that we’re going to see the grandchildren in their school play this evening?’

 ‘But . . . Kerry! I mean, it’s a shock.’

 Dora sighed. ‘Leo, the writing was on the wall when he came back from hospital. We’ve all rallied round and done what we could to keep the hostel going, but that’s a stop-gap, not a long-term solution. He’s tired. You can see it in the way he talks and walks. Be glad for him that he’ll make enough out of the sale to buy a nice retirement flat.’

 ‘But I enjoyed looking doing the maintenance at the hostel for him. The man he’s got now is pretty useless. I told Kerry that I wouldn’t mind carrying on, but he says he has to pay a proper odd job man because of the insurance. Another thing, what are we going to do at Easter? We’ve always gone to Kerry’s before, all of us, including the kids.’

 ‘Sally and I have been thinking about that. She and Bruce have a proper dining room and can seat eight people whereas we’ve only room for four in this little flat – not that I’m grumbling about that, because this place suits us just fine. We’re all going to Sally’s instead.’

 ‘It won’t be the same.’

 ‘Life moves on. Yes, we’re going to miss him. I know how much he’s meant to you all these years. It’s all right to grieve for ourselves, but not for him. His has been a life well lived, hasn’t it? More so than most. Now, I know you like to keep busy.’ Dora slapped a brochure onto the table. ‘A friend sent me this. They’re starting up a Repair Cafe, to help people who don’t know how to mend household things that have got broken. Why don’t you look into it? We could start one locally. Instead of throwing something away when it’s broken, it can be mended and restored to life.’

 Leo scowled, but he read the brochure while he tackled his lunch. Dora said no more. Either he would investigate the opportunity or not. It was true that he did hate to be idle, and he did have a practical nature, but this was not something he could do by himself. Other people would have to be involved; premises found, grants obtained, insurance covered. People would have to take courses in this and that. Perhaps the church would offer premises?

 It wasn’t going to take Kerry’s place in Leo’s life. No. But it might give him another direction.

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Kerry found that climbing the hill up to his house took more out of him than it used to do, so nowadays he took a cab home after meeting his friends. Driving up the road, they passed the low wall on which he’d so often paused to rest in the past, looking back down over the town and enjoying the flowers in the attractive garden nearby.

 Today, he noticed that the forsythia was out. What a blaze of glory! And the tulips had been under-planted with the brilliant blue of forget-me-nots. Stunning!

 Kerry had never seen whoever it was who took care of that garden. All these years he’d admired it and never thought to walk up the path, knock on the door, and tell the householder how much pleasure they’d given him.

 Had he been constrained by shyness? Probably.

 But now, at this late stage of his life, he thought how unimportant such things were. What did it matter if he were rebuffed? Surely it was a good thing to say how much he’d appreciated it? People seemed to think it was their duty to call attention to other people’s sins, so why not commend their good deeds as well?

 He carried this thought to its logical conclusion. How many times a day would it be right to thank someone for a job well done? The road-sweeper who cleared the gutters, the bus driver who negotiated badly-parked cars, the girl at the deli who served everyone with a smile?

 There’d been bad times and good in his life. His friends . . . ah, he’d been fortunate in having such good friends. He really must work out a practical way of saying ‘Thank you’ to them. Perhaps he’d buy Leo some special tool or other? And Bruce? A book on compost-making? He’d have to give the matter some serious consideration.

 He would make a list of people he wanted to say ‘thank you’ to. He had a feeling time was running out on him. He didn’t think he’d made a good job of his life so far. He’d been only middling good at business, had never been able to make his dear wife happy, and his only daughter had chosen to live in America. He’d tried to help other people by listening to their problems, but he wasn’t sure he’d done much good. He’d muddled along, trying to do his best, but had often thought his best not good enough. Well, such as it was . . . *thank you, Lord, for my life.*

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Bruce returned home to find his wife in the kitchen, preparing a stew. This was unusual. Sally hated cooking, and he did nearly all of it nowadays. He kissed her ear and said, ‘Smells good. But, isn’t it my turn to cook tonight?’

She kept her face turned from him. ‘My sister says that no man will put up with the way I treat you, that I neglect you shamefully and that one of these days you’ll wake up to the fact that I’m a bad wife and will find someone else to look after you.’

‘But you’re not in tears. Good.’ He put his arms around her from behind. ‘How often have I told you that your sister always gets the wrong end of the stick?’

‘I know. It’s sour grapes on her part because we’re so happy together.’ She gave a little shriek as Bruce kissed her ear. ‘Careful! You’ll get flour all over you!’

‘Fine by me. Darling Sally, now we have a cleaner once a week, the house is beautifully looked after, and your garden is a picture. I don’t want you in the kitchen all the time. It bores you, and I’ve been happy to learn a new skill. You are not a paid cook, but my very talented, loving wife . . . and I am a very lucky husband.’

She fiddled with his tie. ‘Er, how do you feel about cooking the meal on Easter Day? Kerry, Leo and Dora have already agreed to come, and their offspring, too, so it will be a bit of a squeeze, but we can make it a buffet lunch, can’t we? I was thinking we ought to invite Kerry’s daughter, too. She’ll be moving him after that weekend. I’ll cook a pudding. I’d like to do that, to say “thank you” to Kerry.’

‘We must include your sister. We can’t leave her out or she’ll be all on her own. Yes, why not? We may not be as brilliant at cooking as Kerry, but it will be all right.’

‘And,’ she said, still fiddling with his tie. ‘My sister – don’t wriggle so! She said

that I am being very selfish, neglecting you to spend my life in the garden, and that it would serve you right if you went off me, but that if I did my duty and opened up the garden for charity a couple of times a year for charity, that would be giving something back to the community. What do you think?’

 Bruce held her at arms’ length to think about it. He sighed, and shook his head. ‘I hate to admit it, but your sister may have had a good idea for once. Your green fingers have created something remarkable in our garden, and maybe we ought to share it with others.’ He looked for a paper and pencil. ‘Now, there must be guidelines. How do we apply?’

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Good Friday had come and gone, and the three old friends met for coffee as usual. Bruce and Leo were somewhat subdued but Kerry was smiling as he ticked off another item on his list.

‘I managed to see my old friend the barber this morning, who’s cut my hair for years. Another “thank you” done. And I understand that you two are already using the little presents I’ve sent you.’

‘Dora tells me I have to write you an old-fashioned “Thank you” note, with a fountain pen on good paper.’

 Bruce had already done so. ‘Most people say “Thank you” by email nowadays. I think we should at least send a card.’

Kerry put away his notebook. ‘That’s pretty well tidied me up, just in time for Easter. My daughter’s flying in later today. She’ll settle me into the new flat after the weekend, pack up what she needs to keep from our old home, and be back with her husband in America by the end of the week. So, Bruce, how did the talk at the bookshop go?’

‘It went surprisingly well. My sister-in-law has her faults, but she puts on a good show. The talk was well attended, and she actually remembered to thank everyone for helping – which must be something of a first! And, we’ve just heard that we can open our garden for a couple of afternoons in the summer, as part of the local gardening club. Sally’s sister said that if we liked, she’d formally open the garden for us – as the local celebrity, you know.’

Leo guffawed, and Kerry smiled.

Bruce sighed with mock regret. ‘We had to decline. The Gardening Club rules won’t allow it.’ He turned to Leo. ‘And how’s the Repair Club coming on?’

‘It’s taking for ever to set up. We’ve got volunteers coming out of the woodwork, people who have the skills we need, and the church will provide accommodation, tea and coffee. We’ve even got the local paper to say they’ll give it a paragraph or two when we eventually open in a couple of months’ time. But who knows if anyone will actually turn up with things that need repair?’

Kerry nodded. ‘I’m sure they will. And, you’re the right man for that job, Leo.’

Leo shifted in his seat. ‘I hope you don’t mind my mentioning it, but you’re looking tired today, Kerry.’

‘I’m fine. But I must admit I’ll be grateful if Bruce can give me a lift back up the hill. I’ve got one more “Thank you” to do.’

 Bruce said, ‘A pleasure.’ He thought, *For the last time.*

Half way up the hill, Kerry asked Bruce to let him out, so that he could sit on the wall and look out over the town for a few minutes.

Bruce said he wanted to check the car’s tyres. He’d drop Kerry off and return for him in a few minutes time.

 Kerry sat on the wall, looking down on the town. The trees were beginning to green over. There were a couple of football matches being played in the park some distance away. In the garden behind him, the early tulips had all been taken up, but narcissi and the later Darwin tulips were in full flower. His last ‘Thank you’ must be to the householder, to say how much pleasure this garden had given him over the years.

 In a few minutes, Bruce drove back up the road and parked beside the wall where his friend was sitting. Kerry was smiling.

Bruce bowed his head over the steering wheel.

 *Kerry left his old body behind. He went up the path to the house, and knocked on the door. It opened, and he stepped though into glory.*

Veronica Heley’s latest book, ‘False Impression’ is published by Severn House.