***CORIN’S CHRISTMAS GIFT***

***A short story by Veronica Heley***

Bruce and Leo met outside the coffee shop, stopped and looked around them with a hunted air. Yes, they had indeed been followed.

‘I can’t believe it!’ Big Leo was red with indignation. ‘He’s trailed me from the car park. That’s the third time this week.’

Bruce, bald and brown, tried to look amused. ‘Yesterday, and the day before, he tailed me from home to the shops and back.’

They went in, found themselves seats and ordered a black coffee for Bruce, and hot chocolate for Leo. Corin followed them in, and took a seat some way off.

Leo spooned sugar into his hot chocolate and wished he hadn’t promised his wife not to have cream on it as well. ‘Can’t we get the police to stop him? He abuses our hospitality by telling lies to our wives, we forbid him to enter our homes and he turns to stalking us. It’s getting up my wick. Last night I dreamed he was standing at the foot of the bed and woke myself up, shouting at him. Dora was not amused. Don’t say it’s all in my mind, because I know that it is. And don’t tell me I should go to the doctor for some pills, because it isn’t me that’s the problem; it’s him.’

‘I agree.’ Bruce said. ‘I think Corin is the one who needs a doctor. I’m sorry for him in a way, being left at the altar like that so many years ago, but—’

‘What’s it got to do with us if the girl aborted his child?’

‘We don’t know that that’s what happened.’

‘He thinks it is.’

‘Yes,’ said Bruce. ‘And that’s the problem. He can’t get over it. I think he may not be entirely sane nowadays.’

‘So why does he have to take it out on us? We tried to help him, didn’t we?’

‘We did. Perhaps we’re the only people who have ever tried to help him. Perhaps that’s why he can’t let us out of his sight. He’s still looking to us for answers.’

Leo shuddered. ‘Ugh. Somebody walked over my grave. Dora thinks he ought to be sectioned because his behaviour is not rational. I don’t know how you can be so calm about it. What does your wife think about his following you everywhere?’

‘He upset her terribly when he said I was having an affair with someone else. She knows it was a lie, but her first husband was a bully who undermined her self-confidence and now she’s nervous, afraid that I might really look elsewhere.’

‘As if! Who’d look elsewhere when married to your lovely Sally!’ Leo was overtaken with embarrassment. ‘Oh, I don’t mean that I would ever look . . . I mean, my Dora has . . . Well, you know what I mean.’

‘I do.’ Bruce smiled. ‘And you’re quite right. I don’t want to look anywhere else, either. I’ve thought of going to the police and taking out an injunction to stop him following us, but I think it has to go on for longer than a week.’ He looked at his watch. ‘I promised to pop in to Marks & Spencers and pick up some odds and ends from the food department on my way home. Sally’s at church, helping with the Christmas decorations.’

‘I’ll come with you. Dora likes their mint humbugs.’

Corin followed them both out of the coffee shop and along the road to the pedestrian crossing. Were the lights just about to change from green? Bruce and Leo put on a spurt to get across in time and then . . .

A scream from behind them.

A soft, heavy bump.

Car brakes screeched. A bus roared to an emergency stop. Cries of alarm.

Bruce and Leo were not the only ones to stop and gape.

In the middle of the road was a child’s buggy, skewed, broken. A pink blanket lay nearby, together with a floppy toy rabbit.

The driver of the car who’d caused the accident stared blankly ahead. In shock.

A young woman in a headscarf, screamed again, limping towards . . .

. . . a toddler. A little girl, dark-skinned. Thrown from her buggy onto the road. Not hurt? Scrambling to her feet? Opening her mouth to yell?

A man’s hand reached out from under the car.

An onlooker cried, ‘Help him! Under the car! He pushed her out of the way . . .!’

Horns blared. Traffic stalled.

Passers-by froze, horror-struck. The woman with the buggy had played last across the road behind Bruce and Leo. And lost.

Corin had pushed her and the buggy out of the way, and been run over himself.

Bruce said, ‘Corin?’

Leo cleared his throat. ‘Yes. Under the car, I think.’

The woman swooped on the child. The child wailed. Mother and child disappeared into the crowd.

The hand that was all that could be seen of Corin . . . did it move?

Where was a policeman when you wanted one?

A large young man with a shaved head took charge. Mobile phones were pressed into service. Traffic going the other way was waved on. The driver of the killer car was helped from her seat and taken, shaking, to the side of the road.

Leo said, ‘We must help.’ And didn’t know what to do.

Bruce said, ‘If there’s enough of us, maybe we can lift the car off him.’

A police car used its siren, coming down the road. Thank God!

The traffic began to move, slowly, in the other direction. The drivers and passengers in every car wanted to look.

Statements were taken. Back-up was called for.

An ambulance arrived. Where was the mother and child? Gone. No one knew where. The broken buggy was taken to the pavement. The pink blanket and toy disappeared.

Someone in a uniform organised a number of passersby, including Bruce and Leo, to lift the car up, enabling the ambulance men to load Corin onto a stretcher and take him away.

Traffic began to move again.

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Bruce and Leo waited at the hospital while Corin was taken to the operating theatre. Emergency.

Questions were asked: Who was his next of kin?

Bruce and Leo thought of the girl Corin had married, who had left him on their wedding night. They had no idea where she might be found, and it seemed unlikely that she would want to be linked to Corin nowadays. They didn’t know of anyone else.

They waited. And waited.

Finally, a tired surgeon came to give them some news.

‘You’re the next of kin, I gather?’ He consulted a clipboard. ‘He gave us a couple of names. Bruce something . . .? And a phone number.’

‘That’s me,’ said Bruce. ‘I’m not his next of kin. In truth we don’t think he has any family. But we’ve known him a while and are concerned about him.’

‘Multiple injuries to his legs, mostly fixed. Some internal bleeding. He’s come through the operation though he’s lost a lot of blood. He’s in intensive care. I suggest you ring in the morning.’

When they left the hospital, it was dark. A cold winter’s evening. There were lights in the sky, not of stars, but of aircraft coming in to land. There would be a frost that night. How many days left to Christmas?

Leo said, ‘I didn’t like the man, but I’m sorry for him. He’ll be spending Christmas on crutches. That can’t be brilliant. But I’m not inviting him to spend it with us. He simply can’t be trusted.’

Bruce nodded. ‘I’ll ring the hospital in the morning and let you know how he is.’

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‘He died? Are you sure?’ Bruce knew he was being absurd, asking if the hospital were sure that Corin had died. Shock can make you say and do stupid things.

Yes, they were sure. Would Mr Bruce care to collect Mr Corin’s effects from the hospital? His keys, mobile phone, wallet, and watch, for instance.

Bruce rang Leo. ‘Corin didn’t make it. A blood clot in the night. There was nothing they could do.’

‘Poor man. What a way to go.’

‘I have to collect his keys. Will you come with me to his flat this afternoon? We need to look for his address book, see if we can find any relatives, or friends who need to be informed of his death. With any luck, we can trace his solicitor, and hand the lot over to him.’

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Once at the flat, Leo said, ‘It feels as if we’re burgling the place, going in like this.’

Bruce nodded. He didn’t like it either. The flat was neat and tidy, dust-free. Corin must have had a cleaner. Bruce decided to leave a note for her.

An artificial Christmas tree stood in the sitting room with its arms upraised. A box of baubles waited for attention nearby.

A nativity set was on the mantelpiece, carefully arranged, together with a single card from a painter and decorator.

There were three Christmas cards on the glass-topped table, addressed but not stamped. Two were for Bruce and Leo. The third was for a children’s charity, with a cheque attached.

Bruce said, ‘The bank won’t honour the cheque now he’s dead. I’ll deal with that. I may be able to recover the money from his estate, but if not, I’ll stand the cost myself.’

Leo poked around the kitchen. ‘He left his breakfast dishes in the dish washer, and there’s food in the fridge and freezer. What do we do about that?’

Bruce explored the drawers of a desk. ‘The solicitor will find someone to take over . . . if I can only find his address.’

‘He was neat and tidy, I’ll give him that,’ said Leo. ‘Tidier than I am. He even made his bed before he left, and put his dirty linen in the washing machine.’

Bruce muttered to himself. ‘Files for paid bills, insurances, bank statements. Where’s his address book? Ah, this is it. Only half a dozen addresses in it. Hm, this may be his solicitor.’ He tried the number, and left a message for someone to ring him.

Bruce rang the other names in the address book; acquaintances. No relatives. Corin’s laptop contained business details only. No Facebook, no social media. He had a subscription to a puzzle magazine. Some library books which would have to be returned.

A life interrupted. An empty life.

There was one last drawer to explore. Bruce exclaimed. ‘Leo! He’s made a will, and who do you think are the joint executors and sole heirs to his estate?’

‘His ex-wife?’

‘No. Us. We are.

‘What!’

The phone rang. It was Corin’s solicitor, returning Bruce’s call. Bruce broke the news of Corin’s death and asked for advice as to what to do next. The solicitor asked Bruce and Leo to go in to see him as soon as possible. It appeared that Corin had no family left, but that he’d wanted to reward Bruce and Leo for being kind to him.

Leo said, ‘I’m in shock! How dare he do that to us! It’s as if he’s reaching out to us still, in spite of all our efforts to get free. But, look what I found by his bedside.’ He handed Bruce a bible.

Bruce turned the pages. Corin had used the concordance to look up passages on forgiveness. Some of them had been scored through with angry slashes. Some had been underlined. Exclamation and question marks were everywhere.

‘Forgiveness,’ said Leo. ‘Do you think he was trying to come to terms with what his wife had done to him?’

‘I hope so,’ said Bruce. ‘I pray that he did.’

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Together with their wives, Bruce and Leo organised the shutting up of Corin’s flat. Bruce registered Corin’s death and closed his accounts. Leo cleared out Corin’s clothes, located his car and arranged for it to be garaged. Probate was applied for.

A date was set for Corin’s cremation. Bruce and Leo, with their wives, plus Corin’s solicitor, were the only people at the crematorium.

Another bleak, grey sky day.

‘Poor Corin,’ sighed Leo’s wife, Dora, as they left the chapel. ‘I didn’t like him. He told such lies! He put Leo under so much stress. And yet . . .’

‘I agree,’ said Sally, ‘if he’d had more time, do you think he’d have been able to work through his problems?’

The solicitor was in a hurry. ‘Everyone got a lift home? Yes?’ He looked at his watch, didn’t wait for a reply, and departed.

Leo said, ‘I suppose it’s only natural that a solicitor should want to clear off. He didn’t know Corin even as well as we did. Why should he hang around? I expect he’s got Christmas shopping to do, and an office party to attend.’

Bruce agreed. ‘He only met Corin twice; once to take his instructions for the will, and the second time to have it signed. He can’t pretend a grief he doesn’t feel, and why should he?’

Sally said, ‘Strangely enough, I do feel some grief. Corin was so wrong-headed, and he caused us so much trouble. And yet . . .’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Dora. ‘I can’t get him out of my mind.’

‘That hollow feeling you’re talking about is hunger,’ said Leo. ‘Let’s treat ourselves to lunch somewhere. My treat. What do you say, Dora?’

Dora shook her finger at her husband. ‘Provided it’s not an excuse to come off your diet, Leo! You haven’t lost any weight for weeks.’

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‘What shall you do with Corin’s money?’ Sally was neatly wrapping Christmas presents, while Bruce opened the post.

Bruce said, ‘What would you do with it?’

Sally said, ‘Put your finger just there.’ He did so, and she tied the neatest of bows. When Sally wrapped a parcel, it became a thing of beauty. She said, ‘I haven’t been able to get Corin out of my mind. I’ve tried to think what it was like to be him. The girl he loved left him at the altar and the child he was expecting to have . . . well, it may never have existed but he’d convinced himself that it had. He couldn’t forgive and forget. It ate into him. Then he met us. We’re not perfect; far from it. But with all our faults we have love in our marriage and loving-kindness in our friendships. Even more important, we love and trust in our future with God. Corin looked at the contrast with his own life, and it hurt. That’s why he lashed out and tried to destroy us. And I think, yes I really think, I have forgiven him. How about you?’

Bruce picked up her hand and held it against his cheek. ‘Yes, I have forgiven him, though not without a struggle. It riled me that he upset you, but . . . yes, I have forgiven him. So, any ideas about what we should do with the money?’

‘We could go on a world cruise. Or,’ with a sly glance, ‘we might update the kitchen.’

They both laughed at that, since Sally very rarely entered the kitchen.

Sally said, ‘What does Leo think we should do with the money?’

‘Like us, he doesn’t have any pressing money worries. His son would like money for the grandchildren. Dora says she doesn’t want to take anything from Corin, and if Leo wants to kill himself with over-eating then he should go ahead and do so, but not to bother her about it.’

Sally laid aside the last, perfectly presented gift for the guests they were expecting on Christmas Day. ‘Do you know what I think Corin would have liked? To give it to the children.’

Bruce looked down at the last card they’d received. It was from a Christian children’s charity, thanking Bruce for the donation he’d sent on behalf of Corin.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Why not? I’m pretty sure Leo will go along with that, too.’

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Christmas Day. And all the bells do ring.

Well, it’s not often they ring the bells, nowadays.

Christmas lunch was to be at Bruce and Sally’s house, since they had a big dining-room which would hold all their guests. Sally rarely cooked, so it had been arranged that Leo would drop Dora there after church, to help with the preparation of the meal.

But when Dora got out of the car, she discovered she must have mislaid one of her brand-new expensive gloves. She was sure she’d arrived at church with a pair, but now . . . could she have left one in the pew?

Leo went back to church to look for it. He’d been a steward for many years, so had a key, and he didn’t bother to turn the lights on when he arrived. The church should be empty at that time, although there would be a service around the crib that afternoon. Meanwhile, the place was full of shadows with spicy overtones from the Christmas decorations, and gleams of silver and gold from the decorations on the window sills.

Leo found Dora’s glove easily enough, but didn’t leave straight away. It was good to be quiet for a short time. The morning service had been joyful. Noisy. He sat in a pew, and allowed himself to relax.

The church was quiet. Almost, it was listening for something.

Leo knew he wasn’t as brainy as Bruce. But sometimes he had odd fancies . . . not many, and not often. It seemed to him that the church was waiting for something? Or someone. What nonsense!

He shook his head at himself.

Someone had left a bible open in that pew.

‘*God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son. . .’*

How often Leo had read and listened to those words. Words of comfort and joy.

Corin had given his life to save a child. Perhaps he hadn’t meant to do so. Perhaps he had just acted on the spur of the moment? Nevertheless, he had done so. He’d saved a child who possibly wasn’t even a Christian. The mother had worn a headscarf, was probably a Muslim.

Did that matter?

No. Leo thought it didn’t. It comforted him, too, to realise that he’d finally forgiven Corin.

Corin had been so adamant that he couldn’t forgive his wife and yet the evidence in his bible showed that he’d been wrestling with the idea recently. Leo couldn’t tell whether or not Corin had achieved release from his grief and anger. Perhaps not, since when he died he’d still been wanting help from Bruce and Leo?

But perhaps he had.

In any case, Corin was now at peace.

God would judge Corin, who was now safe in God’s hands. It was a comforting thought.

You could say that Corin’s gift for Christmas was a life given for a child.

Christ had come to earth as a child, and more children would have a better life because of Corin’s gift.

In the shadows a man whom Leo hadn’t noticed before, got up from a pew on the other side of the church and walked away down the aisle.

Leo gasped. Was it . . . could it be . . .? It looked like Corin. But no, Corin was dead!

The man opened the doors onto the outside world.

The sun had come out. The man stood there, silhouetted against a shaft of sunlight . . . and was gone.

Leo shook himself. He looked at his watch. It was time he was on his way. There was the table to be laid, and chairs to be carried. Everyday matters.

He went out into the sunshine.

On Christmas Day the bells do ring, and people do sing. Praise the Lord. Alleluia.