***Remember Me!***

*Our friends solve one puzzle, only to be faced with another.*

*A short story by Veronica Heley*

‘Never volunteer!’

Big Leo could remember his father telling him that. So why had he done it?

It was half way through Lent and the church hall was thronged for the Spring Craft Fair. As people paid to enter, they were given a lucky ticket for a draw to be held at the end of the afternoon. Some people had come for only a short time and then left, but there was always a crowd round the most popular stalls . . . and the tea urn.

Leo turned himself into a jack of all trades, carting trays here, and trolleying urns there. For the last hour of the day he manned the door, during which time the numbers for the Lucky Draw were called out. After that the crowds thinned out. Stall holders began to pack away unsold items and ferry them out of the hall.

Leo had been on the go all day. He looked at his watch, and then he looked around for his wife. When would Dora be ready to leave? She’d been washing up for hours.

Someone yelled a warning. An elderly woman had slipped and fallen. A first-aider was summoned. The woman hadn’t broken anything, but she was badly shaken. The chief steward, who had been orchestrating the events of the day like a conductor, said he’d give the woman a lift home, if only someone else would distribute the last of the prizes for the Lucky Draw.

Leo volunteered, thinking it would only take him a few minutes to contact the winners and drop their prizes off. As he said later, ‘I never learn!’

After supper at home, Leo got out his mobile and started phoning around. As people had been given their tickets, they’d written their name and phone numbers on the counterfoil. In a short while Leo had arranged for a voucher for two at a local restaurant to go to an elderly couple, and a large teddy bear to a young mother . . . and so on. By bedtime Leo had accounted for all but one of the tickets.

‘That’s odd,’ he said to Dora, as they switched lights off and retired to bed. ‘Each time I ring this number and ask for Arnold, the phone goes down.’

Dora yawned. ‘Wrong number?’

‘No, they answer the phone with the number that’s on the ticket, and it’s a woman who picks up the phone. But if Arnold lives there, she’s not letting on. I wouldn’t worry so much if it was a piddling little prize, but it’s a hamper from the deli and it’s worth a few bob.’

‘Try them again in the morning.’

So Leo did. When he asked for Arnold, the woman at the other end shouted, ‘How dare you! If you ring once more, I’ll report you to the police!’ and slammed the phone down.

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Leo and Dora enjoyed having lunch with friends occasionally. Bruce was a retired accountant who still, now and then, used his skills in the community. Bald, lean and brown, he offered a contrast to Leo who struggled to maintain a reasonable weight since his retirement. Bruce usually cooked lunch, since his delightful wife Sally was happier in the garden than in the kitchen.

When they’d all done justice to the food and were having a cup of coffee afterwards, Leo recounted the saga of the unclaimed ticket. He confessed, ‘I don’t know what to do about it. The hamper was our star prize, and it’s sitting in the deli waiting to be collected.’

‘Let’s have a look at the ticket,’ said Bruce. He turned it over. ‘Clearly written figures in an educated hand. It’s a low numbered ticket. That would have been given out fairly early in the day, wouldn’t it? Could you find out who was on the door then? They might remember who had it.’

‘Let’s see.’ Sally held out her hand, and Bruce passed the ticket over to her. ‘Arnold. That’s not a common name.’

Dora said, ‘I don’t think I know anyone called Arnold.’

Sally was in reminiscence mode. ‘Neither do I, but I remember, years ago, when we were all first married and going to have babies . . . well, not me, of course, I couldn’t, and it doesn’t bother me now, though it did at the time . . .’

They all knew that Sally’s first marriage had been childless, and that her husband had been abusive. Now she was happily married to Bruce, who appreciated her many gifts. Bruce put his arm round Sally, which was as far as he’d go in public to show how much he loved her.

Dora prompted Sally, ‘You knew someone called Arnold in the old days?’

‘No, but one of my friends’ father was called Arnold. She said he hated the name and used his initials instead. She moved away because of her husband’s job and we lost touch. He was the headmaster of a private school.’

‘A. G. Wright, do you mean?’ said Leo. ‘I was on a committee with him for a year or so. Golfing mad. He died not long ago, aged eighty something. I remember seeing the obituary in the local paper.’

Sally said, ‘Joy, her name was. Joy Wright. And her husband was called . . . no, it’s gone.’

Bruce went to fetch the local telephone directory. ‘A. G. Wright? If he wasn’t ex-directory and he didn’t die so long ago, maybe he’s still listed.’

‘That’s a long shot,’ said Leo.

‘The politics of desperation.’ Bruce held out his hand for the ticket. ‘Let’s see . . .’ He checked the number on the ticket against the number in the book and raised his eyebrows. ‘It’s the same number. I expect Joy has come back here for the funeral and subsequent tidying up.’ He got out his smartphone, and pressed buttons. The phone rang and rang. Finally it switched to voice mail. Bruce said, ‘Do I leave a message?’

Leo shrugged.

Dora said, ‘I don’t think we should mention the Lucky Draw.’

Sally said, ‘Give it here.’

Bruce handed it over to her and Sally said, ‘This is a voice from the past. Do you remember someone called Sally from the old days? I’d love to meet up with Joy again. I’ll leave my telephone number, now.’ And she did.

Dora said, ‘You’re braver than I am, Sally. When Leo rang, the woman at the other end nearly bit his head off for mentioning Arnold.’

Sally blushed. ‘I’m not brave. If I’m wrong and Joy isn’t connected to the ticket, then it really doesn’t matter if I’ve made a mistake. If I’m right, then Leo’s mystery is solved.’

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Later that day, long after Leo and Dora had gone home, a woman rang and asked to speak to Sally.

‘That’s me,’ said Sally. ‘Is that Joy?’

‘I wish,’ said the voice at the other end of the phone. “Joy” and I are not well acquainted. But yes, that used to be my name.’

Sally took a deep breath. She was about to take a huge risk. ‘Because of Arnold?’

‘Arnold is dead.’ There were tears in her voice.

Sally wished she could hand the phone call over to her husband, who was so good at listening to people, or to Leo, who was all heart . . . or better still, to Dora, who had done some counselling in her time.

She thought, *Dear Lord, help! I’m no good at this!*

Then she realised that there was no one else to deal with it. And if she didn’t, no one else would. ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘No. I just wanted to say, don’t ring again. It’s too upsetting. I’m going to put the phone down now.’

‘No, don’t do that! Can we meet?’

A long, long pause. Sally could hear Joy’s breathing. And then the phone clicked off.

Bruce sang out from the other room, ‘Your programme’s starting on the telly!’

Sally said, ‘Bother the programme! Bruce, something is very wrong with Joy. What do we do about it?’ And she explained.

Bruce didn’t say ‘It’s not our problem.’ He didn’t say, ‘Leave it to Leo.’

He said, ‘Let’s give it some thought.’

‘And, do you think . . . a spot of prayer?’

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Sally did not consider herself to be clever since her father and her first husband had both told her she was rubbish. Bruce said she was brilliant at what she did best, and it didn’t matter a toss if she couldn’t do complicated sums in her head. Her garden was a picture throughout the year and she provided flowers and plants for anyone who was ill, and to decorate the church. She was the first person to offer practical help in an emergency but the last to try to express her thoughts in words.

To her surprise and distress, Bruce had said it was up to Sally to find out what Joy’s problem might be.

‘But I don’t know how to talk to people. Can’t you do it? You’re so much cleverer than I.’

‘You don’t need to be clever to help people in trouble. You show them you care, and then you let them talk. All you have to do is to listen.’

‘It can’t be that simple.’

‘I didn’t say it was easy. But neither Leo nor I, nor Dora, know the woman who is in trouble, and you do. I’ll take you to the house but stay in the car outside while you talk to her.’

‘If she shouts at me, as she did to Leo, my knees will turn to jelly and I’ll run away.’

‘Being shouted at is frightening, but when you remember how much we believe Joy is hurting, you’ll find the courage to stay. I’ll be praying all the time you’re with her.’

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At mid-day Sally walked up the path to the front door of a large, detached Edwardian house, and rang the bell. To her eyes, the place looked neglected. There was a ‘For Sale’ sign tied to the gatepost.

The sky was overcast. No one came to the door. Surely no one was at home and she could leave? She looked back at the road, to where Bruce was sitting in his car. He smiled at her, and waved encouragement.

The door opened a little way, and a shadowy figure appeared, wearing a man’s dressing-gown over pyjamas.

Sally forgot her fears and stepped forward to put her arms around her old friend. ‘Joy! Oh, my dear, whatever is the matter? You know me, don’t you? Sally. You used to call me “Silly Sally”, remember?’

‘Sally.’ Joy put up a shaking hand to her old friend’s cheek. ‘I haven’t contacted anyone since we came back to settle things. He died, you know.’

‘May I come in?’ said Sally, urging her friend into the hall and closing the front door behind her.

Joy flinched. ‘The house is in a mess.’

‘That doesn’t matter.’ Sally rubbed her friend’s cold fingers. ‘Oh, you’re freezing. Are you all alone? Can I make you a cuppa?’

‘I suppose.’ Joy led the way across a square hall. Bookcases lined the walls of the hall and, through open doors, Sally could see rooms crammed with heavy, old-style furniture. The house smelled of damp, there was dust everywhere, and wallpaper drooped from the ceiling.

The kitchen was no better. Some of the glass-fronted cupboards had been emptied and the contents left on a central table. There was a musty, eggy smell. Somewhere a tap was dripping.

Sally was horrified. She put the kettle on – an old-fashioned kettle on an old-fashioned stove – and started on a sink full of dirty dishes till she found there was no hot water. ‘Where’s your husband?’

‘He was here, but he’s gone back home. To what used to be our home.’ She wailed, ‘I told him to go, and he did. Leaving me all alone.’

It sounded as if Joy hadn’t really wanted her husband to leave her.

Sally said, ‘Could you bear to tell me what happened?’

Joy sank into a chair. She wound her arms around herself, and began to rock to and fro. ‘It was all Hugh’s fault. We should never have gone away. I told him! But he wouldn’t listen. And now look what’s happened.’

Sally put a mug of tea in front of her friend. She didn’t know what to say to her. How wrong Bruce had been to think she could manage this difficult conversation!

Joy put her cold hands around the mug to warm them. She’d lost weight, and her hair was unkempt. Sally could hardly recognise the vibrant, smiling girl she had once known. She said, ‘Were you close to your father?’

‘Of course I was. I rang him every week, and we met him for a meal now and then; birthdays and Christmas. You know? He was managing just fine. He was a member of the gold club. He had lots of friends.’

Sally looked around at the neglected kitchen, and wondered if Mr Wright had really been managing all that well. ‘Was he eating properly?’

‘Of course he was. What do you mean, “Was he eating properly?”

‘I was just thinking that some men don’t know how to look after themselves after their wives die.’

‘He had a cleaner, and someone to put a ready meal in the microwave for him. He told me not to fuss. I did think that when we retired we’d see more of him, but Hugh wanted to travel and Dad said he was perfectly all right, so we took him at his word. I kept telling Hugh that I was worried about Dad, and he refused to listen. It’s always what he wants that happens, isn’t it! “One last trip,” he said, “before it gets too hot to travel around India.” Dad died while we were enjoying ourselves in New Delhi. I ought to have been here. If only Hugh had listened to me.’

Did Joy blame her husband for neglecting her father? Instead of blaming herself?

Joy said, ‘The worst of it is that now Hugh pretends he was *so* fond of his father-in-law that he’s totally devastated by his death. As I said to him, “Fine words butter no parsnips!” Just because he wanted to see the Taj Mahal by moonlight! Couldn’t he have waited a year? We should have been here, done something about the house . . .’ She broke off, shaking her head.

Sally said, ‘I am so sorry. I know what it is like to lose your parents. Suddenly, you’re the grown up.’ She looked around at the damp walls and dated kitchen units. She remembered the ‘For Sale’ notice outside. ‘You are selling the house?’

‘Hugh got an estate agent round when my back was turned. I was furious when I found out. He keeps telling me to pull myself together. I can’t stand the sight of him. I’m going to divorce him, so I might as well live here as anywhere else.’

Sally wondered if her friend might be clinically depressed. ‘Have you seen a doctor?’

‘I don’t need a doctor. Hugh thinks that taking a pill will make my grief go away. He’s wrong.’

Sally ventured to say, ‘Grief takes people different ways.’ She had heard that bereaved people work through various stages of denial and blame before reaching acceptance. But what did she really know about it?

Joy said, ‘I can’t cry. I can’t sleep, either.’

Sally had an idea. ‘Was it you or Hugh who wrote Arnold’s name on the Lucky Draw ticket at the Craft Fair on Saturday?’

‘What? What are you talking about? I haven’t been out of the house for days.’

‘Then it must have been Hugh who went to the Craft Fair.’

‘Is that where he got that hideous vase? I suppose he bought it out of guilt. He presented it to me as if it would make up for the loss of my father. I told him to dump it in the trash can.’

‘So it was Hugh who wrote Arnold’s name on the draw ticket? It sounds as if his father-in-law is always in his thoughts.’

‘So he should be! If Hugh hadn’t insisted we go abroad that last time, I would have been here to look after Dad, and he wouldn’t have died. I can’t forgive Hugh for that. I told him to get out, to go back home. I never want to see him again.’

‘Look to the future,’ said Sally. ‘If you divorce him you’ll be all alone for the rest of your life. No one to talk to. No one to care about. And Hugh still cares, remember, or he wouldn’t have bought you that vase. I care, too.’

‘How can you? We haven’t seen one another for years.’

‘Not seeing someone doesn’t mean they’re out of your mind. As you’ve proved, you and Hugh. You can’t see Arnold now, but he’s still in your lives. And your husband wrote his name on that ticket. It’s for a hamper of good things to eat, by the way.’

Joy pulled a face. ‘You think Dad was sending us a message to eat and enjoy ourselves while he lies in the grave?’ Her face worked. Finally, she broke down. She wept with abandon, mouth distorted, yelling ‘No!’ She pounded on the table with her fists. Eventually she grew calmer, shuddering to an exhausted silence.

Sally said, ‘You can’t stay here in this damp house, or you’ll go down with something. You need looking after for a while. You’d better come home with me.’

‘No, I can’t leave,’ said Joy. ‘This is Dad’s house, and I’m not having it sold over my head.’

‘Your father’s no longer with us, but your husband is. You really need to talk to him. Look, whatever mistakes have been made, Hugh seems to be grieving for your father, just as you are. Hugh is still here, and he still loves you.’

‘Nonsense! Or he wouldn’t have left me here all alone.’

‘You told him to go away, remember? I promise you that things will get better. This is not the end of everything; it’s the beginning. Think about a long, hot bath with bath essence, and a good meal. Think about having a new hairdo, and some new clothes. After that you and Hugh can begin to think how to put your father’s house to rights. Whether you sell it or live in it, this house needs some work done on it.’

‘I can’t think beyond “endings”.’

‘Nothing ends,’ said Sally, who hadn’t known she knew this before. ‘Things change; of course they do. Plants die. People die. But that’s not the end. It’s the beginning.’

Joy’s mouth turned down.. ‘Hugh says, “We’re none of us going to get out of here alive!” And then he laughs, and says he’s looking forward to it. I don’t know how he can laugh about things. I can’t.’

Sally drew her friend out of her chair. ‘I’m not leaving you here alone. My husband’s waiting outside in the car. Let’s get you dressed. We’ll pack an overnight bag, ring Hugh and tell him where to find you.’

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Joy stayed with Sally and Bruce for a while. She cried and talked and cried again. She agreed to have some counselling. In due course, she allowed Hugh to visit her. They grieved together over past mistakes and began to look to the future.

On Easter day Joy went to church with Hugh. She was still fragile, still grieving, but she was at peace for she had remembered that though we die and leave this earth, it is not the end. It’s the beginning.

After the grief of Holy Week comes the hope of Easter.

And the hamper? Joy and Hugh shared the contents with Sally and Bruce.