***RECYCLING***

Two old friends meet for a coffee and a chat . . .

A short story by Veronica Heley

Leo slapped a paper bag down on the table. ‘I’ve ordered a hot chocolate with cream and you will NOT remind me I’m supposed to be on a diet.’ He subsided into a chair with a sigh. ‘I love my wife dearly, but she can be a bit of a bully.’ Leo had a substantial figure and didn’t look as if he’d be easy to bully.

Bruce, bald and brown, was amused. ‘What’s she done now?’

‘Spring-cleaning. Not that it’s spring, and not that the flat’s dirty. All the books are out of the bookcase and my papers have been tidied away. I can’t find a thing.’

Bruce sipped black coffee and straightened out a smile. ‘Upsetting.’

Leo tipped the contents of the bag onto the table. ‘She told me to get rid of these.’

Five palm crosses. Dry, but otherwise as fresh as when they’d been knotted into shape in the spring. And this was high summer, turning into autumn.

Leo said, ‘You may well stare. I suppose you always remember to hand your last year’s crosses in, so they can be burned to make ashes for Ash Wednesday. Well, I never remember in time. What I say is, where’s the harm in keeping them for another year, or two?’

‘Or five? Yes, I usually remember to hand mine in.’

‘So I forget. I pop them in the jam jar on my desk, the one I keep pens and pencils in. Dora’s bought me a new china pot and says I can only keep one cross at a time in future. She says she doesn’t care how, but I’ve got to get rid of the old ones. I can’t burn them: there’s no fireplace in the flat and we can’t have a bonfire in the communal garden. I tried taking them out to the bins this morning, but I couldn’t bear to put them out with the rubbish. They may not mean much to other people, but they mean something to me.’

‘They mean a lot to Dora, too,’ said Bruce, ‘or she would have put them in the trash herself.’

Their waitress arrived with Leo’s hot chocolate, so he moved the crosses to one side.

‘Palm crosses?’ The waitress eyed them with respect. ‘I do not go to church here, but my mum sends me a cross from Poland in Lent. Only, I lose mine this year when I move house.’

‘Take one,’ said Leo. ‘You’d be doing me a favour.’

The girl gave him a blinding smile and whisked one away.

Bruce said, ‘There’s your answer. Recycle them. Give them away to people who need a reminder of Jesus’ love.’

Leo reddened. ‘I can’t go round asking everyone I meet if they want a palm cross! They’d give me a one-way ticket to the funny farm.’

‘Look how much it meant to our waitress to have a reminder of God’s love for us. Maybe it will even prompt her to start going to church again. Leo, you know lots of people and you’re never at a loss for something to talk about. Some people may tell you to get lost if you offer them a cross, but others will be delighted.’

Leo thought about that while he sipped his drink, savouring every mouthful of the forbidden treat. If only Dora could see him now . . .

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ll do it, provided you take half of them.’

Bruce stiffened. He hadn’t bargained for that. He wasn’t as outgoing as Leo. It wasn’t his style to engage people in talk about God unless they brought the subject up. But, he’d suggested the solution. And, if he failed to find suitable recipients, he could always hide the crosses away somewhere until next year . . . although he realised that that was exactly what his friend had done.

Leo pushed two of the remaining crosses across to Bruce, who took them.

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Bruce turned his key in the lock and called out, ‘I’m back!’

He thought Sally would probably be in the garden. But no, she was on the phone. Nutmeg, the half-grown cat they’d been looking after while an elderly friend was in hospital, jumped off Sally’s lap and made a beeline for Bruce, knowing that he was always good for a cuddle.

Sally put the phone down. ‘It looks like we’ll have to hand Nutmeg back. Ellen’s being discharged next week and her son wants me to meet him at her flat on Monday morning. I suppose to find some clothes for her to wear when she comes out.’

Bruce sat beside her so that the cat could try out both their laps in turn. ‘Ah well, we always knew we’d have to give him back sometime. That’s good news about Ellen. You’ve done well there. If you hadn’t helped to get her to hospital, Lord knows what would have happened to her.’

Sally had been brought up by her father and her first husband to think she was rubbish, but her second marriage to Bruce was giving her a little more confidence and she had gone to Ellen’s assistance when no one else would.

Now she looked at her husband and realised something was wrong. ‘There’s a problem?’

‘Something Leo dropped me into. I shouldn’t have agreed. It’s ridiculous.’

He told her all about the crosses, and showed her the two which Leo had given him. ‘I’m an accountant, not an evangelist.’

Sally patted his arm. ‘You have a quiet strength which comes from trusting in God. People can see it in you, even if they don’t know what it means. And I know you’ve come up with the right words in some tricky situations.’

‘Perhaps. In the old days more people went to church as a matter of course and understood about palm crosses. Now it’s hard to find anyone who does. I can’t go out into the street and ask people cold whether they’d like a cross, can I?’ He picked up her hand turned it over, and traced the lifeline across her palm. ‘I suppose, hard though it is to admit it, that I’m afraid of being laughed at. That’s how strong a person I am.’

Sally said, ‘You never shirk a difficult task. Not like me. I’m the coward in this family, not you.’

He kept his eyes down. ‘I wish that were true.’

Sally bit her lip. ‘All right, then.’ Her voice wavered, but she went on. ‘If you take one cross, I’ll take the other. And the last one to get rid of theirs is a sissy.’

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Leo took his two crosses home, trying to work out who he knew who might like to have one.

He met Dora on her way out. She said, ‘Your lunch is in the fridge. The Women’s Fellowship is meeting at a new restaurant on the other side of the park and I said I’d go. How did you get on this morning? Get rid of any of the crosses?’

‘Bruce took a couple. I don’t know how you think I can get rid of them, I really don’t.’

‘Give one to me. I’ll ask around this afternoon, see if someone would like one.’

Leo handed one over, hiding a smile. He was doing all right, wasn’t he? He’d given one cross to the waitress in the cafe, two to Bruce, one to Dora . . . and that left only one for himself. This was going to be a doddle. He could afford to be gracious. Dora didn’t drive, so he said, ‘I’ll drop you over there if you like.’

He wasn’t so pleased when Dora handed him back her cross that evening, saying, ‘I checked, but all my friends have already got one. It’s the wrong time of the year for it, isn’t it?’

Leo scowled. Now he was back with two crosses, and how on earth was he going to get rid of them?

He asked everyone at church the following day, but they’d all got theirs. He gave a visitor a lift home after church and asked her if she’d like one, but she said she didn’t believe in cluttering up the place with such things, thank you very much.

In the afternoon he went to watch a friend playing in a bowls match in the park. He stuck the two crosses in his shirt pocket to see if any of the players took an interest. They didn’t. When he drew attention to the crosses, a man asked if he was wearing them as a good luck charm. ‘It will take more than that for your team to win today.’ And the others laughed.

Short of banging all their heads together and giving them a lecture about the importance of palm crosses, Leo didn’t know what to do. So he laughed along with the others and said they should start praying the rain would hold off . . . which did shut them up for a while.

On Sunday night, he still had two.

That night, in anger and frustration, he did what he should have done in the first place; he asked God to help him find a suitable home for the crosses, Amen.

He’d tried hard, hadn’t he? How much more could he do?

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Bruce had already taken the situation to God in prayer.

‘If recycling the crosses is important – and I do think it is, though I’m not sure you are so concerned about it – then I could do with a spot of help here. I’m not as perceptive as Sally. I could easily pass by people in the street without realising they are the ones who might find the crosses a help. Perhaps you could point me in the right direction? And as for Sally . . . she’s so brave, taking part of my burden on herself. You know what it costs her to put herself forward. I hold her up to you in prayer. Please don’t let her meet with rejection. It doesn’t matter if I get slapped in the face. Of course I wouldn’t like it, but I can cope. Dear Lord, I’m not so stupid as to think I can bargain with you, but I’d prefer to meet with derision myself than to have her suffer.’

Returning from a meeting in town the following day, Bruce saw a street drinker – a shambling man in dirty clothes – downing the contents of a bottle near a busy bus stop. The man threw his empty bottle aside. It smashed on the pavement, causing everyone to draw back. Bruce looked round for a policeman but there was none in sight.

The drunk started to pester people who were waiting at the bus stop. ‘Give us some change, will you?’

Some told him to be off, some ignored him. A youngish man with a shaved head got out his phone.

The drunk reached a young Moslem woman in a headscarf, who was pushing a couple of toddlers in a buggy. He pawed at her arm and breathed fumes into her face. ‘Give us some change, won’t you?’

She recoiled, on the verge of tears. ‘No, no!’

Bruce wondered if this was an opportunity to give his cross away. But surely a Moslem woman wouldn’t accept a cross?’

God said, ‘Go on! Help her!’

Bruce swung the drunk away from the young woman. The man subsided onto the pavement, swearing and weeping. Bruce got out his handkerchief and wiped his hands on it. The man’s clothes felt greasy. Ugh. He asked the woman if she were all right. She nodded but didn’t speak.

The bus came and Bruce helped the woman with the buggy onto it. She didn’t say ‘thank you’ or even look him in the eye. No, he’d known she wouldn’t take a cross from him.

When the bus drew away, the man with the shaved head was still there. He nodded to Bruce. ‘Sir Galahad rides to the rescue. The police are on their way.’

The drunk started to bawl his head off. ‘I need a drink! Give me . . .!’

The man with the shaved head picked something up off the pavement. It was the cross, which had fallen out of Bruce’s pocket when he took out his handkerchief. ‘You dropped this. Wrong time of year for it, innit?’

Bruce looked into the man’s eyes and saw there . . . amusement? A yearning for something he’d lost? Bruce didn’t think it over, but said, ‘You know what it is?’

‘A cross. A very present help in time of need.’

Bruce nodded. ‘It’s yours.’

‘I am not in need.’

Bruce smiled. ‘We are all in need, in one way or another, aren’t we? Take it and keep it in memory of the man who died for you.’

Another bus drew up at the stop. The man with the shaved head turned away from Bruce and got on the bus. He took the cross with him.

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On Monday morning Sally toiled up the two flights to Ellen’s flat, worrying about how her friend was going to manage the stairs when she came out of hospital.

The door was open and Ellen’s son John was inside, waiting for her. They’d spoken on the phone but never met before.

He said, ‘I wanted to thank you for all you’ve done for my mother. I dread to think what might have happened if you hadn’t been there for her.’

‘It was a pleasure.’

‘The hospital is going to discharge her in a couple of days, but she can’t possibly come back here. She’d never be able to manage the stairs and anyway, I want her to be near me in future. I’ve found her a place in sheltered accommodation where she can have her own furniture. She’s told me what she wants and I have a removal van coming for it. The rest will be cleared out later in the week. But I’d be grateful if you could spare half an hour to pack up her clothes and any bits and pieces you think she might need. If it’s not too much trouble?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Sally, feeling a mixture of relief and anxiety for Ellen. ‘You’re right, of course, but I shall miss her.’

‘It’s kind of you to say so. My biggest problem is what to do with her cat. They don’t allow pets where she’s going, and I’m allergic to them. I believe you were so kind as to take Nutmeg in for a while? Do you think the Cat Rescue people would take him in if I gave them a decent donation?’

Sally relaxed into a smile. ‘No need. My husband and I are fond of Nutmeg and would love to keep him. We’ll get him re-registered in our name and give him a home.’

‘That’s good of you. See if you can get the Pet Insurance plan transferred to you. If not, I’d be happy to pay the first year’s subscription.’

Sally was embarrassed. Surely Bruce and she could manage that? But she didn’t object because John clearly thought he was doing the right thing. She said, ‘Do you have some suitcases or boxes to put your mother’s things in?’

They moved into the bedroom, which smelled musty. A dried-up cross had been tucked into the frame of the dressing-table mirror. Sally reached out to touch it, but John was quicker, wrenching it off the mirror. ‘I’m not taking that. I don’t want her reminded of death. It was my father’s. She shouldn’t have kept it. He’s been dead nine years.’

Sally winced. She told herself that she understood in a way. John really did care for his mother and he was trying to do what he thought best for her.

Sally thought that if Bruce were here, he would have been able to argue with John, to convince him that Ellen would want the cross to accompany her into her new life. But, being Sally, she didn’t dare. She got on with packing up Ellen’s things.

Ellen only had a few books but one of them was a child’s Bible. After some hesitation, Sally took the cross she’d taken from Bruce and inserted it into the Bible, which she placed in the bottom of the box containing Ellen’s shoes. Perhaps Ellen would find it. Perhaps she wouldn’t. But it would go with her into her new life, whether she knew it or not.

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Leo walked along the shops till he came to the cafe. He decided to sit outside in the sunshine and watch the world go by. He was not pleased with himself as he hadn’t succeeded in getting rid of either of his two crosses. Perhaps inspiration would strike if he had a hot chocolate? With cream.

An old friend hailed him, and they exchanged news about the forthcoming school fete. School was out and children streamed along, towing mothers and fathers and au pairs. All colours. All sorts.

An older woman he knew slightly stopped to talk. No youngster she, but a granny on duty, carrying a grizzling toddler, manhandling a buggy, and towing a solemn five-year old in her wake.

Leo said, ‘Long time no see. How are you doing?’

‘Not bad. And yourself?’ The toddler lunged at Leo and she only just managed to hold him. ‘He’s growing fast. Almost too much for me.’

The five-year-old interrupted. ‘Granny, can I have a coca cola?’

The woman detached the toddler and held him out to Leo. ‘Can you hold him while I get my money out?’

Leo took the boy, who wriggled in his arms. The woman delved into her bag for some coins and handed them to the older child. ‘Get one for me while you’re at it.’

‘Is your daughter keeping well?’ Leo jiggled the toddler as to the manner born. He’d been through this stage with his grandchildren and knew how to play with them, didn’t he?

‘She’s on a course, this week and next.’ Then, with a note of anxiety in her voice, ‘What’s he got in his mouth now?’

The toddler was chewing on one of the palm crosses Leo had stowed in his shirt pocket.

‘Ugh. Disgusting. Teething, he is,’ said the woman. ‘Don’t try to take it off him. He’ll only scream. I’ll give him his dummy to suck on instead . . . not that I believe in them, but needs must on occasion.’

Leo couldn’t think what to say. Was it a desecration for a baby to chew on a palm cross? Or was it only natural? Either way, the child was not to blame.

The woman made the exchange, and shook the cross to dry it. ‘There, now. No harm done. I’ll cut that bit off. Tell you what, if you don’t need it I’ll give it my son-in-law to hang up in his car. It might remind him to drive carefully.’

Leaving Leo speechless, she dumped the toddler in his buggy, collected the five-year- old and two tins of coca cola, and wheeled away.

Leo lumbered to his feet and made his way home. Only when he reached the flat did he realise he’d lost his one remaining cross. It must have dropped out somewhere at the shops. It would make him late for supper if he went back for it, so he didn’t.

He apologised, ‘Lord, I’m sorry. I should have taken more care.’ And thought he got a smile in reply.

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Leo’s last cross was picked up off the pavement by a child and given to an elderly lady. She put it in the bunch of artificial flowers in the basket at the front of her motorised wheelchair. It reminded her of God and what a blessing a warm day was to one of her age.

How do you recycle your crosses?