‘Jimson and the knife!’

A short story by Veronica Heley

‘I knew I could rely on you!’ The minister threw the words at Bruce as she fled, already late for her next meeting.

Bruce wanted to swear. Or break something.

Hearing the front door bang, Bruce’s wife Sally came in, took one look at Bruce’s face and said, ‘What’s wrong?’

‘She wants me to be a cross between the Archangel Gabriel and Job. She wants me to stop our neighbourhood yob - young Jimson – from revenging himself on the lads who attacked him up last weekend. She thinks I’ll know how because she knows I was beaten up some months ago. She thinks I’ve able to forgive the lads who kicked my ribs in and can therefore preach forgiveness to Jimson. If only I knew who they were . . . but I don’t, and the police can’t find them. Jimson, on the other hand, knows exactly who attacked him. He’s bought himself a killer of a knife and boasting about what he’s going to do with it. And our minister expects me to talk him out of using it!’

‘If anyone can, you can.’

‘I don’t know how to talk to lads of that age! His mother says she hasn’t had a single word out of him for months. A grunt here and a snarl there. He’s been excluded from school, for which I do not blame the school. He hangs around the amusement arcade all day and night, looking for mischief. He’s been heading for jail since he was twelve years old. As he hasn’t succeeded in getting himself arrested for anything serious until now, he proposes to risk everything by carving up his old friends with a knife. And our minister expects me to convert him to being a model citizen with fifteen O levels and a place to study nuclear physics at Cambridge!’

Sally was a sucker for a sob story, ‘We have to remember that his father walked out on the family when he was twelve, and I don’t think he’s dealing drugs.’

‘So? Some of my friends lost a parent when they were young but they haven’t turned to crime, so far as I know. I suppose you’ll say he deserves a helping hand because he hasn’t stolen any smartphones this week?’

Sally laughed. ‘He wants to go into the Army when he’s older. They’ll sort him out. I’m sure you can talk him out of using a knife.’

‘You’re joking!’

Bruce had a point. He was a retired accountant in comfortable circumstances while Jimson was fifteen and had been heard to say that everyone over the age of twenty-five was a geriatric. Bruce had suffered months of pain after he’d been assaulted, while Jimson had been sent home from hospital the same day with a couple of stitches in a cut on his chin.

Sally patted his arm. ‘You’ll still try to help the lad, won’t you? His mother’s given up and she’s got two younger ones who look as if they’re going to follow their elder brother to prison, if no one stops them.’

‘You think that I ought to try to help him, even though he’s a lost cause? Do you think that even trying to help him – and failing - might earn me Brownie points with God? You think that making the attempt will be good for my soul?’

‘And his soul,’ said Sally. ‘And his.’

Bruce hadn’t had the nightmare for some weeks, but after his talk with Sally, it all came back. He was walking in the park, he saw the four hooded lads, they asked him for his phone and his car keys. He’d handed them over but then . . . Thud, thud! Thud, thud. Blindingly white trainers coming at him as he lay on the ground. His ribs had been smashed in. The pain! Down he went into the dark . . .

He struggled awake. It was three in the morning.

At half past four he dozed off . . . and the white trainers came at him, again and again.

Next day he opened the door to find Jimson on the doorstep. Cap on backwards. Expensive T-shirt and jeans. *Blindingly white trainers!*

Bruce felt dizzy. The lad thrust past Bruce into the hall, looking around him.

Bruce thought, *He’s casing the joint, looking for something to steal.*

Jimson located the sitting room and walked in. He looked around, blank of face, and sat down. Bruce told himself to take one deep breath, and then another. He reminded himself that Jimson had not been one of his attackers, that it was absurd to allow himself to be so affected.

The boy’s eyes were glazed over. His fingers played percussion on his knees. His right knee jerked to some rhythm Bruce couldn’t hear.

Bruce said, ‘I’m so sorry. I can’t help you.’

The lad took no notice. He lifted his feet and put them on the coffee table. Normally Bruce would have objected to such behaviour but he was mesmerised by the lad’s blindingly white trainers.

Only then did Bruce realise that Jimson was hooked up to his smartphone. That tinny sound trickling from the lad was some kind of music being played directly into his ears.

The minister had promised Jimson she’d stand up for him in court if he went to Bruce for counselling. Well, he’d come, all right . . . with his headphones on so that he didn’t have to listen to a word Bruce said!

Bruce relaxed. He sat down opposite the lad. Even though Jimson wasn’t listening, Bruce knew someone who was. Before Jimson had rung the bell, Bruce had been having his morning chat to God. So now he said continued with, ‘Well, Lord, as you can see, somewhat to my surprise, the lad came. Not that I can help him. I don’t know how. Some days I think I can forgive those who attacked me, but most of the time I can’t. I’m still so angry inside!’

Bruce wondered if he’d spoken aloud. But no, the boy hadn’t reacted and his head was still nodding in time to his music. The cut on Jimson’s chin was healing nicely. Two stitches, he’d had. He’d got off lightly. It had been three months before Bruce’s ribs had stopped hurting.

Bruce went on, ‘I still don’t know who my attackers were. Jimson knows his, of course, and is going to do something about it. I can’t say I blame him. Mine are probably still boasting about beating up an old man in the park. If I’d been twenty years younger and trained in martial arts, maybe I’d have been able to put up a fight.’

Jimson looked out of the window, head and knee bouncing in time to the music.

Bruce went on talking, not caring whether the boy was listening or not. ‘Well, Lord, I understand how the lad feels. The humiliation, the loss of respect. I can’t blame him for wanting to retaliate even though we both know it will lead to yet more trouble for him. I myself have fantasies about what I’d like to do with the youths who attacked me.’

Jimson drew a knife from a black sheath and laid it on the table between them. It was the wickedest knife Bruce had ever seen. It had serrated edges. It flickered in the sunlight. It was looking for somebody to hurt.

Bruce said, ‘Wow! Possession of a knife like that would make you feel invincible. I can imagine thrusting it into someone’s belly, and yanking it upwards and . . . Do you know something? I’m glad they didn’t use that on me. I wouldn’t be here to tell the tale.’

Did Jimson smile?

Bruce sighed. ‘Well, Jimson, I can’t blame you for wanting to use it on someone who’s hurt you.’ He leaned forward to touch the sharp edge of the knife. ‘Yes, I can imagine myself carrying something like that to protect myself, and then, if anyone ever threatened me again, I’d . . . Ah, but I can see all too well where that would lead. They say that if you carry a knife or a gun, even if you have no intention of using them, when push comes to shove, you’ll use whatever you’ve got. And that’s how you can so easily kill someone without meaning to. And then goodbye a career in the Army. Jimson, I assume you know the lads who attacked you?’

A nod. Well, at least Jimson was now listening to what Bruce said. Sort of.

Bruce said, ‘You told the police who they were?’

A baring of teeth in something which was more of a snarl than a smile. If he’d bothered to speak, he’d probably have said he was no grass and wouldn’t run away.

Bruce sighed. ‘I’d never seen the lads who attacked me before and the police never identified them. Two young black men, one of whom was the leader. Strange, he had hardly any eyebrows. One of them was white with a shaved head, and one looked Oriental. Wearing hoodies, white trainers. Second generation British, all born and brought up here.’

Jimson sat very still.

Bruce shot upright in his chair. ‘You don’t mean . . . you can’t mean that you know them? The police said there wasn’t a gang hereabouts with that combination of people in it. Do you know . . .? Was it the same people who attacked you?’

Jimson got to his feet. ‘Gotta see someone.’ It was the first time he’d spoken.

Bruce put his hand over the knife. ‘Let me hold that for you for a while. If the police catch you with it, even if you haven’t used it, you’ll be in dead trouble.’

For a moment Bruce thought Jimson was going to refuse, but the knife was still on the table when the lad left. Bruce said ‘Phew!’ And then, ‘What on earth am I going to do with the knife? Sally will have a fit if she sees it. Where can I hide it?’

Jimson rang the bell at the same time next day. He danced in to the music, and took a seat as before. He looked at the bare table top, where he’d left the knife..

He said, ‘The one you want, he come up from Brighton for a visit. Found himself a coupla no good hangers-on, did a bit of this and that, got across some locals, got beaten up and sent back home. He won’t be back.’

‘What about the lads with him?’

‘Daft gits, nothing to them. Not without him, know what I mean?’

Bruce felt himself relax. So now he knew. He said, ‘Well, thank you very much.’

‘That’s all right. I was sorry for you, you not being streetwise. Now me, I know when to stand me ground and when to play it clever, like. I’m taking up kick-boxing, down the gym. When that news gets out, it’ll keep me safe. And I’ve been down to the Army place and they’ll keep an eye on me till I can sign up.’

He got to his feet. ‘You’d better get rid of that knife. You’d be in a right state if the police found it on you, right?’ And off he went again.

Sally came in to find Bruce with his head in his hands. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’m laughing. I think. I was supposed to put young Jimson on the right track, but it’s been the other way round. Thankfully. And now I have to find out how to get rid of the lethal bit of kit he left with me.’

‘Oh, that. I found it in the cutlery drawer and took it down the station and handed it in; said I’d found it at the bus shelter.’

Bruce said, ‘Bless you, Sally. And, praise the Lord. Perhaps trying to do something in a difficult situation, even if you think you’ll lose, is better than doing nothing. I don’t know who saved who today, but I’m very grateful.’