***LOST CHILD!***

 ***a short story by Veronica Heley***

Bruce did not – emphatically did not – want to help out at the Annual Fair in the park.

‘High summer,’ he said, ‘brings flying ants, noisy ice cream vans, and fetes worse than death. I don’t mind helping out at a church ‘do’, but this is a community event and they’re expecting a huge crowd from all over. And you want me to sit in a hot tent answering questions as to what time the Dog Show is to be held, or the way to the nearest toilets? I’m feeling my age and there’s tennis on the telly this afternoon.’

 His loving wife patted his hand. ‘You’ll manage. I’m going to help with the children’s craft corner which the church is organising, and they need someone with a cool head in the headquarters tent. It will all be over by nine and then you can sit back at home, turn on the telly, and catch up on anything you’ve missed.’

 Bruce had hoped for a nasty cold, wet, day so that few people would attend but, as he made his way to the HQ tent, the sun was shining brightly, there were just enough light clouds to prevent the day from getting too hot, families were picnicking on every vacant area of grass, balloons of all shapes and sizes floated around, and a clown-cum-magician was working his magic on a large crowd of children of all ages. In short, everyone but Bruce was enjoying themselves.

The Headquarters’ tent was large enough to accommodate five people, three trestle tables and a cool box containing cold drinks for volunteers. Bruce relieved the hot and tired woman who had been dealing with enquiries until that moment. A heavy-set woman – the treasurer? – was counting out change and taking in money. She said the Organiser was out, dealing with a dispute between stallholders. Behind her loomed two large security guards in Hi-Vis yellow jackets who said it seemed pretty quiet and they hoped it would continue to be so.

And yes, it was hot in the tent. Bruce discarded his jacket and tie and familiarised himself with the ground plan of the Fair, the programme of events, and the folder containing volunteers’ hours and contact details. By which time three people had arrived, wanting to know where the toilets were.

The temperature mounted. Bruce stole a look at his smartphone to see how the tennis matches were progressing and worked out how many minutes he still had to serve.

And then . . . a volunteer burst into the tent, carrying a small, fair-haired child. ‘She was in the chariot on the Carousel, going round and round all by herself! No parents in sight! We can’t get her to speak. You have to get someone to make an announcement from the stage to find her parents. I’ve got to get back! We’re incredibly busy!’

‘You’ve done the right thing,’ said the security guard, and held out his arms to take the child. ‘We know what to do.’

Bruce tried not to panic, because *he* didn’t know what to do, and *he* was supposed to be in charge if anything happened. The child looked fragile, with blue shadows under her eyes. Age? About eighteen months. She had fine, fair hair and was wearing threadbare jeans, a T-shirt which was a size too big for her, and brand-new trainers with red laces.

Fortunately, the security guard seemed able to cope. He jiggled the little girl. ‘What’s your name, love?’

The girl leaned away from him and put her arm over her face. To make herself invisible? Was she afraid of him?

The woman counting the money looked up. ‘Is she deaf, do you think?’

The security guard gave her a little shake. ‘Come on, love. Help us out here. What do they call you at home?’

The child tried to fold herself up into a ball. The guard had difficulty holding on to her. ‘Ugh,’ he said. ‘She’s not half damp down below.’ He put her down on the floor. He said to Bruce, ‘There’s a form you have to fill in. Then you get someone to make an announcement from the stage as soon as there’s a break in the acts.’

Bruce told himself to keep calm and carry on. He found the relevant form, checked the list of volunteers and rang the Organiser to report what had happened. Then he got onto the MC on stage, asking him to make an announcement ASAP.

While he was doing this, the child folded herself up on Bruce’s jacket, which had fallen from his chair onto the floor. And yes, he could see she was very damp down below. Bruce opened his mouth to object, but closed it again. The child would be collected in a short while and he could always have the jacket cleaned.

He turned back to answer a query about how to enter a cocker spaniel for the Dog Show, and heard the MC on stage asking the parents of a lost child to come forward.

The questions to Bruce continued. No one came for the child.

In his next free moment Bruce glanced down to see the child had curled into a ball. Huge, frightened eyes looked up at him. Bruce had never had any children of his own, and didn’t know how to talk to them. He nodded and smiled at her and turned back to answer another query.

Why didn’t anyone come for the child? How long had it been since the plea had gone out to her parents to collect her? Surely they must be frantic with worry at having mislaid her?

One of the security guards was called away. The Organiser popped in, talking on her mobile the while. She stayed just long enough to check that Bruce had done what he was supposed to do about the child, and swept out to deal with the next crisis.

A boy who’d grazed his knees was brought in. The other security guard took him out

to the St John’s ambulance tent and returned with an iced cupcake which he presented to the child. She turned her head away from him.

Bruce said, ‘On the form it says we mustn’t give a lost child anything but water, because she might be allergic to whatever it was.’

The guard ate the cake himself. Then he bent over the child, saying, ‘Come on, love. Give us a clue. What’s your name?’

Perhaps it was his Hi-Vis jacket in bright yellow which frightened her? She squeaked and hid her face under her arm again.

 He shrugged, and went off to deal with a group of teenagers who’d been pushing one another into the river nearby, for fun . . . until the fun had got out of hand.

Bruce opened a bottle of water and passed it down to the child, thinking she might be dehydrated in that heat. The child took it and drank. He began to worry how long she’d been without food or drink.

Bruce dealt with a woman enquiring when her neighbour’s son would be on stage with his newly-formed band . . . and felt something around his ankles. Something damp? The child was that wet? Horrors! He hoped not.

Looking down, he found she’d pulled herself upright by holding onto his jeans, and was looking up at him. What did she want?

The security guards were both out, as was the Organiser. And the treasurer was absorbed in her tasks.

Bruce managed to get the little tot on his knee, put the bottle of water within her reach and turned to his next customer, who wanted to know what time the dance school would be on stage.

It was at that point that Bruce realised he’d forgotten to record the afternoon’s tennis programme on the telly! He would have sworn aloud if it hadn’t been for the child, who had settled into the crook of his arm and closed her eyes. He couldn’t disturb her, poor little mite.

Why didn’t someone come for her?

He told himself to calm down. He had Catch-up on the telly. He wouldn’t really miss anything. Finally, he did what he ought to have done in the first place. He put the situation into God’s hands: the heat, his discomfort, missing his programme . . . and then laughed at himself, for what did that matter compared to what had happened to the child?

He held her up to God in his mind. He asked for protection for her, and for wisdom for himself so that he would know how to help her. He checked to see if there were a name tape sewn into the neck of the little girl’s T-shirt. There wasn’t.

More enquiries. The security men came and went. The Organiser ditto. She said they’d give it till six o’clock and, if the parents hadn’t come forward by then, they’d have to hand the child over to the police.

Bruce didn’t like the sound of that. What would the police do with the child? Pass her on to Social Services? Wasn’t it bad enough that the child had been left behind? It would be traumatic for her to be handed over to strangers.

Bruce began to think what he could do to prevent that happening. He couldn’t leave the tent himself to make enquiries but others could come to him. He checked his list of volunteers. The ones manning the carousel did a two- hour stint. Those who had brought the child in would have finished and left that area now, but he had their phone numbers and could ring them. He rang the first on his list, who was now taking a breather in the refreshment tent. He asked if she could remember anyone bringing a small child to the carousel. But no, she couldn’t. They’d been so busy they hadn’t had time to think. She reckoned there’d been a good eight thousand people in the park that day.

Bruce looked the child over. Her clothes were cheap and cheerful, probably handed down from an older sibling, but the trainers with the red laces were new, hardly worn. She looked up at Bruce with a serious air. He looked back at her. ‘Well, here’s a pretty pickle,’ he said. She didn’t react. Maybe she was really was deaf?

The security guard, stuffing his face with a cheeseburger he’d bought on site, said, ‘It’s a waste of time, talking to them when they’re like that.’

Bruce thought, but did not say, *Like what? Deaf and dumb?*

He clicked his fingers behind her ear, and she turned her head to see where the sound had come from. He did it again. Almost, she smiled. She could hear him all right. But, if she wasn’t deaf, then why wasn’t she talking?

He pointed to her trainers with their bright red laces, and made a circle in the air with his finger and thumb indicating that he liked them.

She did smile, then. She tried to copy him, finger and thumb in a circle. And she pointed back at him.

It was his turn to smile. He pointed to himself. ‘Bruce.’

She tried to say his name. ‘Booz.’ A good try. So she wasn’t dumb.

He pointed at her, and raised his eyebrows.

She nodded. ‘Anya.’

‘I’m Bruce. You’re Anna. Is that right?’

‘Da.’ Or, it might have been ‘Ja.’

He guessed, ‘German? Deutsch?’

She frowned. No. Not German.

‘Polish? Polski?’

She nodded.

‘Blimey!’ The guard was impressed. ‘Who’d a thought it?’

The child said something in her own language which Bruce didn’t understand. He shrugged and shook his head. Her lips drooped.

So she was Polish, and didn’t speak English. Many Polish families had

settled in this area. A child living here for any length of time would have picked up some English, but she hadn’t so she might well be a visitor.

He went back to phoning the volunteers who’d been on the carousel that day, and struck lucky on his third attempt. Yes, there had been a large group chattering away in some foreign language. All ages from tiny tots to grannies. No, not Indian or Mediterranean. Possibly Scandinavian? The volunteer couldn’t say for certain, but yes, they might have been speaking Polish.

Bruce asked, ‘Can you remember how many children there were in the party?’

‘Some boys, yes. About eight, or ten years old. I remember them because they were too small to get up onto the horses unaided. There were a couple of older women, who couldn’t get onto the horses, either. They sat in one of the chariots. Then there were some youngish women and several teenage girls.’

Bruce asked, ‘Can you remember a small child being with them?’

‘There might have been, but I didn’t notice.’

‘What time was this?’

‘I finished my stint at three so it must have been before that. I’m sorry I can’t be more helpful. There were so many people wanting a ride. We didn’t have time to think.’

Bruce asked the child, ‘Well, what do we do next?’

She nestled into the crook of his arm, took a fold of his shirt in her tiny hand, and closed her eyes. Lucky girl to be able to blot out reality for a while.

Bruce’s replacement arrived to take over for him, and the security guard said he’d take the child if Bruce wanted to be off.

He couldn’t do that. He said, ‘I can’t disturb her.’

‘Very well,’ said the Organiser. ‘She clearly feels safe with you, so if you want to stay, it’s no skin off my nose. But you mustn’t take her out of the tent, not for a moment. Understand?’

He understood. He tugged his shirt open at the neck and glanced at his watch, thinking about the tennis matches he was missing on the telly. He put them out of his mind and sent up a couple of arrow prayers. ‘Help, Lord! Ideas, please!’

And yes, there *was* something he could do. Maybe it would work. He couldn’t be sure, but it was possible, maybe even likely, that Anya had been with the Polish speaking group on the carousel. Now Polish parents nearly always sent their children to the local Catholic primary school, so it might be possible to find a link to a family with two young Polish lads in it.

He asked the MC on stage to make a request for a classroom teacher or assistant from that particular school to go to the HQ tent.

‘You’re joking!’ said one of the guards.

The Organiser nodded. ‘Good call.’

Within five minutes a mid-forties, curly-haired woman, who looked both sensible and kind, came to ask why she was needed. Bruce explained the situation. He said it was a long shot, but did she know of any Polish youngsters at school who were expecting guests, and if so, was it possible to contact them to ask if they knew Anya.

She said immediately, ‘Yes, Marius Kowalski is in my class and his brother is in the year below. Marius told me he was expecting some cousins to come to stay for a while. His sister’s getting married and he’s to be ring bearer. He can’t talk of anything else.’

Anya opened her eyes and said, ‘Marius?’

Bruce asked, ‘You know a boy called Marius?’

She repeated the name and sat up, looking around for him. ‘Marius?’

‘Bulls eye!’ said the teacher. ‘Mind you, I don’t know how you can contact them. I don’t have pupil’s home phone numbers with me. You’d have to go through the school secretary to get those, and you won’t be able to do that till Monday. Now, I must go. I left my husband and the boys in the food tent and they’ll fill up on junk food and not want their supper.’ She bustled away.

‘Last chance,’ said Bruce. ‘We ask the MC to put out a plea for anyone who knows the Kowalski family to come forward. Hopefully there’ll be someone here who knows them or of them.’

The hard-working MC did as requested, and soon a burly man in his fifties shoved his way into the tent, asking what was up? Polish, articulate, long resident here and with perfect English. He was a man who worked with his hands and brooked no nonsense.

Anya stirred in his arms, and studied the newcomer.

Bruce explained that this child had somehow been left behind by mistake and he was hoping to reconnect her with her family. Otherwise, she’d be handed over to Social Services. Did the man know the Kowalskis and were they expecting visitors from abroad?

Satisfied that she recognised the newcomer, Anya reached out a hand towards him.

The man leaned over to touched her cheek. ‘Anya?’

She nodded and smiled.

The newcomer straightened up and said something short and sharp in Polish, which didn’t need translation. ‘That family!’ or words to that effect. Standing with legs spread apart, the man attacked his smartphone, saying grimly, ‘I know the Kowalskis all right. That whole crowd came to our barbecue last night, children and all. This little one was tired out from the journey and fell asleep on the settee. That mother of hers . . . nothing between the eyes.’

‘And the father?’

The man switched to Polish again. Bruce translated that as ‘Don’t get me started!’

There were squeaks and squawks from the other end of the phone as he got through to the Kowalskis. The man spoke forcefully and at some length in Polish. It didn’t need translation. He was clearly telling them ‘What!’

Finally he clicked the phone off. ‘They came in two cars. After they’d been on the carousel, one lot wanted to go to the Dog Show and the other on the climbing wall, so they separated. Each group thought the other had taken Anya. They got home a short time ago and that’s when they discovered the child was missing. They’ve been going frantic, not knowing what to do. Daft lot!’

‘They’re coming back to collect her?’

‘They are. Natalya’s in tears. That’s Anya’s mother. The grandmothers are blaming everyone but themselves, and the bridegroom has gone down the pub. I’d offer to take Anya back, but I’m helping out with the music on the stage in fifteen minutes. So are you all right now?’

‘Very much so. And, thank you.’

The man touched Anya’s cheek again. He said something soothing in Polish which sounded like, ‘Soon, little one. Mummy’s on her way.’

Anya sighed and relaxed. She seemed quite resigned to wait.

Within minutes, what felt like a tornado hit the tent as the Kowalski family burst in. The noise was shattering. Bruce thought the tent sides bulged outwards. A small terrier on a lead added to the chaos by threading his lead round people’s legs and barking. The treasurer’s table went over, showering coins far and wide.

A young woman plucked Anya from Bruce’s arms and kissed her fiercely before handing her around for the same treatment from all the others. Two elderly women shouted insults, each blaming the other for losing the child.

 **‘Quiet!’** yelled the security guard. Gradually the turmoil died down, the table was righted, and Bruce was able to fill out the lost child form. It took longer to retrieve all the coins which had been spilt – some had found their way into the small boys’ pockets – but eventually order was restored and the Kowalskis withdrew, taking Anya and their excitable dog with them.

Bruce’s wife, Sally, arrived, hot, tired. ‘Had a good day, dear?’

Bruce was too tired to laugh, but the Organiser, the security guards and the treasurer did. They said, ‘He was brilliant.’

Sally was anxious to get home. ‘You must tell me all about it later. I’ve had enough drama for today. Do you know, two children got into a fight over the last of the craft materials? Who’d have thought it?’

Bruce listened, and smiled, and thanked the Lord for helping him out.

The evening was fine and warm, although beginning to cloud over. He could still see the tennis when he got home.