***Structure***

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

Dora wouldn’t get out of bed.

She usually rose at seven, had a shower and by eight o’clock had breakfast on the table.

But today, she wouldn’t get out of bed.

Leo, her practical husband, rose at half past seven, fetched the morning paper from the corner shop, and was sitting at table by eight. No breakfast. Was she ill?

He ’d had a rough couple of days himself, feeling under par but not enough to make a fuss about it. He’d dragged himself around, thinking it would pass, and pass it had. He felt almost up to his usual round of tasks today.

Except of course, that there were no ‘usual tasks.’ There was no meeting up with his friend for coffee, and the jobs he’d been doing for the church had been axed. So what was left? Sitting in the flat and watching the telly? That was no sort of life for an active man like him.

And now Dora wouldn’t get out of bed. He took her in a cup of tea with not too much slopped in the saucer, and asked if she were ill. She shook her head and didn’t answer.

He felt her forehead, which was cool. So she hadn’t got the virus.

But if she hadn’t got the virus and wouldn’t get up . . .? The weird notion popped into his head that she was turning her face to the wall to die.

He sat on the edge of their big double bed, and felt the foundations of his life shift. They’d been married for . . . how many? Fifty-one years. Years filled with working hard, raising a family, both busy from morning to night. When retirement had come, they’d down-sized to this ground floor flat near the shops, and he’d found voluntary work to do. Dora hadn’t wanted to go out to earn money but had spent her time serving their church.

Now, the structure of their lives had changed overnight. The church was closed. They were too old to volunteer for front line nursing, and their group activities had been disbanded.

Oh yes, Leo understood why Dora wouldn’t get out of bed. He’d felt the same way, but had told himself that this too, would pass, that life as they knew it would return. Which was nonsense. He knew it. Dora knew it, too. And that’s why she was not getting out of bed.

He had to accept that older people were now a burden on society. Locked in. Relying on others to bring them food.

The phone rang. Leo patted Dora’s hand, and went into the living-room to answer it.

It was their friend Bruce, the semi-retired accountant, calling. He sounded strained. ‘Leo, a favour, if I may? Have you a thermometer, by any chance? We don’t have one, the chemist hasn’t got any, and I think Sally has a fever.’

Leo recognised the dreaded word ‘fever’. To be followed by ‘hard cough’ and ‘fatigue’. The classic signs of the virus.

No wonder Bruce sounded strained. He adored his Sally.

‘A thermometer?’ Leo was never ill. Hadn’t been ill since childhood. Did Dora have a thermometer? He hadn’t a clue. ‘I’ll ask.’ And then, ‘Dora hasn’t got out of bed this morning.’

Bruce understood what was not being said. ‘Has she got the virus, too? Are you all right?’

‘I’m OK. I don’t know if she’s got it or not. I think she’s just given up.’

‘Ah. Yes. The rug’s been pulled out from under us, hasn’t it? I’ve got some work to do for clients which can be done online, but I can’t concentrate. And now, if Sally really has a temperature, I won’t be able to leave the house to go shopping.’

Leo realised he’d be in the same boat if Dora had gone down with it. Lockdown hadn’t been pleasant but at least he’d been able to walk around the block and go to the shops.

Bruce said, ‘Forget I rang. You’ve got enough on your plate. I panicked. I expect Sally’s just got a dose of ordinary flu. We’ll manage.’

‘I don’t think Dora has a fever. I’ll see if I can find a thermometer and bring it over to you. Let me have a list of what you need from the shops and I’ll get it for you.’

Leo put the phone down and sat watching a small cloud race across the sky. It was windy out. A nice blowy day. A day for hanging out the washing in the old days, but now they had washer/driers and gadgets which were supposed to make life easier.

Leo had been intrigued by the new technology but he’d sympathised when his friends decided that smartphones and tablets were too tricky for them to bother with.

Dora had never taken to modern technology. She had a mobile phone but not a Smartphone. She always said she could add up as fast as any machine.

Leo had, rather guiltily, bought himself a Smartphone with the excuse that he needed it to pay parking fees. He also had a tablet which he liked to play about with now and then. But he hadn’t seen the need for Skype or Zoom or whatever it was called.

Since the virus arrived, their son had phoned them every evening to see how they were doing. Their son had no patience with folk who fell behind the times. He was always saying, ‘Why don’t you have your food delivered on line, and go on Skype so that you can speak to your grandchildren every evening?’

Dora had declined. She liked to see what she was buying, the local shops were well stocked and besides, she’d heard that the supermarkets had run out of lots of everyday items.

Leo opened his tablet. He’d used it a lot recently to find out about the virus and what it could do. Should he email his son now, and tell him that Dora wouldn’t get out of bed? No, why worry him? The lad was finding it hard enough working from home and keeping the rest of the family from murdering one another. And, what could he do about it, anyway? He couldn’t come round and coax Dora out of her depression. No visitors, by Order.

Leo stared at the tablet, and then switched to looking up at the sky.

‘Lift thine eyes to the mountains whence cometh help.’

He half sang and half spoke the words from the Elijah and immediately felt calmer. God was always there, waiting for people to turn to him. God had made the world. He had looked on it and seen it was good. Then human beings in their greed and carelessness had upset the balance of nature. They had turned away from God, and now they had pandemics and bush fires and floods. They had wars which drove people from their homes and their countries, the seas were full of plastic and the air was polluted.

And, the churches were empty.

Leo put his head in his hands. He understood in his head why the church buildings had been closed, but in his heart he rebelled. The church had been the focus for his whole life and for the lives of their friends. It had provided the structure for daily living which had supported them through thick and thin. And now it was gone.

He calmed himself down and went to search the bathroom cabinet. He was sure Dora would have had a thermometer. She had a First Aid tin, didn’t she? It would be in that. He and Dora might have fallen into the Slough of Despair, but there was still some purpose to life while he could help his friends.

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Bruce was tense. Sally had managed to wash and dress herself and get downstairs, only to fall into an armchair and drifted off to sleep. The effort had worn her out and she was far too hot. Would she start coughing? God forbid.

In theory he knew what to do when someone fell ill with the virus. He’d Googled the condition from the start. He’d stocked up on Paracetamol and cough Linctus and he knew at what point he needed to call for help.

To think that only yesterday they’d been talking about where they might go for a summer holiday when the danger had passed! They’d got a paint chart out and discussed repainting the kitchen. Sally had asked him to order some chrysanthemum plants online for the autumn.

They’d discussed how to keep themselves occupied. She had her garden, and he still did some free lance work which could be done online. They told one another that life could carry on much as normal if you had work to do.

Now Sally opened her eyes, blew her nose on a tissue and tried to smile. ‘Just a heavy cold. No need for the ambulance.’

He managed a smile. If her breathing got any worse . . .

She put out her hand to touch his. ‘Do you think you could water the plants in the greenhouse for me? I’m not going to die. Honest. Yes, I do feel a bit odd but I’m not going to die. I was talking to Him about it yesterday afternoon while I was pricking out the seedlings and He said I was going to survive, that he still had work for me to do.’

Sally had learned not to talk to everyone about her conversations with God. Many people thought she was making them up in order to appear holy. Bruce didn’t think that. He knew better. His dear wife had no great opinion of herself and rarely raised her voice in public, but she was a true Christian, she read her bible and she talked to God. And sometimes she heard him speak to her.

It eased the hard lump in Bruce’s throat to hear her say He’d promised that she’d live.

But he couldn’t prevent himself thinking that if she got worse he’d have to call an ambulance. He said, ‘God works through the doctors and the nurses. They are his hands and his feet.’

‘Yes, but they haven’t set tomato seeds which will die if I’m confined to the house for a bit. Could you water everything and fill the bird bath and put some more bird seed in the holder?’

He got up to obey. He said, ‘Leo says Dora has taken to her bed. Any ideas?’

‘Pray, of course. Idiot!’ And she laughed, which brought on a fit of coughing. Was that the high, hard cough, symptomatic of the virus? Or the loose cough of flu? He couldn’t be sure. He carried his fear out to the garden to do as she’d asked.

Half an hour later he found her asleep in her chair. He imagined her temperature had gone down a trifle, but he could be wrong. He sat down in the chair opposite her, and watched and waited to see what would happen. And prayed.

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Leo looked in on his wife. She hadn’t drunk her cup of tea. He took it away to make her another.

While waiting for the kettle to boil, he looked for and found a pen to tick off another day on the calendar. He liked to know what day of the week it was, and it was only too easy now to lose count. Only, the calendar wasn’t on the wall by the back door. Where was it?

It was on the floor, ripped in two.

What on earth? Had Dora done that? Why?

Ah, he saw what she’d done. Dora entered her appointments on the calendar. She liked to see at a glance what she had to do every day of the week.

Monday: Tea Club for the over 65s.

Tuesday: Help in the charity shop. Visit the housebound.

Wednesday: Women’s Fellowship, Circuit meeting.

Thursday: Prayer group, shop for neighbour.

Friday: Strength and Balance exercise class, tea at Sally’s.

Saturday: coffee morning

Sunday: church service, family lunch.

That had been Dora’s life, and it had gone. She’d drawn red lines through each day’s work, the pen ripping through the paper as she went down the list.

Leo tried to put the pieces back together with some sellotape, but couldn’t manage it. He threw the pieces in the bin. Then took them out again because he liked that month’s picture of a windy, seaside day.

He didn’t know how to handle this. He tried saying the Lord’s prayer on the basis that that covered everything. It didn’t seem to help today.

He made another cup of tea and took it in for Dora. She was lying on her back, staring at the ceiling. He wanted to say something comforting, but couldn’t find the words. He felt her forehead. Still no fever.

He said, ‘I do understand how you feel. You’ve always worked so hard. You could do with a day in bed.’

She nodded but didn’t speak.

He handed her the cup of tea, and she drank it. He thought that was a good sign. He said, ‘Bruce rang to say Sally’s got a temperature. He wants to borrow our thermometer. I said I’ll take it over and do some shopping for him. Do you want anything?’

She shook her head.

Just in case she wanted more than just one day in bed, he took the Paracetomal and sleeping tablets out of the bathroom cupboard before he left.

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Quarantine. Bruce made Sally up a bed downstairs. Luckily, they’d put in a downstairs toilet some years before, but his plans to include a shower had been frustrated by the builder saying the staircase wouldn’t allow it.

Sally didn’t complain and was always ready with a smile when he brought her drinks and painkillers. Her temperature went up and down but, he was thankful to see, it never went into the stratosphere. He brought pots of seedlings in to ask her what he should do about this and that. He’d never been interested in gardening before. He wasn’t now, but the frailty of the tiny shoots made him anxious for them.

She urged him to get back to his computer now and then. So he did. He was grateful that he still had work to do when others’ occupations had gone. He was in quarantine so couldn’t leave the house or shop, but Leo brought him food every day, and there was always Sally’s garden to walk around when he needed exercise. He might even learn how to mow the lawn.

Sally spent a lot of time looking out of the window at the branches of a magnolia which was coming into flower. She said that looking at a tree which was obeying God’s laws in all its beauty helped her to pray. Sometimes she’d say, ‘I’m worried about so and so,’ and then Bruce would ring them up and find out that yes, they were pretty low and would like a chat with him. Or with Sally, when she was able. The fact of keeping in touch seemed to make them feel better.

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Leo continued to be worried about Dora. It was three days since she’d taken to her bed. She’d refused to eat but accepted fruit juices and tea at intervals.

Standing in Bruce’s driveway, with Bruce well back from the open door, Leo talked about this. ‘She feels that the structure of her life has gone. That the church has gone. I tried to tell her that the church is not the building but the people in it, but she says she’s too old to start again.’

‘I understand that,’ said Bruce. ‘I have work to do still but it’s hard to create a new way of life without social interaction. How about you?’

‘At first I felt, like Dora, that the world had come to an end, but then I discovered there’s always work for a man like me. I shop for the housebound people in the flats, and do the odd spot of DIY. This morning I fixed a gate which had come off its hinges for a neighbour. Yesterday it was someone else’s washing line that had broken. I’m busy from morning to night. I keep the social distance and wash my hands and hope for the best.’

And, thought Bruce, you have endless patience and good humour, and people are warmed by your presence.

Leo continued, ‘I managed eventually to get on this Zoom thing and followed the church service but funnily enough I was more moved by a prayer I found on the internet. Dead simple. Touched the heart, if you know what I mean?’

‘Send it to me,’ said Bruce. ‘Sally will like it. She’s improving slightly, I think. Maybe it was only flu. She sits there gazing into space and then she comes out with things like, ‘Bread is the structure of life,’ which I don’t wholly understand. I suppose it means that we’ve got over-complicated and should get back to basics. What are you going to do about Dora?’

Leo threw out his hands. ‘I’m at my wits end. I’ve been sympathetic and understanding. That doesn’t work. I’m living on ready meals. I’ve tried to keep the flat clean but it’s in a right old mess. Can you ask Sally what I should do?’

‘I will.’

‘Good. Now, have you a list of what you want tomorrow? The supermarket’s not much fun but the local shops are pretty well stocked. They’ve even got loo paper.’

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The following morning Leo took a call on his smartphone, which he then handed to Dora. ‘It’s Sally. For you.’

He went out, leaving the door ajar.

Dora said, ‘Yes, Sally? . . . No, I’m not feeling up to much. You know how it is . . . yes, Leo’s been wonderful, I don’t know how he does it. He always finds something to keep him occupied whereas I . . .’

There was a long silence while Dora listened to what was being said at the other end of the line, broken eventually by Dora’s sharp voice saying, ‘But I’ve always asked God to . . . ..’ The springs of the bed protested as Dora straightened up. ‘What do you mean, that I was trying to do it in my own strength instead of trusting in God? I was worn out. I needed a rest and . . . No, I didn’t know our minister was trying to get hold of me. No, I haven’t looked at my phone for ages. What is it she wants? . . . For me to organise daily phone contact with the people on the prayer list? Well, of course I could do that. I’ll start this morning.’

Leo went into the kitchen. Today he was going to shop for two elderly ladies while taking someone’s pet dog for walkies. The man whose gate he’d mended had promised to drop in a bunch of flowers for him, which he was going to divide between Dora and Sally.

The flowers would cheer Sally up in her convalescence. For she was going to be all right, wasn’t she? And Bruce was fine, and he was fine, and soon Dora was going to burst into the kitchen and tear him off a strip because the place was in chaos.

Dora appeared in the doorway, arms akimbo. ‘What on earth’s been going on here! Just look at the mess! I turn my back for five minutes and . . .’

He grinned. Home Sweet Home. Praise the Lord!

Now to switch on the computer ready to zoom in on the morning

prayers from the minister. He was looking forward to that. The church building might be closed but its members were still providing bread for the soul. Living with Christ was all the structure in life that you needed.

Alleluia and all that. Christ is risen, bringing hope to the world, Amen.