Love in Lockdown

**A short story by Veronica Heley**

It was to be Bruce’s first outing since his wife had contracted the virus. Sally was now well enough to leave so he arranged to do some shopping for things he couldn’t get delivered and to meet up with his old friend Leo for a coffee. Arriving at the café, he pulled off his mask and took a seat, saying, ‘Ah, I’ve missed the scent of good coffee!’

Leo agreed. Big and burly, he stirred sugar into his hot chocolate and said, ‘How good it is to see people out shopping and enjoying themselves again.’

Bruce said, ‘I’ll never again take the little pleasures of life for granted.’

His phone rang. It was Sally and she sounded distraught. ‘Bruce, can you come home straight away? Fiona’s arrived and wants to stay!’

‘What!’ Bruce scrambled to his feet. ‘I’m on my way.’

Leo was not amused. ‘You’ve only just got here.’

‘Sally’s sister has arrived, to stay. How could she! She knows Sally’s been ill. Even though Sally didn’t need to go to hospital, she still gets terribly tired. I have to get back.’

‘What? Fiona the Frightful, She Who Cannot Be Pleased? Yes, of course you must go. What about your shopping? I’ll do it for you and drop it in later.’

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Bruce could hear Fiona talking – or rather, scolding – as he entered the house. A tote bag, a laptop and an enormous leather handbag were stacked in a huddle in the hall.

‘. . . really won’t do! This room’s like a hospital ward. Where’s the table gone and the big settee? What with your bed and the commode, there’s hardly room to swing a cat! And what’s that wardrobe and a chest of drawers doing in the hall? You’ve allowed yourself to become a permanent invalid. I can see it’s more than time that I came to stay. Look at your hair! Done up in a ponytail as if you were a young girl, which you are not. Now, I want you to get up, now! Take a walk around the garden—’

Sally’s elder sister was a tall, well-built woman in her early sixties, solid in every way. Even her hair seemed carved rather than natural, which made Bruce wonder how she’d managed to get to a hairdresser in lockdown. She was wearing an expensive two piece in the style of the late Queen Mother, and diamond earrings.

Sally was sitting where Bruce had left her in the big armchair. Seeing Bruce, she tried to smile. ‘I’m sorry to drag you away from your coffee.’

He kissed her forehead, pressed her hand in his and noted that her pulse was far too fast. He sat on the arm of her chair and confronted his sister-in-law. ‘Well, Fiona. Good to see you, even in these difficult circumstances. Sally’s doing all right, isn’t she, even though she still gets very tired.’

Fiona said, ‘I don’t care to lie. My sister is not looking good. When did you last allow her out into the sun, may I ask? She’s as white as a sheet. You have to get her moving again or she’ll never get out of that chair. I can see it’s more than time that I moved in to help you.’

Sally’s hand tightened on Bruce. He said, ‘It’s kind of you to offer, Fiona, but I’m afraid we aren’t in any position to have guests at the moment. We moved our lives downstairs when Sally fell ill so that I could nurse her better.’

Fiona wasn’t having any of that. ‘If Sally needs so much nursing then she should go into a care home for a while.’

Sally’s grip on Bruce’s hand tightened. She said, ‘I did suggest that, Fiona, but Bruce wouldn’t hear of it.’

‘Certainly not,’ said Bruce. ‘And we have a plan to start moving everything back again, starting today. I have been sleeping in the chair next to the bed, but—’

‘Then the master bedroom upstairs must be free. Good. I’ll move in there.’

‘No!’ said Bruce. ‘One more night, and we’ll both be moving back upstairs to sleep. I have a stair lift being fitted tomorrow morning.’

Fiona was horrified. ‘You can’t put in a stair lift! It would completely ruin the proportions of your hall and take thousands off the price of the house. If Sally can’t manage the stairs then she must go into care while I sort the house out.’

Sally gave a little gasp and seemed to shrink.

Bruce reddened. He told himself he mustn’t lose his temper. He counted down from ten. Then he said, ‘Fiona, this is Sally’s home and mine. We are grateful for your offer of help but it’s best that we stick to our own plans for the future. We do understand that you would find it uncomfortable to live here at the moment so . . .have you booked into a hotel somewhere? Shall I call you a taxi?’

Sally fingers tightened on Bruce’s hand and pressed her head against his arm.

Fiona tossed her head. ‘Go to a hotel, indeed! I’m not risking infection by going to a hotel. I shall move into your guest bedroom until . . . well, for a while.’

Sally struggled to sit more upright. ‘Fiona, has something happened to your flat? No, wait a minute, you moved into a friend’s house recently, didn’t you? What’s happened? Why do you want us to put you up?’

Fiona brushed a speck off her skirt. ‘Well, as you can imagine, life has been very difficult. I had three cruises booked this summer where I would have been the writer in residence and would have had time to finish my next book, so I’d rented out my little flat to some friends who needed a base in London, no children or dogs. When the cruises were cancelled, my good friend Frederick offered me sanctuary at his place in the country. Naturally I jumped at the chance.’

Sally said, ‘You mean, this Frederick offered you accommodation, rent free?’

Fiona reddened. ‘It’s a big house, his housekeeper had retired and he offered me the use of her flat above the garage. He runs a company which makes jigsaws and board games and he’s been good enough to say that I have an eye for the market. I’ve even been able to suggest some subjects would make an attractive prospect for the jigsaws and of course we try out his board games together. We enjoy one another’s company; we like the same television programmes and he’s as mad about gardening as Sally. All I had to do was order a weekly delivery from the supermarket, send the linen to the laundry and put a ready meal on the table at seven every evening. It was an excellent arrangement all round.’ She reached for a hankie and sniffed. ‘Oh dear, oh dear! Why did he have to catch it?’

Was that really the sheen of tears in her eyes? Surely not.

Bruce worked this out. ‘You mean, he got the virus and was hospitalised?’

‘No, no.’ She blew her nose. ‘At least . . . Well, I don’t know exactly . . . I was so shocked when I saw his note. I admit, I panicked. I mean, what would you have done? He said his temperature was up and he’d contacted the doctor and they were sending some medication round for him, and I wasn’t to worry as he’d be perfectly all right. I mean, he can afford to get people in to look after him and I’d be no good as a nurse, absolutely none, and I have my book to finish.’

Bruce could hardly believe what she was saying. ‘You were afraid that you might catch the virus from him and instead of self-isolating, you left him to come to us, not caring that you might be bringing the infection here as well?’

‘My flat is not available for another three months, so where else am I supposed to go? And it’s clear that you need me here to sort you out.’

As usual, Sally was more concerned for others than herself. ‘You left your friend alone and ill? Oh, the poor man.’

‘Yes, well . . . I do feel badly about that. I’ll ring this evening, find out how he is.’

Fiona didn’t sound as sure of herself as usual. Perhaps she did have a soft spot for the man who had given her shelter? Whatever regrets she might have had, she pushed them away. ‘Now, Bruce; would you carry my things upstairs, please? I’ll take the guest room at the front for myself, and use your third bedroom for my study.’

Bruce’s had an impulse to turn Fiona out into the street and let her fend for herself because Sally wasn’t strong enough at the moment to deal with her sister’s bullying tactics. On the other hand, they were sisters and, although they’d never been close, that did count for something. And maybe Fiona had fled before she’d been infected and wouldn’t need nursing?

Bruce thought how easy it would be to disclaim responsibility for someone who broke all the rules and put others in danger, but it wasn’t in him to turn her away. He said, ‘First things first. You must arrange to have a test to see if you’ve got the virus or not. Until you get the result, you have to self-isolate in those two rooms and the bathroom upstairs. I’ll clean everything you’ve touched down here and I’ll bring you up food and drink. Understood?’

Fiona bridled, but knew when to agree terms. ‘I haven’t got a temperature or any of those other symptoms. But . . . all right.’

Sally added, ‘And you’ll ring your Frederick *now* to find out if he’s coping or if he needs to go to hospital?’

Fiona blushed. ‘He’s not *my* Frederick, though from time to time I have wondered . . . but no, it’s quite out of the question.’

Knowing her sister, Sally persevered. ‘Is he too old, too fat or too poor?’

Fiona was clearly uncomfortable with this line of questioning. ‘None of those. He’s perfectly acceptable, except . . . He was given a knighthood recently, services to industry and so on. Such a nice man. If only . . . He married young but she died from some blood disorder or other, and there’s no children. But no, it’s out of the question.’

The doorbell rang.

Bruce rose to his feet. ‘That’ll be Leo. He said he’d finish my shopping and bring it over. I must go and explain to him what’s happened. He’ll have to wait outside till you’re safely upstairs and I’ve cleaned everything you’ve touched.’

Fiona objected. ‘You don’t have to let him in.’

‘Oh yes, I do. He’s going to help me take the furniture back upstairs, and later on his wife Dora is going to bring round a meal for us all to eat in the garden. They are our bubble, Fiona. I’ll help you take your things upstairs and you’ll stay there until we know if you’re infected or not. Right?’

Fiona muttered something about this being worse than prison.

Sally flashed a smile in her husband’s direction, and murmured, ‘Thank you.’

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Bruce settled his wife down for the night, and sank into the big armchair at the side of her bed. Sally was looking brighter. She’d enjoyed sitting out in the garden that afternoon and planned to get out there again tomorrow.

Bruce was exhausted. He hadn’t realised how dusty everything had got upstairs. They had a toilet downstairs and a shower room so he’d only gone up there once a week to run the taps and chase the occasional fly out of the windows.

They could hear Fiona moving around above them.

Sally said, ‘Thank you for taking her in, Bruce. I know she can be difficult at times, but—’

‘If she’s brought the infection with her, I’ll do her an injury. The thing is, if she goes down with it we won’t be able to move her unless she gets bad enough to go to hospital.’

Sally reached for his hand, and took it in hers. ‘You’ll manage, whatever happens. You’ve seen your share of nursing, haven’t you? You dear first wife, and then me. Over and above the call of duty.’

‘A labour of love, both times. You nursed your first husband, too. Veterans of the commode, that’s us.’

Sally said, ‘It would have been a labour of love to nurse you as well, if you had got the virus instead of me. I don’t think you need worry about Fiona. She never gets anything. That’s why she thinks that people who do succumb are being weak-minded.’

‘Was she always such a bossy-boots?’

‘It comes of being the eldest, and being clever. She always had university and fame and fortune in mind. I’m not at all academic. It makes a difference.’

Bruce rubbed her fingers. ‘Well, she got her worldly success with her books though I can’t say it seems to brought her much joy in life, whereas you’ve made two men happy in marriage. What’s more, you’ve spread your loving care for everyone around you. When people mention your name, they smile.’

Bruce didn’t often wear his heart on his sleeve, but he wasn’t even looking at her when he spoke, so this didn’t count, did it?

Sally kissed his hand. ‘You, too. Goodnight, my dear love.’

‘One more night down here, and tomorrow we’ll be back in our own bed.’ He switched off the side-lamp. He’d left the curtains open, so that they could enjoy seeing the stars in the night sky if the clouds cleared.

He murmured to himself, ‘Dear Lord, keep Sally safe this night. Give us strength to deal with whatever you have in store for us tomorrow. I suppose I ought to pray for Fiona, too, but somehow . . . yes, I know we ought to pray for those who despitefully use us . . . Does she even believe in God? Poor woman, how much she is missing. And whatever happens, give me the strength to carry on. Good night, dear Lord. Wake me safe with morning bright.’

Love in lockdown.

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It was going to be another hot day. Bruce got up early to help Sally dress and to settle down in a chair on the patio outside where they liked to have breakfast when the weather permitted. The garden was Sally’s pride and joy. Bruce had kept it going as best he could and it didn’t look too bad. He knew Sally was dying to get out there to deadhead this and cut back that.

Returning to the kitchen, Bruce found Fiona trying to make herself coffee in Bruce’s special espresso machine which required respectful handling. He was shocked to see her downstairs and annoyed that she was trying to use his coffee maker. ‘You’re not supposed to be here, Fiona. Go back up this minute. I’ll bring you some breakfast in a minute.’

‘You don’t understand.’ Sniffle, sniffle. ‘I rang Frederick to ask how he was, and the signal faded out. My phone’s dead. I know exactly where I left the charger. If you’re keeping me here as a prisoner, then you’ll have to go out and buy me another one.’

‘Use mine. It’s on the wall in the study.’

‘I’ve tried it and it won’t fit!’

She’d been poking about in his study? He’d have to wipe everything down in there, too. Bruce heard the burble and reached the stove one second after the espresso machine boiled over.

‘Now look what you’ve done!’ cried Fiona, reaching for the tissues. ‘Everything’s against me! First Frederick was taken ill, you’re being horrible to me, and now the coffee’s spoilt!’

Bruce bit back the words on the end of his tongue. He poured out some coffee for Fiona and said they’d make a plan after they’d had breakfast.

Fiona sniffled, said she didn’t fancy anything much but could possibly manage a poached egg on toast, some toast with real butter and some good home-made marmalade if they had such a thing.

Bruce told her to make breakfast for herself and take it back upstairs.

He left her groaning to herself while he took coffee and a pot of tea, with cornflakes, milk, some bread and butter and a couple of bananas out to join Sally in the garden. She was looking better today, with a bit of colour in her cheeks.

Now she smiled her thanks. ‘Can you cope? Yes? If she annoys you too much, tell her that her wig’s slipped.’

Bruce couldn’t help laughing. ‘Oh Sally, is it really a wig?’

‘Hush. She’d hate you to know that.’

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Bruce managed to clear up the mess Fiona had left in the kitchen before the engineer arrive to fit the stair lift. A chunky Yorkshire man wearing a regulation mask, he asked where the power point was, said for them not to use the stairs for a while and to leave him to it. He then manhandled equipment into the hall while Bruce cleaned surfaces and worried about whether they’d got enough food for the weekend with Fiona around.

He looked out of the kitchen window to see that Sally had managed to get herself into the greenhouse to attend to her tomatoes. He praised the Lord, for her colour was better and she was doing a little more every day, even though she still got terribly tired.

Then there was a commotion from upstairs. Fiona, shouting.

Bruce went into the hall to hear what she was saying, and the engineer suspended operations to listen. Sally, too, drifted in from the garden. ‘What’s up?’

‘Someone outside. I’m not expecting anyone, are you?’ Bruce opened the window in the front room which overlooked the drive.

‘Let’s see.’ Sally was interested.

Out in the road was a monster of a black SUV, shiny and new. In front of it stood a small, tubby man in expensive casual clothes and a panama hat. He was shouting up to Fiona, who was leaning out of her bedroom window above. ‘Come on down. I’ve got your charger, and your electric toothbrush.’

There was a wail from upstairs. ‘Oh, Frederick, I thought you were dying! I know I shouldn’t have left! I couldn’t sleep for worrying about you and when I tried to ring you, my phone died on me!’

‘Dying? Why should I be dying? Yes, I ran a temperature and my arm swelled up, but that was because I was stung by one of those blithering horseflies in the garden. Yes, I had to rest till the medication took effect, but I haven’t got the virus and you’d no need to run away.’

The little man spotted Bruce and Sally, and took off his hat to them. ‘Apologies. You must be the delightful sister and her clever husband. I fear I’m trespassing on your driveway. Must introduce myself. I’m Fred. I make toys. Fiona’s absolutely brilliant about knowing what will sell. Amazing woman!’

Fiona wailed, ‘Oh, Frederick!’

‘Enough of that, Fiona. I’ve come to take you home.’

‘Even though I ran away? Oh, Frederick, what you must think of me!’

The little man said, ‘I’ll tell you what I think of you when you get down here, woman! I’m not playing Romeo and Juliet at my age, and I’m not going down on one knee either. Don’t expect me to woo you with roses. A diamond ring’s more my style, what!’

Sally began to giggle. Bruce did, too. Was it the height difference which made Fiona think marriage impossible?

From above Fiona cried, ‘I can’t come down! There’s a workman on the stairs!’

The engineer appeared in the study doorway. ‘I’ve finished. Shall we let her be the first to try the stair lift?’

Bruce said, ‘Why not?’

Another case of love in lockdown.