***CAN YOU FORGIVE?***

by Veronica Heley

Bruce had noticed that recently his breathing had become harsher when walking up the hill to his house. Was it time for him to consider getting out of the car and taking some exercise? His wife Sally walked everywhere and worked in the garden. She wasn’t exactly slim, but she was pretty fit, and she could take the slope much faster than he could.

He decided that he’d walk down the hill and round their local park next morning. It wouldn’t take long, would it? Only if the sun shone, of course.

The sun did shine, but he didn’t particularly feel like taking any exercise next day. Unfortunately he’d told Sally what he intended to do, and she was all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed about it. She was going out herself that morning but checked that he was wearing comfortable shoes and had his keys in his pocket so that he could get back in after his walk.

He went down the hill at a good pace, telling himself that this was doing him good, and that he would boast about taking exercise to his old friend Leo when they next met. He even managed to give a tolerant smile as a couple of joggers brushed past him on their way into the park.

He paused at the park gates, faced with a decision about which way to go. He could take the loop round by the river which was what most people – and the joggers – normally did, or he could take the secluded path which wound in and out of the trees around the outside of the park, which would take longer. He told himself not to be a wimp, that this was doing him a lot of good, and took the secluded path.

He was no more than five minutes along when he saw them.

Four youths in hoodies and sweat pants with blindingly white trainers.

Doing nothing much. Not even smoking. Hands in pockets, hoods up.

For some reason he hesitated. But surely there was no reason to feel fear? It was a bright, sunny morning in a popular park. Yet, he nearly turned back.

If he had done, would they still have come after him?

One white, one black and two Asian; possibly Pakistani.

They turned to look at him.

He nodded to them. He would have given them a wide berth, but the leader – the black lad – stepped in front of him. ‘Got some change on you?’

Bruce shook his head. ‘Sorry, no. Just out for a walk.’

‘You don’t do much walking, do you? No trainers. It’s a giveaway, see. Give us your phone.’

They surrounded him. Gleaming eyes. Rapacious.

Bruce had heard it was best to give robbers what they asked for . . . and that if he did, they’d leave him alone. He handed over his mobile phone.

The leader merely glanced at it. ‘Can’t you afford anything better?’ He tossed it to one of his mates. ‘Give us your car keys, then.’

They crowded around him. He could feel their breath on his neck.

He dug in his pocket and produced his key ring. He hesitated to hand it over, realising that if he did, he wouldn’t be able to get back into his house on his return, because Sally was going to be out all day.

One of the Asian lads snatched the key ring from him. ‘Where’s your car, then?’

Bruce cleared his throat. ‘Back at home.’

The leader screamed, ‘He’s wasting our time!’ And kicked Bruce’s legs out from under him. And then . . . and then . . .

And then he was alone. And hurting. He couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t move. They’d taken his phone and his car keys.

Not many people came along this path. He tried to get to his feet. Failed. Heard himself whimper. He would have to crawl . . .

Wheels! A bicycle? A child on a child’s bicycle. They weren’t supposed to ride their bikes in the park, but a small boy had taken this secluded path, thinking he’d be safe from official eyes. The boy spotted him and slowed down. His eyes went wide. He was too young to help. But maybe . . .

Bruce managed to croak out, ‘Get some help!’

The sky went black.

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Everything hurt. The hospital said he’d got several cracked ribs which would heal in time. They gave him painkillers, and sent him home.

The painkillers didn’t really do the job.

His wife Sally wept and tried to hide her tears. She hovered, and took over the cooking and shopping, which Bruce usually did. Housework was not exactly her ‘thing’ but she did her best and Bruce didn’t care. He hadn’t much appetite, anyway.

The police said they were treating it as a hate crime, and would he come down to the station to attend a line-up of possible suspects?

Bruce didn’t recognise any of the lads lined up for him to look at.

He was told not to drive for a while. His wife Sally had never learned to drive so his old friend Leo kindly got his car out to take Bruce here and there.

Friends, people at church, acquaintances commiserated with him. Bruce bared his teeth and tried to smile, but it was an effort. The pain was steady. He lost weight.

There was a second line-up at the police station. Again, no result.

Strong painkillers provided some relief but numbed his mind. People said things would get better soon. He didn’t believe them. He seemed to himself to be getting worse.

One day Bruce realised the weight in his chest was anger.

He was angry that the police couldn’t identify the group of young men who’d assaulted him. How dare they! What did it say about those lads that they could demand money of an elderly man, and kick him senseless?

His anger grew. He could feel it, burning. There was acid in his mouth.

The yobs were evil! They should be given a taste of what they’d handed out to him.

His minister visited. ‘What a dreadful thing. These lads . . . terrible background, I expect. So many youngsters nowadays have no hope . . . there’s nothing for them to look forward to . . . poor education, no jobs . . . probably looking for money to buy drugs. We must pray for them.’

Bruce prayed all right. He prayed they might be beaten up by another gang of hoodies. He prayed they would be run over in the street and suffer the same pain they’d inflicted on him. He prayed they would be knifed in a brawl, but not killed. No. They must suffer as he suffered.

The Bible said that he should leave revenge to God.

Bruce said, ‘But there’s no justice if they are not caught and punished.’

The minister said, ‘I know it’s difficult, but we must try to understand what makes these young men act like this. With understanding we can, gradually, come to forgive.’

Bruce almost laughed. Understand those yobs? He understood them only too well. They were the lowest form of life. They were feral. Wild. They didn’t respect the laws of the land. ‘Old man, what’s yours is mine!’ That was the way they thought. The minister was a nice enough man but he’d never had his ribs kicked in as he lay, helpless, on the ground

As for forgiveness! Hah!

Bruce told himself he’d tried to do nothing but good all his life, and look what had happened!

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Leo took Bruce for yet another hospital appointment. Gloom and doom. Waiting on hard chairs. Bruce wondered why Leo had bothered to help him. They’d never had anything much in common, had they? Leo had been a sales manager, Bruce an accountant. They’d fallen into a kind of friendship through a series of accidents. Leo was a ‘doer’. Bruce was a ‘thinker’.

Yet it was Leo – who would have laughed at the idea of being called a philosopher – who said, ‘Do you remember talking about forgiveness not long ago? We were in the cafe and there was this child running wildly around?’

Bruce remembered . . .

The child had bumped into a waitress, causing her to drop the tray of crockery she’d been carrying. Two cups had broken.

A woman – the mother? – grabbed the child. ‘How many times have I told you not to run around in here!’ She carried her daughter off, screaming, to a table at the back.

The waitress, shocked, started to pick up the pieces.

The manageress appeared. In vicious tones she said to the waitress, ‘That’s the third time you’ve dropped a tray. I’ve warned you before to look out for children running around. Clear that up, and get out!’

The girl whined, ‘That’s not fair! It wasn’t my fault!’

Leo and Bruce – like all the other customers – pretended the incident had never happened.

When the waitress had disappeared, Leo leaned back in his chair and said, ‘Who was really at fault? The waitress for dropping the tray, or the child for running into her?’

Bruce said, ‘Or the mother for not looking after the child properly?’

Leo sighed. ‘The Bible tells us we have to forgive those who do us wrong. The manageress wasn’t very forgiving, was she?’

‘It seems the girl’s not very good at her job. If someone persists in making mistakes you can forgive but you can warn them there’s going to be consequences. She was warned.’

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Bruce remembered. It all seemed so long ago that they’d talked so light-heartedly about forgiveness.

Leo said, ‘At the time I remembering thinking if the manageress should have forgiven the waitress and given her another chance. You said that if she was such a liability, then probably not. But that’s such a trivial affair compared to what has happened to you. I’ve been lucky. I don’t think I’ve ever suffered any great injustice. Nobody has hurt me as you have been hurt. May I say how much I admire the way you’ve deal with what’s happened to you? If I’d been in your place, I’d be screaming and shouting for those boys to be arrested and brought to justice.’

Bruce was surprised. He didn’t think he was being calm about it. He supposed he’d hidden his anger well, if it had fooled his friend. He thought he’d been a right grumpy old man recently, and that he probably ought to ask the doctor for tablets to ease his depression.

Leo said, ‘I know we’re supposed to forgive our brother no matter how many times he treats us badly. Could I forgive those boys who’ve got away scot free? They might well go on to get someone else on the ground and kick their ribs in next week. I don’t see that my forgiving them is going to do any good. To my mind, it’s giving them permission to go on doing it.’

Bruce had to point out, ‘We’re only urged to forgive if they show remorse for what they’ve done.’

‘Those yobs who beat you up aren’t exactly saying “sorry”, are they?’

Bruce had been thinking the same thing. ‘I’m trying to keep in mind that there’s worse things that could have happened to me. War crimes or rape, for instance. How could I forgive those?’

‘There’s a man in Ireland who forgave the people who’d killed his son.’

‘He was a saint. I’m not.’

Leo said, ‘You’re a better man than I am. You’re further along the way. Think how many times you’ve said something, or done something that’s helped to set me on the right track!’

Bruce nearly laughed, thinking how absurd it was for Leo to put him on a pedestal. Bruce might have a better brain for accounts, but Leo had a heart full of love for his fellow men. Didn’t that make Leo a better man? In Bruce’s world, it did.

A nurse called out Bruce’s name, and he struggled to his feet. He said to Leo, ‘I know what your wife would say to me. She’d say, “Pull your socks up and get on with it!”

At which they both laughed. Dora wasn’t given to introspection.

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Later that day Dora brought round a casserole for Bruce and Sally to eat. Dora knew that cooking wasn’t Sally’s strong point. She was a very positive, practical person.

Bruce asked her, ‘Dora, how do you forgive the unforgiveable?’

‘Put it out of your mind each time it comes up and hits you. That’s what I do. I tell it to go away and I think about something else till it does.’

Bruce nodded and said it was good advice, but privately he thought that pushing something away was a sort of denial. And denying that something bad had happened to you wasn’t going to help. It certainly didn’t ease the acid lump in his stomach.

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Healing took time. Bruce hit a snag. He’d been saying the Lord’s Prayer ever since he was a child. He knew it by heart. He rattled it off with everyone else in church. He didn’t think about what it meant . . . until one Sunday, it struck him that he couldn’t forgive those who had sinned against him.

The thought was like a laser light, showing him the gap between what was asked of him, and what he was doing.

He tried arguing with God. *You can’t ask me to do this! It’s impossible!*

It seemed to him that God smiled down at him. *Difficult, yes. But not impossible.*

*You’re asking too much of me!*

That evening he broke the news to Sally that he didn’t think he was up to going to church for a while. He’d recently been made a steward and he knew they’d find it difficult to replace him, but that was that. He was not going to go again until he’d got himself sorted out.

He expected her to accept his decision without demur, but she didn’t. ‘Are you hurting so much, dear?’

‘Hurting, yes. In mind and body.’

She put her hand on his. ‘I’m only a bear of little brain, but are you sure about not going to church any longer? Surely that’s cutting yourself off from, well, everything that matters?’

Sally had a strong, uncomplicated faith which had not been shaken by what had happened to her in the past. She had forgiven her difficult first husband, even though his words and actions had wounded her deeply at the time and had left her with little self-confidence. Perhaps for the very first time, Bruce realised that she was actually a better person than he was. It made him feel very humble.

So instead of confirming his decision to stop attending church he said, ‘I’m working on it. Pray for me?’

Which he knew she would do.

He prayed, too. ‘Dear Lord, it would be so much easier to forgive if those lads had been caught and prosecuted. This way . . . it’s so hard! I can’t do this in my own strength. Show me how to forgive.’

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The following Sunday he did go to church, though he didn’t join in when it came to the Lord’s Prayer. Instead, he prayed again, ‘Help me to forgive.’

After the service, he made an effort to talk to an elderly neighbour. ‘I haven’t seen you for a while. Have you been away?’

‘I went to stay with my sister. That’s the last time. We’ve never got on. She was always the favourite, even though it was me who looked after our Mum when she got poorly. Every day I popped in to see our Mum, and did we ever see my sister? Not once in a blue moon. And what happens when Mum passed? Her best tea-set, which was one of her wedding presents, which should have come to me, my sister took it and gave it to her daughter, who won’t be looking after it properly and it will probably end up in the rubbish bin in pieces. Everything was supposed to be divided equally but no, she had to take that. She said as I was to have more money to make up, but that’s not the point, as I said to her. She had no right! None! I told her to her face, I said “You’re no sister of mine if you don’t give me my rights!” And she said . . . well, I won’t tell you what she said as it doesn’t bear repeating.’

Bruce tried to pour oil on troubled waters. ‘I can see you’re upset—’

‘Upset! That’s not the word for it. I’ve had it up to here with here. No more nice guy for me. She don’t deserve it! There are some things you can’t forgive!’

Bruce lurched to his feet, clutching his ribs. It hurt to laugh, but his sense of humour had got the better of him. He stumbled out into the fresh air and stood there, holding himself together.

Sally saw him leave abruptly and hastened to follow him out. ‘Are you all right, dear?’

He said, ‘“What fools we mortals be.” That’s a misquote from someone who saw it all and understood it all. We human beings do get worked up about such stupid things, don’t we? Yet we’re like ants, tiny grains of sand on the surface of the world, blowing our problems up out of proportion till they take over our lives . . . and for what? Something that won’t mean anything to anybody in a hundred years’ time, or fifty . . . or even five. From His perspective our lives pass in a micro-second of time. Our wars, our earthquakes, our individual sins . . . it’s amazing that He can care what happens to each one of us individually. And yet I have to believe that He does.’

Sally took his arm. ‘Yes, I know that He does.’

‘Thank you, Sally, for your loving care and your wisdom, and for putting up with me being so grouchy. I feel much better now. Don’t let’s wait for Leo to offer us a lift. Let’s make our apologies and walk home by ourselves. I think I can manage it today, and it’s about time I got back to normal.’

Cheekily, Sally said, ‘And will you cook lunch today?’

He grinned. ‘Don’t push your luck. Not today. But perhaps tomorrow.’

As they walked along, Sally began to hum to herself as she often did when she was happy.

‘What’s that?’ said Bruce. ‘I seem to know it, but . . .’

She sang softly, ‘O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,

Consider all the works they hand hath made,

I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,

The power throughout the universe displayed.’

Bruce joined in, and they sang together, ‘How great thou art . . .!’

It was springtime, and the trees were greening over. There were daffodils and tulips colouring the gardens as they passed by . . . and birdsong . . . and people beginning to shed their winter clothes and lift their faces to the sunshine.

It was Lent, and on Good Friday they would go to church and hear the story of the Crucifixion and how Jesus, nailed to the cross by Roman soldiers, asked His Father to forgive them for what they were doing to him. And Bruce would at last find himself filled with enough grace and love to forgive those who had wronged him.

On Easter Sunday he stood at the church door on duty and words of love and adoration rang through his mind, ‘Then sings my soul, my Saviour God to thee . . . How great thou art, how great thou art!’

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