*MICHAELMAS*

a short story by Veronica Heley

Long Covid had affected Sally badly, but she was gradually rebuilding her strength. Bruce, her almost-retired accountant husband, had taken over most of the household duties but she was determined to do a little more every day . . . or perhaps every other day.

Today she told herself she would take her stick and walk along to the shops and back. She wouldn’t buy anything. Well, perhaps she might stop for a coffee when she got there but if she could manage such an outing, it would prove that she was getting better. She knew she’d probably be waylaid now and then by people asking how she was doing, and she planned to prop herself up somewhere when that happened; against a shop front, perhaps, or on one of the benches along the street.

It was a bright autumn afternoon, and she felt positive about her venture. Leaves were changing colour and starting to drift down from the trees and some people she knew were sitting outside a café drinking tea and coffee. Perhaps she’d join them.

The pavements were wide enough for several people to walk abreast until . . . there was some shouting behind her . . . boys? And down the pavement they thundered, whooping and screaming, a teenage boy on a bike, pedalling away as fast as he could, racing another teenager on an electric scooter!

Sally hastily stepped aside to get out of their way. A woman who’d been walking along ahead of her – an elderly woman with a stick and a shopping basket on wheels – was not so fortunate. The boys swooped round, aiming to pass her by on either side. . . and, Oh! Made contact!

The woman fell, sprawling onto the pavement. She lay there, her right leg at an angle to her body.

Sally, all of a quiver, dropped her stick to steady herself against a nearby bench. All around her was pandemonium, some people rising from their chairs outside the café, others shouting after the boys who were disappearing along the road, still whooping and hollering.

The woman lying on the pavement didn’t make any sound at all.

A young woman pushing a baby buggy got out her smartphone. A man delivering to the Co-op left his lorry to run to the fallen woman and feel for a pulse. He got out his smartphone, too. Sally felt her knees give way and told herself to sit down. And couldn’t move.

‘Is she all right?’

‘Did you see that?’ Smartphones were pulled out all round.

The people sitting outside the café were distressed. Some showing neighbours that they’d snapped the back view of the lads on their phones as they disappeared along the road; others ringing for an ambulance.

Sally was shaking. She inched her way onto the bench.

Rachel, the owner of the café came out with one of her waitresses, asking if there was anything she could do.

‘Those boys! She’s broken her leg.’

‘Look out for her handbag. People can pinch them if . . .’

The woman’s shopper had fallen over. Fresh salads stuffs, a sliced loaf from the bakery, some cheeses . . . a newspaper. Someone gathered the fallen things up and put them into the abandoned shopper.

‘Anyone know her? Who is she?’

‘Dunno. I see her about. She lives up the hill in one of those retirement flats, I think.’

A paramedics’ car drove up. A burly man with a shaved head got out and hunkered down on the pavement beside the fallen woman. His mate stayed in the car, on the phone.

A quick examination and the burly man started giving resuscitation.

Heart attack? Oh, no! The paramedic was patient. Strong. He’d get her back, wouldn’t he? His mate brought equipment out of the car.

Everyone watched. Fascinated. But at last the burly man stopped, shook his head. His mate nodded, consulted his watch and went back to the car to report. ‘Anyone see it?’

Several people said they had. Some said they’d caught the boys on their smartphones but only the back view. Others said it had all happened so quickly they couldn’t identify the boys.

Some were angry, some excited. One said, ‘There ought to be a law!’ And, ‘What are the police doing, those boys are always up and down the pavement, racing one another? They’re trouble.’

The first paramedic said, ‘The ambulance is on its way, and the police. If anyone saw what happened, please stay and give details.’

Sally tried to stand up, started to tremble, and sat down again. She said, ‘I saw it.’ But didn’t think she was heard until Rachel, the café owner, sent one of her waitresses over to Sally to ask if she’d like a glass of water. Sally did. The girl brought one out to Sally, who drank it and felt better.

The burly paramedic came to check Sally over. As he leaned forward, a medallion on a chain slid out of his shirt. It caught the light. He saw her looking at it, and said, ‘St Michael, patron saint of paramedics. He has another job, too, that of taking souls up to God for judgement. A useful man to know, in this job. I can see you’re all shook up. How are you doing? Not bad? Sit still for a bit, eh? You say you saw it all? The police will want to ask you a few questions.’

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Bruce was home when Sally returned. He took one look at her and made her sit down. Hot, sweet tea arrived in her favourite mug.

She tried to smile. ‘Death in the afternoon. People were having tea and coffee, chatting about family and friends, wondering if it were time to collect the children from school. Death mowed a path along the pavement and took one of us. It might have been anyone. It might have been me. Someone knew her, said she was a widow from one of the old people’s flats up the hill. She’d been shopping. I wonder what happens to the things she bought? And who will tell her children? That is, if she’s got any. I didn’t know her, but I saw it happen. Boy racers. On the pavement. Sorry. I’m burbling. Am I making sense?’

Bruce held her hand and encouraged her to drink her tea.

‘I saw them,’ she said. ‘Teenagers. Maybe the one on the bike was younger than the other one. Maybe fifteen or so? The other had a scooter but I’m sure he wasn’t old enough to have a licence. Do they have to have a licence to drive those things? Anyway, they should both have been at school, shouldn’t they? They weren’t wearing a school uniform. The one on the bike caught her with his handlebar as he raced by. He tipped her over and broke her leg. Nearly toppled himself, too. I wish he had.’

Bruce said, ‘You’re in shock. If she fell and broke her leg, she must have been pretty frail.’

‘She had a heart attack. They worked on her, but it was no good. The paramedic had a medallion round his neck. I thought it was St George, slaying the dragon, you know? But he said it was St Michael. But I was sure there was a dragon on the medallion.’

‘You stay where you are and rest. I’ll look it up.’ Bruce put a rug around his wife. He said, ‘I’m glad it wasn’t you who died.’

Tears came. ‘Perhaps it ought to have been. I’m not much use to anyone as I am now.’

Bruce put her hand to his cheek. ‘You have a special job in life. You care about people. You care for me, and our friends. You pray for them, and for me. That is beyond price. See if you can doze a bit while I look up your dragon slayer.’

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Two good friends, Leo and Dora, came round for an informal supper that evening. Dora brought a blackberry and apple tart that she’d made herself, and Leo brought some tomatoes which had been given him by a friend who had a glut of them in his garden.

Bruce had laid on some cold meats and salad stuffs and they agreed it was a really good spread and just right for the time of year.

Dora produced some clotted cream to go with her tart, saying the blackberries were just about finished so this would be the last for the year. She said her mother had always said blackberries were no good after Michaelmas, and strangely enough, whatever the weather had been like, she’d found the saying to be true.

Leo, the retired sales manager, had a struggle to keep his weight down. Eyeing the last piece of tart, he said, ‘Michaelmas as a special day seems to have dropped out of sight nowadays. It’s a quarter day on of four days in the year when rents were due, and when labourers were hired for the following year. I seem to remember going to a Hiring Fair as a child. I remember the sound of the organ playing as the carousel went round and round. Anyone want the last piece?’

Bruce handed him the dish. ‘We recycle our saints to meet different needs, don’t we? Sally here spoke to a paramedic who says St Michael is their patron saint. I thought he might be confused with our St George, but apparently not. George was a latecomer compared to Michael, who was the one who turfed the evil angels out of heaven at the beginning of time. Michael has collected various other jobs on the way; such as being patron of Kyiv in the Ukraine. He’s also patron of the police and the army. Chiefly, he’s the champion of good against evil in high places.’

‘You mean, against corruption and extortion? Never heard of him,’ said Leo, polishing his plate.

Sally said, ‘I’ve got some lovely Michaelmas daisies coming into flower in the garden. Do you think it would be silly to put some on the pavement where that poor woman died today?’

Dora hated waste. ‘Why not take them to church, where they can be put in water and everyone can see them on Sunday?’

Sally shook her head. ‘We lay flowers on graves, don’t we? Now we also lay them on the place where someone has died in a public place. I didn’t know the woman, but I think I’d like to do that. I’d also like to find out what’s going to happen to the boys who were responsible for her death.’

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Sally worked it out that she could now manage to get to the shops and back without getting too tired if she took it easy and stopped for a coffee when she got there. She remembered how kind Rachel, the café owner, had been. It would be good to go there again.

So the next day Sally returned to the shops with her flowers. She sat down outside for a coffee and a chat with a woman she knew slightly. She learned that no one seemed to know much about the dead woman except that she’d been a widow with no family except for a cousin who might or might not make herself responsible for the funeral. No doubt that would be a small affair at the crematorium.

Sally asked what would happen to the boys who had been responsible for her death? Nothing; that was what was going to happen to those two boys. Not even a slap on the wrist.

Rachel came out of the café to say how nice it was to see Sally out and about again, and to expand on the situation with regard to the boys. ‘They’re children, technically. We can’t touch them. They ride up and down on the pavements here and frighten the life out of mothers with small children who could easily be knocked down and badly hurt. You can stand in their path and try to make them slow down if you want to risk getting run over, but you can’t lay a finger on them because that would be assault and grounds for your arrest and getting fined.’

Sally said, ‘You mean that even though it’s illegal for them to ride on the pavement, nobody can stop them doing it?’

‘Oh, you can stop them if you like. And remind them of the law. And they’ll laugh and tell you to get lost.’

‘But we must be able to do something!’

‘We know where they live. Single parent families on benefits, boys out of control and out of school more often than in. They come down the hill from the flats which are mostly social housing. Where did they get that scooter? Stolen, most like. My husband has been to see the mother of one of them whom he knows slightly. He got sworn at for his pains. We tried the headmaster of the school where they’re both registered. He said he can’t be responsible for what they do out of hours.’

Sally looked at the bunch of flowers she’d brought with her. ‘Would you mind if I left them here on the bench? They won’t last long, but I could tie them to the back of the seat and it might remind people what happened here.’

‘Why not? I’ve got an old can somewhere we can fill with water for the flowers. That way they’ll last a little longer.’

Sally walked home slowly. She held the image of the medallion in her mind.

*St Michael, it seems you’re the one to call on when all else fails. I don’t know how you work nowadays. Do you put ideas into other people’s heads? Do you inspire people to take up arms to defend the right? I’m putting my faith in you because you champion the cause of good against evil. You are all for justice.*

*I know this is a very small matter to call to your attention. An elderly lady is knocked down and dies. One old lady might not seem important to you. There must be thousands; no, millions of who live in London.*

*But somehow I don’t think that bothers people like you. The trigger is ‘injustice.’ And I’m pressing that trigger, here and now.*

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The following afternoon Sally had a phone call from Dora. ‘I’ve just been along the road to get some groceries, and I thought you’d like to know that there’s a whole lot more flowers tied to the bench where that woman died. All sorts. And somebody’s left some tea-lights, too. It’s quite a sight.’

‘I hope the boys see the flowers.’

‘Someone said they’re putting what’s happened on Facebook, and on the local WhatsApp page. Perhaps the local paper will get hold of it.’

Sally knew that the local paper was no longer printed but available only on the internet. Perhaps that was better than nothing.

Dora said, ‘It’s quite moving. A woman came by with a baby in a buggy and a little boy she was walking back from school, and he asked what the flowers were for, and she told him it was for a lady who’d gone to heaven. Wasn’t that nice?’

*St Michael, are you behind this? It won’t bring the woman back, but maybe, just maybe the community’s reaction will make those boys think about what they’ve done.*

Bruce appeared, smiling. ‘I’ve just been on the internet. That woman – Shirley something, her name was – it appears she was a teacher of special needs children, and that she continued going into the primary school to listen to children long after she retired officially. Lots of parents and some of the children she helped have been posting about what a wonderful person she was. The school’s had a special assembly to tell the children about it.’

‘I wonder if she taught those two lads who mowed her down.’

Bruce shook his head. ‘I doubt if they know what they did. They’ll get their news on their smartphones and wouldn’t even hear about a death in the community. Even if they did, their little world doesn’t take other people’s feelings into account.’

‘I’d like,’ said kind-hearted Sally, who could never bear even to kill a housefly though she did make an exception for slugs and blackfly, ‘to rub their noses in it.’

It became a habit of hers to walk along to the shops every day and have a coffee at the café before she returned home. Today there was a blustery wind and fewer people were sitting outside, even though the owner had provided cushions to sit on, and light rugs to put over customers’ knees. Sally chose to sit outside to see the flowers that were still being left at the bench. The owner said she got one of her girls to clear away the dead ones each morning, so that the display always looked fresh.

A neighbour Sally knew slightly stopped to say that she’d just been to the funeral, which had been held at the church. She said that it had been surprisingly well attended.

‘I didn’t know her,’ said the neighbour, ‘but I know someone she helped. Dyslexia, you know. They didn’t know what it was in the old days, till people like her came along and did something about it. It was a beautiful service. I think she would have like it. They chose to use Simeon’s words when he saw baby Jesus. “Now, Lord, you may let your servant go in peace.” Shirley was a true servant of the Lord, wasn’t she? I hope someone says the same about me when I die. Where you there?’

Sally hadn’t thought of going. She shook her head. It would have been too tiring.

The neighbour went on her way.

A shadow paused, just out of Sally’s sightline. A hooded figure. Hoody plus jeans worn low meant youth. His head turned to Sally, and then turned back to the bench which was full of flowers.

He spoke in a low voice so that Sally could ignore him if she wished to do so. ‘We didn’t do that. No way.’ A long pause. ‘Did we?’

Sally said, ‘Yes, you did.’

‘But . . . we didn’t mean it. I mean, not us. She oughta got out the way.’

‘You oughtn’t to have been riding on the pavement.’

‘They can’t do nothing to us. Not at our age.’ Another long silence. ‘I didn’t know till yesterday. Someone said. I told my friend and he said, “No way!” So I said I’d come and have a look. It’s not down to us! She oughta got out the way! Now what am I going to do?’

*Confess to the police. That would be a good start. But you won’t, will you? You ought to be locked up and . . . No, I can’t judge this one. Perhaps he’s not such a bad lad, underneath. I don’t know what his upbringing has been like, what mitigating circumstances could be cited in his defence.*

*It’s not for me to judge. That’s St Michael’s job.*

She got out her purse. She’d fancied some fresh fish that day which was something Bruce never bought on his weekly descent on the supermarket. She had just enough for that and the coffee she’d drunk. If she gave the money away, she wouldn’t have enough even to pay for her coffee.

She had her debit card with her but didn’t often use it. Well, perhaps this was the day to do so.

She held the twenty out to the boy. ‘Take this. Use it for yourself. Or maybe you’d like to buy some flowers to put on the bench?’

The note disappeared, and so did the boy.

Sally told herself she was a first-rate idiot, giving that young criminal money which she’d planned to spend on food. She eased herself to her feet and went into the café to pay for her coffee. When she came out there was a fresh bunch of Michaelmas daisies on the bench.