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Opening Extract from...

Troubled Waters

Written by Gillian Galbraith

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Troubled Waters

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Polygon

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I

An accident, that's what it had been, just a horrible accident. No more than an accident. His mind was chaotic, thoughts barging in, swirling, colliding, chasing each other, disappearing, and all without his volition. In the maelstrom, all he felt was panic, a tide of fear rising, threatening to engulf him. He could not breathe.

Trying to calm himself, he slackened his grip on the steering wheel and looked into the rear view mirror. Behind him, the girl was busy picking at the dry flakes of skin on her upper lip, as she tended to do when anxious. He watched her for a few more seconds before, unable to bear it any longer, he exclaimed, 'Stop it, please. Just stop it, will you?'

It came out more sharply than he had intended. Like a startled deer, she glanced up, meeting his eyes before lowering her gaze to her lap, chastened, her right hand now wringing her left as if in mute appeal.

Looking ahead again, he followed the narrow road round into Kirk Street, braking hard as he noticed a one-way sign coming up and just managing to take the sharp right into the lane leading back to Leith Walk. As he turned the steering wheel, he felt his car slewing sideways on the snow-covered road, and heard a dull thud as something hit the inside of the boot, followed by a slight intake of breath from behind him. Glancing at her reflection again he sighed; she was at it once more, only now

with renewed vigour. At one side of her Cupid's bow lips, the carmine merged into an inflamed, angry pink at the side of her mouth, a testament to her obsessive picking and a visible reminder of his impotence. There was even a bead of fresh blood. By now, she ought to know that it was forbidden. By now, a dumb beast would know that.

'Stop it!' he shouted, and this time felt a surge of shameful pleasure in seeing her petrified expression as she jumped, dropping her hand as if it had touched an electric current. Frightened, she blinked repeatedly before closing her eyes, shutting out the world and everything in it.

In repose, he thought, stealing a few additional glances at her as the engine idled at the traffic lights leading into Great Junction Street, she would pass as normal. Her condition manifested itself, not in her features, which were regular and well-proportioned but in her incessant, maddening tics. No wonder she was so thin, with one or more of her muscles always busy, propelling this limb hither or thither, working a tendon or bending a joint, and all to no useful purpose. Sometimes it was as if the Almighty was some sort of puppeteer, pulling her strings simply to test that they were still attached. Yet, when relaxed or asleep, at rest, she would pass for a beauty.

A red light on his dashboard began to flash, attracting his eye, warning him that they were all but out of fuel. By good fortune, no, likely by Divine Providence, a garage was within sight, on the other side of the bridge. Turning in, he began to apply the brake gently, over-sensitive now to the risk of skidding on the icy tarmac. All the pumps were busy, and as he waited he drummed his fingers manically on the steering wheel. Three minutes later, he drew up opposite the last pump in the row.

Turning round to face her, and fixing her in the eye as if she were a dog, he commanded, 'Stay!'

Satisfied by her meek, nodded response, he managed to still his trembling fingers, undid his seatbelt, and clambered out of his Mazda 6 into the cold air. For a second he stood gazing up at the sky, transfixed by the innumerable flakes of snow as they poured down, every one revolving in its fall, every one illuminated by the forecourt lights. Digging his hands deep into his pockets, he fingered the two crisp twenty-pound notes. They would get him fuel enough. As he yanked the nozzle from its holster, he noticed the man in front of him doing the same thing and automatically speeded up, determined to reach the cashier first and settle his business. His need was greater.

Once he was in the shop, the girl took her chance. Opening the door as quietly as she was able, she crept out, marvelling as snowflakes landed on her face and melted there. Instinctively she extended her tongue, allowing them to land on it, before, lizard-like, withdrawing it at speed.

Excited by her freedom, by the unfamiliarity of the place, by the spiralling snow and the bright lights of the cars, she began to walk along the very edge of the pavement, arms out for balance like a tightrope walker. Teetering to one side, she caught sight of a narrow lane, signposted Prince Regent Street, ahead of her, righted herself and headed for it, dragging her feet through the fallen snow for a while simply to experience the sensation. It was like walking on solid clouds.

Lights were on in many of the windows she passed and, unselfconsciously, she pressed her face against a few

of them. In one house, a man was watching a television, its unnatural glow reflected off the bridge of his nose and his sharp cheekbones as he sat open-mouthed before it. Next door, a couple of small children appeared to be dancing, each of them holding something in their right hands. They, too, were facing the screen and seemed entranced by it. As she rose onto her tiptoes to get a better view of what they were looking at, she felt something snuffling around her skirt, poking her knee. A bony dog, apparently ownerless, had its cold, wet nose against her flesh, exploring it insistently as if she was as inanimate as a side of beef.

With stiff, frightened fingers, she pushed it away but it resisted, its head returning to snuffle her thigh again. Hysterical, unnerved by its boldness, she ran away, abandoning the dancing children and looking back at the stray, fearful that it might follow her. In her absence, its attention had turned seamlessly to a piece of grease-stained newspaper, flapping and pinned by the wind to the front of a nearby wheelie bin.

Shaking her head at the sight, she blundered on, blinking as snowflakes hit her eyes. The wind had risen, changed direction, and a horizontal stream of thick snow blew directly into her face. A young couple passed, their arms linked, talking and laughing together as if they were alone in the world. Glancing back down the street and seeing the dog staring at her, she became fearful that it would follow her after all and started to jog again, legs and arms flying in all directions. It would bite her this time. She had seen its teeth. That was what dogs did.

In her terror, she veered off the pavement and all but collided with the wing of a passing car, catching the blare of its indignant horn as its brake lights receded and

merged into the red lights of the T-junction ahead of her. A cyclist, having to swerve to avoid her, hurled abuse at the top of his voice. Something in her mind began to scream. Standing still in the gutter, feeling the world racing around her, spinning out of control, she bent over, covering her eyes with her hands.

'Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out.' That was what Mrs Smollet had said the last time in the games room. On that occasion, one of her teacher's manicured hands had been pressing on the small of her back, and the woman had been inhaling and exhaling in time with her, sounding like a steam engine. But it wasn't working. Not here and now. Not without Mrs Smollett.

'You alright, dear?' a stranger asked, coming towards her and bending over slightly to reach her level, to be face to face with her.

She said nothing, relieved when she saw the woman's companion, a little boy on a scooter, wrinkle his nose and incline his head, signalling that they should move on, mind their own business. The scent of stale coffee tainted the woman's warm breath. Suddenly, alarmed by the uninvited proximity, the girl stood up straight, crossed her arms against her chest and walked off, eyes looking directly ahead as if she had heard nothing, seen nothing. The mother and son might have been as insubstantial as ghosts for all the notice she took of them.

Through the constant drone of the Leith traffic she could make out snatches of music and, hardly conscious of what she was doing, she began to search for the source of it. Having adjusted and readjusted her course innumerable times, she eventually found herself opposite an open doorway at the far end of Madeira Street. Standing outside it, peeking in, she blew on her fingers, her whole

body chittering with cold. Then, drawn by the light and the sound of piano music streaming from the door, she walked inside.

Everywhere there were people, all talking, all laughing, and every one of them seemed to be holding a glass. A woman, much of her tanned flesh on show, glowered at her as she pushed past, their buttocks touching in the closeness of the crush. Observing them both, an old fellow winked at her. Someone had dropped a packet of crisps on the floor and she could hear them crackling as they broke under her feet. Accidentally she jostled a plump lady's elbow, making her spill her drink over herself and curse out loud in annoyance. Burrowing on, she lowered her head and kept pushing through the crowd until, unexpectedly, she found herself in a corner. Turning round she spotted a small alcove with a table and two chairs in it. There was even an open packet of nuts. Following the wall with her hands until she reached it, she sat down, now eye-level with the surrounding shirts, ties and blouses.

'Like a wee drink?' a smiling man asked her, tapping the side of his wine glass as if to show her what a drink was.

'Donald!' The white-haired lady beside him said, frowning.

'What?'

'She's a child!'

'No, she's not, she's a young lady. Well, what's she doing in here if she's a child, I'd like to know?'

'Leave her alone!'

'I am. I was only asking if she'd like a drink, for Heaven's sake! There's no harm in that, is there, Hilary?'

'Yes. There is.'

The girl was no longer listening to them or to anyone, anything. She was gazing out of the window, watching the snow pouring from the sky like water in a waterfall, hypnotised by the perpetual movement. A young man had taken the only other seat and was glancing at her, taking an occasional gulp from his beer glass as he did so. Had he chanced upon the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow he could not have looked more pleased. After a couple of minutes, he plucked up the courage to speak to her.

'D'you like the snow?'

Hearing his voice, she turned to face him and, for the first time, he saw just how extraordinarily beautiful she was. Her dark, long-lashed eyes met his and as they did so, she shivered and a slight tremor started up in her right hand. To stop it, she slapped her left over it, trapping it.

'You cold?' he asked.

'You're wasting your time, boyo,' Donald said to the youth. 'She's probably foreign, immigrant Polish or something. She doesn't say anything, she doesn't understand.'

'Just because she didn't answer you!' his wife snapped, putting her empty glass on the table and waiting, expectantly, for her husband to do the same. His was half-full of gin but, smiling at her with his mouth only, he obeyed.

Listening to the background music, the boy sat with the girl, getting no reply to any of his questions, collecting more drinks and, after a while, staring at her openly as if she was an object. She ate the peanuts in front of her, singly and slowly, and then, unselfconsciously, licked the inside of the packet. His eyes always on her, he stacked and restacked his pile of beer mats. Twice while they sat there, he had to fend off the attentions of drunken men, telling one of them that she was his sister and giving the

other, more insistent one, a shove. He, his balance long gone, careered into another customer, getting a hard stare for his pains and quickly retreating back into the anonymity of the melee for his own safety. Under the table, the boy slid his foot beside the girl's, feeling the warmth of her flesh through the leather and heartened that she made no attempt to move it away. They had an understanding, wordless, but real.

Twenty minutes after going into the BP kiosk, the man hurried out of it. He was jingling his small change in his pocket, whistling as if he did not have a care in the world. Once he had done his belt up he glanced into the mirror, expecting to see the girl's familiar, anxious face behind him. But there was nothing. He could make out the road beyond, the cars zipping past, the buildings and pavement, but no human being. Maybe she was kneeling down for some reason? Was playing Hide and Seek, larking about, making a fool of him? Now, of all times!

Feeling his heart speeding up, rapping against his ribs, he ripped off the belt and climbed out of the vehicle. He grabbed the back door and yanked it open. Nothing: there was nothing there. He got in, knelt on the seat, looking forward as if, somehow, she might have concealed herself in the foot-well of the passenger seat. No one was there either. Under the seat? Not a dickey bird. Heavens above! She had done it again, scarpered into the night, and dropped him right in it. This time, Lambie might not forgive him.

Breathing rapidly, too shallowly, he clambered out of the Mazda and began looking about him. Snow was still falling all around, disorientating him and making

everywhere appear strange, new and other. Even the sounds of the traffic seemed muted. No footprints were visible on the garage forecourt. The queue in the kiosk had been long, certainly, but not that long, surely? He should not have gone to the Gents, too; that was it. That had been silly, added another five minutes to his total. Undoubtedly, the bloke with the wrong credit card had done the bulk of the damage, but the queue, the Gents, it all added up. She had probably stayed still for quarter of an hour or so, then lost all hope, and gone in search of him or something. The stupid, stupid little ninny. On her own, outside the car, she was as vulnerable as a snail without a shell, as a new-born baby on ice. Anything could happen.

Panicked by the thought, he raced back down Great Junction Street, accosting people as he passed them, demanding to know if they had seen her, getting strange stares, shakes of the head and, from one, a mouthful of foreign curses. In case she had doubled back, he looked again at the car, illuminated brightly within the distant forecourt lights. A youth was ambling next to it, casting sidelong glances into its windows. Had he locked it? Blast! All he needed now was a theft!

He raced back, and once in range, pressed the button on his key fob, supporting himself against a lamppost, panting, his lungs aching, made raw by the frozen air. While he stood there, unable to move, he scanned his surroundings, pirouetting slowly on the spot for a three hundred and sixty degree view. There she was! She was standing by a bus stop on the other side of the street, only a couple of hundred yards away.

Forgetting all about his lungs, he shot off in pursuit, slipping on the smooth road surface and almost losing his

footing in front of a car in his haste to get to her. Once he was close enough to grab her, he realised that he had made a mistake, turned on his heel and began the long trek back to the garage.

This was hopeless, suicidal. He must get on. She would be alright for now, would survive. Someone would look after her. Someone always did. First thing tomorrow, he would return with a plan, track her down properly, if she had not been returned before then. This had happened before, would not be the last time either, and he had business to attend to. Very important business indeed; and somehow, somehow, he would square it all with Lambie.

When the Landlord called last orders the hum in the pub became louder, a few drinkers making their way through the crowd to the bar, others leaving their empties on the tables, bestowing beery kisses on each other and departing into the night, to be startled by the chill air. The girl sensed the movement around her, felt uneasy at the change and caught the boy's eyes. He, pleased that she seemed to have noticed him at last, got up and interrupted the stream of people going out to allow her to join the flow.

Once outside, he took her cold hand in his and began walking eastwards, in the direction of his home. A couple of hundred yards on, exhilarated by her company, he let go of her hand and playfully backed her against the tenement wall, caging her there with both his arms. Hesitantly, he placed his head on her breast as if to listen to her heart, astonished to feel it on his temple as it thumped against her ribcage. As he raised his head to kiss her, she poked him in the chest, dislodging his arm and ducking out of

his unwanted embrace. Free, she began to run, her long legs as ungainly as a new-born fawn.

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' he said, looking round blearily for her, hurt and disappointed. Did she not want to kiss too? On a magical night like this, peaceful and still, heavenly, what could be nicer than the feel of warm flesh on warm flesh? She had only to say if she didn't like it.

At three-thirty in the morning, a householder in North Fort Street dialled 999 and asked for the police. She had been unable to sleep, had risen every hour or so to get a drink of water. Sipping it by her bathroom window, a figure had caught her attention. Someone, she said, was curled up in a doorway opposite, and the snow was falling on them, like it would on a wild beast.

'Homeless?' the call-handler asked.

'They must be.'

'Have you tried the Bethany Christian Trust or the Salvation Army or someone? That's a social services problem, not really a police problem . . . not an emergency.'

'It might be a child, for Christ's sake, it looks little more than a child.'

'You should have said that first, dear. We'll send someone round the now. What's the address?'