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Brown Owl's Guide to Life

Kate Harrison

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Extract

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Chapter One

Brownies do their best. One time when you can try to do your best is when things go wrong. Try to swallow the grumble and to put on a smile.

It's not until they carry my mother's coffin into the church that it finally sinks in. All those bargains I've made since I was little – with myself, with God or any other force that might be out there – have been in vain: saying the Lord's Prayer, crossing my fingers after every bad thought, and carrying out a daily routine of superstitious rituals, from humming hymns when I brush my teeth, to always stirring tea anti-clockwise. But none of it has stopped my recurring nightmare becoming a reality.

I'm an orphan.

The fact that I'm thirty-five with a daughter of my own ought to help, but it doesn't. I feel abandoned. The organist is thumping out 'You'll Never Walk Alone' – a surprisingly low-brow choice by my mother, and I suspect she only picked it to annoy the vicar – and I grip the pew like someone shipwrecked, trying to keep my head above water.

'Mum, don't cry,' Sasha whispers. I'm not sure whether it's an expression of sympathy or a command. I've a habit of embarrassing my daughter with excessive displays of emotion.

Right now, she looks like Wednesday from the Addams family. You don't often see a seven-year-old dressed all in black, but she insisted on full mourning regalia, just as she insisted on coming to the funeral. Sasha's definitely inherited the stubbornness gene, the one that skipped a generation with me. When I

took her shopping for today, she picked a serious raven-coloured velvet dress with a lace collar: she knows what's appropriate, just like her father and grandmother. It's only me who doesn't know how to behave.

Sasha's expression is grave, her big brown eyes screwed up as she concentrates on looking sombre. She's a stoical child. She didn't cry when we buried Norman the gerbil in a shoebox under the bamboo (there are no proper trees in our Zen back garden, and no lawn, just designer white shingle that the local cats use as a litter tray). She was far too curious about how long it'd take the maggots to eat the body. So it was me who worked my way through a whole packet of UltraBalsam tissues in the rodent's memory.

Mum, don't cry. I grit my teeth together so hard that I wonder if my fillings will implode. Today of all days I need to be brave, to prove to my own mother that I can get something right for once in my life.

I've always been a cry-baby. Once I start, I can't stop until I've shed some predestined quantity of tears, like a vending machine programmed to dispense an exact cupful of coffee. I missed my father's funeral – I was only five – but at my grandmother Dorothy's I was inconsolable, howling from the organist's first chord until the final sandwich was consumed at the wake in the Old Surgery. Dorothy was eighty-four. Mum was fifty-eight.

Oh God. I can taste salt and try to gulp the tears away, but more are ready to take their place. There are always more tears.

Andrew reaches out to take my hand and I grip it, more firmly than I did when I was giving birth to Sasha. Before we left the house this afternoon, he huffed and puffed because his trousers were creased and he was worried someone would notice. But the moment we arrived at St Peter's, he became the model of a supportive husband and dignified son-in-law.

It's the perfect day for a wedding, not a funeral: a honeysuckle-scented breeze wafted our way as we came in through the lych-gate. Now all I can smell are the cloying freesias on top of the coffin.

'Uhhh.' I try to swallow the first sob but fail. Now I'm lost, detaching my hand from Andrew's as the dammed tears pour

down my face and with them the make-up I applied so carefully just an hour ago. I told myself that the mascara and lipstick and foundation would give me a reason not to cry. *Silly Lucy . . .*

'There, there,' says Andrew, reaching out for my hand again. Before I give it to him, I wipe it on my jacket, leaving a slug-trail of snotty liquid on the fabric. When I reach out again, he registers only the tiniest wince at my damp fingers. I try hard to concentrate on something else, the way men think of their bosses or their pensions or their mothers when they want to delay ejaculation.

Andrew, of course, has no trouble with premature ejaculation, or unacceptable behaviour of any kind. He has been drilled from infancy in what to do, how to look the part. I focus on him, in the hope that some of his resolve will rub off on me. Everything about my husband is just right. His black suit emphasizes his height and his breadth and his slightly craggy face. Even as the mourners approached us outside the church earlier, with gruff regrets and awkward pats on the shoulder, I saw the women flush in appreciation. Even the vicar's wife.

It's not working, it's not working. *Try harder.* I look up at Andrew: his periwinkle eyes are crinkled at the edges, and though strangers would see only concern in those crinkles, I wonder if there's irritation there too: his mother wouldn't have dreamed of crying in public when she lost her husband.

My forehead aches as more tears build behind my eyelids. Don't start again. Focus on anything but the reason why we're here, in this chilly church, when Sasha should be on a school trip to a formerly dark satanic mill, and I should be selling shoes, and Andrew should be evaluating transport policy while his assistants swoon over his grasp of strategic infrastructure. At least, that's what he honestly thinks they're swooning over: whatever faults my husband has, I could never accuse him of vanity.

Compared to him, I know I'm only average-looking. Borderline pretty at best, with the kind of slightly plumped-up face that doesn't yet reflect my age. The downside is the slightly plumped-up body that goes with it. My hair is dirty blonde, cut in the same forgiving bob I've worn all my life. My eyes are my

only distinguishing feature: deep brown with flashes of yellow around the pupils, like reflections of lightning. They're Quentin eyes, passed down the generations, though the surname's been lost. There's a sepia photograph of Great Grandma Agnes as a child at the turn of the century, and I can see the same fire in *her* eyes. But unlike the rest of the dynasty, I don't have the fire in the belly to match.

People often look from Andrew to me and then back again, wondering why he chose me. The truth is that our marriage is as appropriate as everything else he does or owns. His looks could have won him a dolly bird, but he knew what he really wanted: a traditional marriage, a copy of his parents' *Janet and John* double-act. And I wanted a family. A light, bright, modern detached home. Security. A life as far removed from my mother's lonely widowhood as possible.

We've kept our bargain: he treats me exactly as his father treated his mother, and I am sweet and easy: being a good girl hasn't saved my mother but it will save my marriage. The compromises are tiny: it's not *that* hard to remember to avoid humming operatic arias if he's in earshot. In return for my sweetness, he looks after me, even when I don't necessarily want to be looked after. There's always a catch.

'Judith's courage in the face of her illness was an example to all of us,' the vicar says, wiping his brow with a crumpled handkerchief. The church windows allow a pool of sunshine to fall onto the pulpit, like a celestial spotlight. I can see his dandruff and his discomfort. 'She maintained her sense of humour until the very end.'

My mother's idea of what was funny grew darker as the days grew lighter, from the diagnosis of her illness three days before Christmas, to her death on the twenty-fifth of March. It took three weary months for the cancer to complete its conquest of her body. The progress of the disease was like one of her beloved cricket series between an unconquered touring side and a small, former outpost of Empire. As each match was fought in a different location – ovaries, stomach, lymph nodes – overall defeat was inevitable, but she only stopped fighting the week before she died.

'I've had a reasonable innings,' she told me as we drove her to Troughton Cottage Hospital for the last time. 'Now I think I'm entitled to a rest in the pavilion, don't you?' The joke was an attempt to cover her disappointment: she'd hoped to die at home, in the Old Surgery where she'd been born.

I laughed it off. 'Oh, there's plenty of life in you yet!' We both knew I was lying. Her elbows were three times as wide as her withered arms, while her belly was pregnant with poison. She'd nursed enough cancer patients in her time: she knew what was coming.

Yet until that moment, I'd believed Mum was coping: she always did. It was only when I went back to the house at midnight that I realized the illness had reduced my super-powered mother to a mortal being. The bin was crammed with rotting madeira cakes and egg-and-cress sandwiches, delivered by friends trying to tempt her appetite. It must have been torment to throw it all away, because, as she'd never tired of telling me over the years, 'there's barely a greater sin in my book than wasting good food'.

'Now let us all sing one of Judith's favourite hymns, "Abide with Me".'

The congregation shuffles to its feet. I'm determined to stop crying long enough to sing. It's the only thing I'm any good at and I owe her this at least. I remove my hand from Andrew's and bunch it into a fist so my nails dig into my palm. Then I bite my lip until I can taste metal. The organist pounds a heavy-handed introduction and there's a moment's pause as the other mourners take a breath before singing.

But when I do the same, a strange sound emerges from somewhere deep inside me, more of a howl than anything human. And then my world stops.