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No Sorrow to Die

Written by Gillian Galbraith

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No Sorrow to Die

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Polygon

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Any errors in the text are my own.

Dedication

To Douglas, with all my love

1

Saturday night

'I am doing nothing wrong,' Heather Brodie told herself, trying to silence the unwelcome voice in her head which was busy telling her that she certainly was doing something shameful, in fact. A few bars of 'Jerusalem', hummed loudly, finally smothered it.

Craning towards the mirror she began to apply her lipstick, conscious, as she did so, of every flaw and imperfection on her careworn, middle-aged face. True, the blue of the irises was as deep as ever, but crows-feet had begun to clamber across her cheekbones and her brow was no longer smooth, one corrugated fold following another like sand on a beach at low tide. She smiled humourlessly at her own reflection, and as she did so taut lines appeared on either side of her mouth, extending from nose to chin, multiplying when the smile widened and producing a dimple on the left. An eyelash caught in the corner of her eye distracted her, making her blink convulsively until, with a fingertip, she was able to remove it. Relieved, she turned her attention back to her lips, dabbing them with a paper hankie to remove the outer layer of scarlet gloss in an attempt to make herself look less predatory, less like a hawk.

'Life must go on.' Everybody said it, and she could only agree. When younger, greener, she had thought that the cliché had a pitiless ring to it, the mantra of a

ruthless survivor, the living sloughing off illness and death in their determination to kick their heels and enjoy the remainder of their allotted span. But, after nearly half a century on this earth, she knew better, understood the saying only too well. Now she positively embraced it.

The wardrobe door was already open and she looked inside, fingering the material of the black dress that she had decided to wear, then took the soft garment out. She had planned ahead, no goodbyes were now required, she had attended to them before she had begun to get ready. Previous experience had taught her that the spring in her step, never mind the warm scent of her perfumed body, was likely to disturb him, to provoke some kind of incoherent fury or, worse still, deeper withdrawal. So she stepped out of the front door as quietly as she was able, the icy air tingling her tender cheeks, and pulled it tight closed behind her.

The decision to walk had been a good one, she decided. The sound of her heels clicking on the pavement made her feel alive, part of the human race once more, and she studied the other pedestrians as they ambled along, taking in their clothes and imagining their destinations. None of them, she thought, were likely to be as delightful, as exhilarating as her own. The farther she got from the hushed interior of her house in India Street, with its stale air and faded colours, the more she allowed the excitement rising in her to grow unchecked until she felt herself almost crackling with energy, as if champagne had been transfused into her veins. She was off the

leash again, and must make full use of her freedom.

Both Heather Brodie and her lover knew that it was foolish to choose a restaurant on Dublin Street for their illicit rendezvous, but neither had been able to resist the charms of *Il Gattopardo*. Edinburgh might be a capital city, but it was a small one, an intimate one, one where words travelled easily and secrets were seldom kept. The place remained little more than a series of interlinked villages, and scandalous tales, usually of infi delity or embezzlement, knew no boundaries; they passed from Bruntsfi eld to Ravelston, Corstorphine to Comely Bank as easily as the air itself. Nowhere was completely safe.

But standing under a street-light in the marrow-chilling cold outside the eating house as one leaden minute piled on another, exposed to the gaze of every passer-by, she regretted the recklessness of their choice. And after a further fifteen minutes of waiting she no longer met the eyes of anyone, her gaze fixed steadfastly on the pavement, afraid that she might again be confronted by a former colleague or acquaintance, a playful smile on their lips as they cocked a quizzical eyebrow at her.

She pushed a strand of damp hair off her forehead and looked up the hill, scanning the horizon, her eyes coming to rest on the red Dumfries sandstone of the National Portrait Gallery. But she was blind to its gothic grandeur; one thing only was now on her mind. Where the hell *was* he? She inspected her watch˜ seven-twenty˜ and felt a surge of desperate, impotent anger. They had agreed on seven, had agreed on *Il Gattopardo* and, crucially, that they would meet

outside it. He must know how exposed she would be, waiting for him on the street, attracting curious glances, vulnerable to the cruel winter weather.

Someone tapped her arm and she spun round, her anger already forgotten, expecting to look into his dark eyes, but instead found herself face to face with Miss Guild's thick spectacles and whiskery chin. The old school-mistress's pleasure on bumping into a former pupil was clear from her broad, buck-toothed smile.

'Hevver . . .' she hesitated briefly, 'Hevver Burns!' she exclaimed, triumphant at having remembered the elusive name.

'Heather Brodie, now,' her ex-pupil corrected irritably, glancing over the old lady's shoulder in search of the man, not bothering to hide her preoccupation.

'So, Hevver, you married. And you're as lovely as ever. Did you continue with your drama course? I've never forgotten your Ophelia, you were a star . . .'

Before their conversation could go any further, unseen clouds in the black, starless sky above them burst, unleashing a deluge, and raindrops as large as cherries began to fall on their heads, splattering on the ground round about them. In seconds they were both drenched, tiny rivulets forming on the old teacher's spectacles and running down her cheeks. Fumbling ineffectually with a folded polythene rain-hat, she mumbled, 'I must be off, dear. I'm not dressed for vis kind of wevver!' and, like an anxious duck, she waddled speedily down Dublin Street, her fl at feet splashing from side to side on the streaming

pavement.

Heather Brodie ran down the steps to *Il Gattopardo* and pushed open its door. She was certain that he would not be inside, but she had to have shelter, both from any more prying eyes and the cold rain. She wandered into the dining area and, absentmindedly, put a finger to her cheek to wipe away another drip. Her mascara had mingled with the water, so she would be looking a fright.

As she became accustomed to the subdued lighting, a flickering candle on each table, she noticed a familiar figure sitting in a corner, hunched over a menu and nursing a beer glass in his left hand.

'Let him not see me yet' she prayed, embarrassed by her wet, flattened hair and besmirched eyes, now hunting frantically for a sign to the toilets, and quickly spotting it. Hastily, she threaded her way between the tables heading for the *Donne*, but her lover caught sight of her and immediately began to wave, semaphoring his presence. When she did not respond, he shouted in ever-increasing volume, 'Heather! Heather! I'm over here', broadcasting to the world her arrival, and with it his own.

Flustered, and desperate to shut him up, she waved back and changed course towards his table. She reached him, all poise now gone, sodden and fl ushed, and instantly he rose to greet her, planted a kiss on her cold, wet cheek and attempted to help her out of her coat. Sitting down opposite him, she imagined the impression that she must be making with her black, smudged eyes and sopping hair, the dim light not dim enough for her now. But he seemed, simply, pleased

to see her, and showed no signs of being dismayed or disappointed by her appearance.

'I thought we were supposed to be meeting outside,' she began, leaving her sentence unfinished, but meaning, 'That was what we arranged. I stayed there to ensure we would not miss each other, and that's why I'm now soaking wet.'

'Yep, I know,' he answered, blithely unaware of what had not been said, 'but it was freezing. I got here early and it seemed sensible to wait inside.'

And, of course, she had to agree, and in the act of doing so, she felt herself relax in his company, unfurling like a damp flower in full sunlight.

They did not eat a great deal, being too immersed in each other to savour, or even notice, the food, but the wine flowed freely enough, loosening their tongues and making them less fearful of discovery. And every so often, when their eyes met, he smiled delightedly at her, like a fellow conspirator privy to some wonderful, shared secret.

Once, when her companion had left in search of the *Uomini*, Heather Brodie allowed her gaze to roam freely around the room, inspecting her fellow customers and the staff scurrying around them. A couple close to their table caught her attention. Holding hands with an unshaven student was a petite, blonde girl, and they were looking at each other so fondly, so intently, that they seemed oblivious to their surroundings, to the chatter of their fellow guests, to anything other than each other, certainly to her scrutiny. Other lovers, she thought, just like us. And they appeared so young and attractive, untouched,

unscarred by life, that she remained enchanted by the sight of them until the spell was broken by a waiter accidentally dropping her dessert plate onto the fl oor, where it spun on its axis until it fell, smashing itself on the cold tiles. Hearing the noise, the fair girl looked up and caught her eye, smiling shyly at her, as she might have done at a benign aunt.

'Coffee, back at my place?' her companion asked, stuffing a receipt for the bill into his jacket pocket, confi dent that she would accompany him home. She hesitated momentarily before replying. Not because the question had not been unexpected, she had long anticipated it, well aware that 'Coffee' did not mean coffee.

And why should she not go back with him, spend the night once more in his company? Once an adulteress, always an adulteress. She was only human after all, had the same needs as everyone else and, so far, so good. Their secret had remained undiscovered by everyone, including the children. So what was there to hold her back? Nothing whatsoever. Certainly, 'Coffee' had been on her mind throughout the day: while doing the housework; in the bath; walking along the street and, most of all, while sitting opposite him, inhaling his particular scent and feeling the pressure of his hand on hers. So she smiled her reply wordlessly and rose to leave, turning her hips sideways, ready to navigate her way through the narrow spaces leading to the exit.

She had been often enough to his flat in Mansfi eld Place to know her way around it, but she still enjoyed its strangeness, its faint aroma of stale cigar smoke,

the casual, bachelor untidiness of the place, with a squash-racket propped up by the door and post-it notes stuck on the bathroom mirror.

Waiting for him to return from the kitchen, she wandered over to inspect his CD collection, unconsciously expecting it to resemble, to some extent at least, her own middle-aged, middle-of-the-road selection. But she found no Elton John, Genesis or David Bowie in his racks and her unfamiliarity with the New Romantics reminded her forcibly of the disparity in their ages. Of course. It was only to be expected. He would have been a small boy tucked up in his bed on the evening that she had swayed with thousands of others to the strains of 'Rocket Man' in the Usher Hall. He had probably never even seen a platform heel.

The realisation was accompanied by the recurrence of a doubt, a sinking feeling inside her as all her confi dence slowly drained away. Who was she fooling? She was no longer young or good-looking, her flesh sagged and bulged in unnatural places and her skin had developed unsightly blemishes. This very morning she had been horrified by a glimpse of her own fat knees. She could only be a disappointment to any lover. And he must see young, fi rm flesh on a daily basis at his work. How stupid she had been to listen to him again, to come with him again.

Hurriedly she rose from the couch, intending to leave, but before she had taken a step her companion re-entered the room bearing two cups on a tray, two whisky glasses beside them.

As if in a dream, she sat down once more, and as

she did so, he closed the curtains and dimmed the lights. To bolster her flagging spirits, she took a large mouthful of the Talisker, hoping that it would mix quickly with the half-bottle of Chianti she had already consumed, and help to dispel her doubts, make her less agonisingly self-conscious. If only he were ten years older, rather than ten years younger.

They sat close together, thighs touching and tingling, and he put his arm behind her neck until his hand dangled above her shoulder. Briefly he allowed it to rest it there, with his fingertips brushing the side of her breast. Taking another sip of her whisky, she turned to kiss him, desperate to forget about herself and all her fl aws. But as they kissed, she found that instead of losing herself as she had hoped, she was becoming all too conscious of what was happening. The sneering voice in her head had begun to speak, telling her that she, a middle-aged wife and mother, should have known better than to cradle-snatch, and that this affair would never last.

Trying to ignore the voice's unpleasant, intrusive words, she closed her eyes and lay back, allowing her hands to ruffle his hair, trying to quieten her mind with her body, allow it to follow its own desires. Soon, she could hear nothing but their breathing, feeling her excitement mirroring his own as he removed her blouse and bra and placed his lips on her neck. And the knowledge that he, he of all men, wanted her, was enough, enough to banish all other thoughts from her mind.

When they had finished and sleep was just beginning to steal over her, she felt him move away,

heard him get up and stride about the room, gathering his clothes together. And though he had said nothing to her, lying there she felt sure that he wanted her to do the same. So she rose and in the darkness started to pick up her own disordered garments. A single shoe proved elusive and she began searching for it, trying first behind an armchair and then dragging back one of the curtains in the belief that it would be revealed there.

While she continued her quest, the silence between them began to oppress her. He turned on the light to help her, its harsh illumination finally destroying the comforting ambience that had previously existed, and instantly she spotted the heel of the shoe protruding from beneath the sofa.

'See you next week?' he said brightly, holding it up in triumph for her to put on.

'Yes, maybe,' she replied in a thin voice, taking the shoe, the contrast between her fantasy leave-taking scene and the real thing disheartening her, making it diffi cult for her to say more without breaking down. This time she had hoped to spend the night beside him.

'Darling, think,' he said, as if he had read her mind, 'what would his carer make of it, finding him alone in the morning?'

'I know, but I love you,' she replied, speaking the words for the first time and looking into his eyes to see if he would flinch. But he did not, and his murmured response pleased her, sounding something like 'Love you too.'