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A Banquet of Consequences

Written by Elizabeth George

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ELIZABETH GEORGE

A Banquet of Consequences



HODDER &
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In loving memory of Jesse Vallera:
every moment in his presence was
an absolute privilege.

‘ . . . the past is so hard to shift. It comes with us like a
chaperone, standing between us and the newness
of the present – the new chance.

Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?

Jeannette Winterson

‘Sooner or later, we all sit down to a
banquet of consequences.’

Under the Wide and Starry Sky

Nancy Horan

8 DECEMBER

★

THIRTY-NINE MONTHS BEFORE

Spitalfields
London

Since it was only to be a weekend jaunt to Marrakesh, Lily Foster reckoned they could use one suitcase, and a carry-on at that. What did they need to take, really? It had been deadly cold, grey, and wet in London since the middle of November, but it wasn't going to be that way in North Africa. They would spend most of their time lounging round the pool, anyway, and when they weren't doing that, they'd be getting romantic in their room for which, obviously, they needed no clothes at all.

Packing took less than ten minutes. Sandals, summer trousers, a T-shirt for William. Sandals, a clingy frock, and a scarf for her. Swimming suits for them both and a few other essentials. That was it. Then began the wait which – confirmed by a glance at the plastic wall clock ticking away above the cooker – should have been less than thirty minutes. But it stretched instead into more than two hours during which time she texted him and she phoned him as well, only to receive no response. Just his pleasant voice saying 'This is Will. Tell me and I'll tell you back,' to which she said, 'Where are you, William? I thought the job was only in Shoreditch. And why're you still there in this rotten weather? Ring me soon as you get this, OK?'

Lily went to the window. The afternoon was spitting rain outside, the sky dark and angry with erupting clouds. In the best of weather, this particular housing estate was grim: a mixture of filthy brick blocks of flats tossed by the handful across a level plain, which was crisscrossed by cracked and heaving pavements that the residents ignored in favour of trudging across a dying patchwork of lawns. In weather like this, the place looked like a death trap and what was at risk of extermination was hope. They didn't belong here, and Lily knew it. It was bad for her; it was worse for William. But it was what they could afford for now and it was where they would remain until she built her business larger than what it was and William had his own on firmer footing.

That part was tricky: William's business. He regularly argued with his clients, and people didn't like that when they were paying someone to work for them.

'You *do* have to take on board what people think,' she kept telling him.

'People,' he countered, 'need to stay out of my way. I can't concentrate when they yammer at me. Why don't they get that? It's not like I don't tell them straightaway.'

Well, yes, right, Lily thought. Telling people was part of the problem. William needed to stop doing that.

Lily frowned down at the street. There was no one on the pavements below, certainly no William with his collar up, making a dash from his car to the narrow tower that contained their building's lift. Instead there was only a woman on a balcony of the block of flats sitting at an angle to theirs. She was gathering laundry in her arms, her bright yellow sari whipped by the wind. As for the rest of the buildings' balconies with their lines of dispirited laundry and their children's toys and their few haggard-looking plants and – always – their satellite dishes, whatever they contained was being left to fend for itself in the weather.

Through the window Lily could dimly hear the unrelenting city noise: the squeal of tyres on wet pavement as a car took a corner too swiftly, the metallic roar of a building site where yet something else was being redeveloped nearby but out of view, an ambulance siren on its way to hospital, and, much closer, the *thump thunka thump* of a too loud bass underscoring someone's musical preference.

She texted William again. After two minutes of no response, she rang him as well. She said, 'William, you *must* be getting my texts. Unless . . . Oh damn it, you haven't got your mobile on silent again, have you? You *know* I hate it when you do that. And this is important. I don't like to say but . . . Oh, hell, hell, hell. Look. I've a surprise planned for our anniversary. I know, I know. You'll say ten months can't be an anniversary but you know what I mean, so don't be difficult. Anyway, this surprise involves our *being* somewhere at a particular time, so if you're just not replying because you're playing silly buggers for some reason, please ring me back.'

And then there was nothing to do but to wait. She watched the minutes tick by and she tried to reassure herself that they had plenty of time to get to Stansted. All William had to do, really, was walk in the door because she had their passports in her bag, she had the tickets printed already, and every plan that needed to be made when one journeyed to another country even for a weekend had been made by her.

She realised that she should have told him that morning. But he'd been displeased with how the job in Shoreditch was shaping up, and she hadn't liked to break into his thoughts. Sometimes his clients took a bit of work on his part to bring on board, for even when William had a superb idea that he knew would work on their property, people liked to be in charge of things, even when they hired an expert, which was definitely what William Goldacre was. Expert, visionary, artist, and labourer. Give him your weed-choked garden and he worked magic.

When she finally saw his ancient Fiesta rounding the corner from Heneage Street, she had been waiting for him for four hours, and the Marrakesh plan was shot to hell. The money was wasted, they were stuck, and Lily was looking for someone to blame.

Where had he been? *What* had he been doing? *Why* hadn't he answered his bloody phone? Had he just done that early on – it was *one* simple thing, William – she could have told him about her plans and advised him to meet her at the airport. They could have even now been sitting happily shoulder to shoulder on that stupid plane as it winged them towards sunshine and a weekend of simple pleasure.

Lily was winding herself up as he got out of his car. She was choosing her words. *Inconsiderate* and *thoughtless* were at the top of her list. But then she caught sight of his face as he passed under one of the street lamps. She saw the set of his shoulders, and the way he walked towards the lift in the evening darkness. She thought, Oh no, and she knew what had occurred. He'd lost the Shoreditch client. That was two clients in three months, with both projects ending in acrimony, anger, and accusation. That would be on William's part. On the part of the clients would be a demand for the return of a rather hefty deposit, most of which would already have been spent on supplies.

Lily watched his progress from pool of light to pool of light till he disappeared from view. Then she took the carry-on through to the bedroom. She shoved it out of sight under the bed. By the time she'd got back to the sitting room, William's key was in the door lock, the door was opening, and she was sitting on the sagging sofa with her smartphone in her hand. She was checking her email. 'Pleasant trip, darling!' from her mum didn't do much to lift her spirits.

William saw her at once – he could hardly help it as the place was so small – and he averted his eyes. Then his gaze came back to her again, and she noticed that it shifted from her face to her phone. He said, 'Sorry.'

She said, 'I texted and rang you, William.'

'I know.'

'Why didn't you respond?'

'I broke the phone.'

He had a rucksack with him. As if to prove to her the truth of what he was saying, he unzipped the thing and dumped its contents. His mobile toppled to one side, and he handed it over. It was destroyed.

'Did you drive over it or something?' Lily asked him.

'I smashed it with a shovel.'

'But—'

'You kept . . . I don't know, Lily. I couldn't answer, but still you kept . . . It was the *ringing* and then the *buzzing* and every bloody thing was happening at once over there. My head felt like it was on the verge of exploding and the only thing I could do to make it all stop was to use a shovel on the phone.'

'What's going on?'

William left the contents of the rucksack where he'd strewn them. He crossed the room to a slingback chair. He flung himself into it, and she saw his face clearly. He was double-blinking in that way he had when things were moving from bad to what was going to be worse.

'It's no good,' he said.

'What?'

'Me. This. The whole bloody thing. I'm no good. It's no good. End of story.'

'Did you lose the Shoreditch clients, then?'

'What do you think? Losing things is what I do, isn't it? My car keys, my notebooks, my rucksack, my clients. You as well, Lily, and don't deny it. I'm losing you. Which is – let's face it – what you wanted to tell me, isn't it? You rang and you texted and it was all to get me to ring you back so you could do to me pretty much what everyone does. End things. Right?'

He was triple-blinking. He needed to be calm. Lily knew from experience there were very few ways to calm him if he got too far along in the direction he was taking, so she said, 'I was taking you to Marrakesh, actually. I'd found a hotel on the cheap, a pool and all the trimmings. It was supposed to be a surprise weekend and I should have told you this morning – at least that I had a surprise trip planned – but that would have meant . . . Oh, I don't know.' She ended rather lamely with, 'I thought it would be fun.'

'We've no money for that sort of thing.'

'My mum lent it me.'

‘So now your parents know how bad things are? What a loser I am? What did you tell them?’

‘Not him, her. Just my mum. I didn’t tell her anything. And she didn’t ask. She’s not *like* that, William. She doesn’t intrude.’ *Not like your mum* was what she didn’t add.

He heard it anyway because his look became sharp the way it always became when the subject of his mother came up between them. But he didn’t go there and instead he said, ‘I should have seen from the first they were bloody mad fools, but I didn’t. Why do I never see what people are like? They say they want something special and I can give them something special and they *will* love it if they only let me get at it. But no, they want drawings and sketches and approval and control and daily receipts and I can’t work like that.’

He stood. He walked to the same window at which she’d waited for so long for him. She didn’t know what to tell him, exactly, but what she wanted to say was that *if* he couldn’t work under the aegis of someone else, *if* he could only work alone, then he would have to learn how to deal with people because *if* he didn’t learn that, then he would fail over and over and over again. She wanted to tell him that he wasn’t being reasonable with people, that he couldn’t expect them to hand over their gardens or even part of their gardens to his creative impulse. What if they don’t like what you have in mind? she wanted to ask him. But she’d said it before and she’d asked it before and here they were again where they kept ending up.

‘It’s London,’ he said abruptly, to the window glass.

‘What’s London?’

‘This. It. Me. London’s the reason. People here . . . They’re different. They don’t get me and I don’t get them. I’ve got to get out of here. It’s the only answer because I’m not going to freeloader off you.’

He swung from the window then. The look on his face comprised, she knew, the very same expression he wore when his clients asked questions he deemed unreasonable. It signalled that he’d made his mind up about something. She reckoned she was seconds away from learning what that was.

He told her. ‘Dorset.’

‘Dorset?’

‘I’ve got to go home.’

‘This is your home.’

‘You know what I mean. I’ve spent all day thinking and that’s the answer. I’m going back to Dorset. I’m starting over.’

Spitalfields
London

She got him out of the flat, no matter the rain. She suggested the Pride of Spitalfields. It wasn't far, a bit gastro pub-ish with its creamy exterior and deep blue awnings dripping with rain, but inside there was still a decent cider to be had and usually a table or two tucked away in a corner. He was reluctant to go – 'I can't afford it, Lily, and I won't let you pay.'

She told him it was money from her mum to spend in Morocco and what did it matter as they were in things together, weren't they?

'It's . . . it's unseemly,' he said, and his use of that word suggested his mum was in one way or another behind every decision he'd made since falling out with his clients: from smashing his mobile into oblivion to declaring a need to return to Dorset.

Without doing what needed to be done to school herself to patience, she said to him, 'You've talked to her, haven't you? You told her about this before you told me. *Why* did you do that?'

'This isn't about my mum,' William said.

'Everything's about your mum,' she told him.

She entered the Pride of Spitalfields, and her annoyance with him was such that she found she didn't much care if he followed. But follow he did and they sat at the only table left, directly next to the door to the ladies', which shot a shaft of near blinding fluorescent light on their faces every time someone ducked in or out. Music was playing. An iPod or iPhone with a hookup to something of a satellite nature because it was a country and western mix of oldies only, Johnny Cash foremost with dashes of Willie Nelson, Patsy Cline, Garth Brooks, Randy Travis, and the Judds.

Lily said, 'You didn't answer me, William.'

He was looking round the pub but brought his gaze back to her. 'Untrue. I told you that—'

'You tried to misdirect me is what you did. So let's go back. You spoke to your mum. You told her what's happened before you told me.'

'I said this isn't about my mum.'

'Let me guess at the conversation. She told you to come home to Dorset. She told you that you can "start" again there. She promised help: hers, your stepdad's. When are you breaking *away* from them?'

'I'm not intending to live with Mum. At least not permanently. It's only till I can get established. It's for the best.'

'God, I can even hear her voice in you,' Lily fumed.

‘I’m thinking of Sherborne,’ he said. ‘Or Somerset. Probably Yeovil because it’s less costly but the business itself will do better in Sherborne. There’s money there. Even Mum says—’

‘I don’t want to hear what “Mum” says.’

‘It’s London, Lily. It’s attempting to have *any* kind of business in London.’

‘I have a business. It’s working out.’

‘Tattoos, yes. Well, this is London after all. But what I’m trying to do . . . having my kind of business, what I’m *good* at, here . . . People don’t connect the way I need to connect in London. You’ve said that yourself: the perfect place to be anonymous but if one wants anything more than anonymity, it’s not going to happen. I’ve *heard* you say that. It’s no go for me here. It’s only because of you I’ve hacked it for this long.’

She looked towards the bar. She thought uselessly about how trendy Spitalfields was becoming as the City of London inched towards it one hideous glass tower block at a time. Even here – God, not that far from where Jack the Ripper haunted the narrow Whitechapel streets – there were young women wearing pencil skirts and young men in suits flirting with each other as they sipped white wine. White wine, for God’s sake. Here. In the East End. They were only a sign that nothing ever stayed the same, that progress was relentless and that ‘making progress’ applied not only to society and economics and science and everything else but to people as well. She hated that: the very idea of constant change to which one had to become accustomed. But she also knew when fighting it was hopeless.

She said to him, ‘I suppose that’s it, isn’t it?’

‘What’s it?’

‘You and I. What else?’

He reached for her hand across the table. His palm was damp where it covered her balled fist. He said, ‘You can come to Dorset as well. You can set up a shop there. I’ve already spoken to—’

‘Yes. Right. To your mum. And she’s assured you that there’s plenty of scope for tattoos in a place like Dorset.’

‘Well . . . yes, if it comes to that. You’re reading her wrong, Lil. She wants you there as much as I do.’