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Leaving Everything Most Loved

Written by Jacqueline Winspear

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Leaving Everything Most Loved

A Maisie Dobbs Novel

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PROLOGUE

London, July 1933

Edith Billings – Mrs Edith Billings, that is, proprietor of Billings' Bakery – watched as the dark woman walked past the shop window, her black head with its oiled ebony hair appearing to bob up and down between the top shelf of cottage loaves and the middle shelf of fancy cakes as she made her way along with a confidence to her step. Mrs Billings considered herself to be a woman of some integrity, one who lived by the maxim 'Live and let live', but to be honest, she wondered what a woman like that might be doing on her street; after all, she should keep to her own patch. Billings' Fine Bakery – or 'Billingses' as the locals called it – did a fair trade in morning coffee and afternoon teas, and Edith didn't want her regulars, her 'ladies' as she referred to them, being upset by someone who had no business walking out of her own part of town. There

were a lot of her kind, to be sure – you could thank the East India Company going back three hundred years for that – but all the same. On her street? That woman with her coloured silk, her jangling bracelets, her little beaded shoes – and, for goodness' sake, just a cardigan to cover her arms. *What's she doing here?* wondered Edith Billings. What does she want around these parts, with that red dot on her forehead? And what on earth happened to 'When in Rome', anyway? It'd be painted dots one minute, and curry with roast potatoes the next, if people weren't careful.

Elsie Digby, aged six, was outside Billingses when the lady with the dark skin clad in silks of peach and pink walked towards her. She'd been left to rock the baby carriage while her mother bought a loaf of bread, and now she pushed back and forth with a solid rhythm against the carriage handle, yet with barely a thought to minding her new brother. The lady smiled as she approached, and Elsie blushed, looking at her feet in sensible brown lace-up shoes. She'd been told never to talk to strangers, and she was afraid the woman might speak to her, say a few words – and the woman was, if nothing else, a stranger. But as she came alongside Billingses and passed Elsie, a corner of the woman's sari flapped against the girl's bare arm. Elsie Digby closed her eyes when the soft silk kissed her skin, and at once she wondered what it must be like to be clothed in fine silk every day, to walk along with the heat of late summer rising up and bearing down, and to feel the cool brush of fabric touching her as if it were a night-time breeze, or breath from a sleeping baby.

Usha Pramal, respectfully dressed in her best sari, could feel the stares of passers-by. She smiled and said 'Good morning'

when proximity brought the person within comfortable distance. There was no reply. There was never a reply. But she would shed no tears and worry not, because, according to Mr and Mrs Paige, their God was watching over her, as He watched over all His children. She had said a quick prayer to Jesus this morning, just to keep on acceptable terms with the Paiges and their deity, but she also bowed to Vishnu and Ganesh for good measure. Her father would have been appalled, but he would also have said, 'Never burn your bridges, Usha. Never burn those bridges.' She would not be here for long anyway. Her pennies and shillings were mounting, along with the pounds, and soon she would be able to afford to make her dream a reality; she would book her passage and at last return home. *At last*, after all this time, after seven long years, she would sail away from this grey country.

When the pain of separation seemed to rend her heart in two, it was her habit to walk to a street where there were shops that sold spices, where the aroma of familiar dishes cooking would tease her senses and set her stomach churning. And she could at least see faces that looked like hers; though at the same time, the sense of belonging was out of kilter, for many of those people had not been born in India and spoke in an unfamiliar dialect, or their names were constructed in a different manner. And even the other women in the hostel were not of her kind, though the Paiges thought they were all the same, like oranges in a bowl. Perhaps that's what happened if you had only one God to watch over you. Yes, she was wise to honour the gods of her childhood.

Usha had left her customer's house with a silver coin

in her hand, a coin she would place in a velvet drawstring bag kept well inside her mattress, along with other coins earned. Whenever she added a florin or half-crown – riches indeed – it seemed to Usha Pramal that as she looked into the money nestled in the rich red fabric, it began to glow, like coals in a fireplace. And how she had worked to build that fire, to keep it alive. Soon she would have her ticket. Soon she would feel the damp heat of her own country, thick against her skin.

It was a tight little gang of street urchins, rambling along the canal path, who discovered the body of Usha Pramal. At first they aimed stones at the globe of coloured silk that ballooned from the green slime of city water, and then they thought they would use a broken tree branch to haul it in. It was only as they hooked the fabric that the body turned, the face rising in the misery of sudden death, the dead woman's eyes open as if not quite understanding why there was a raw place on her forehead where a bullet had entered her skull. That morning, as Usha Pramal had painted a vermilion bindi to signify the wisdom nestled behind the sacred third eye, she could not have known that she had given her killer a perfect target.

ONE

Romney Marsh, September 1st, 1933

Maisie Dobbs manoeuvred her MG 14/28 Tourer into a place outside the bell-shaped frontage of the grand country house. She turned off the engine but remained seated. She needed time to consider her reason for coming to this place before she relinquished the security of her motor car and made her way towards the heavy oak door.

The red-brick exterior of the building appeared outlined in charcoal, as the occasional shaft of sunlight reflected through graphite-grey clouds scudding across the sky. It was a trick of light that added mystery to the flat marshlands extending from Kent into Sussex. The Romney Marsh was a place of dark stories; of smugglers, and ghosts and ghouls seen both night and day. And for some years this desolate place had offered succour to the community of nuns at Camden Abbey. Local cottagers called it 'the nunnery', or

even 'the convent', not realising that Benedictines, whether male or female, live a monastic life – thus in a monastery – according to The Rule of Benedict.

It was the Abbess whom Maisie had come to see: Dame Constance Charteris.

Whether it was for advice that she had made the journey from London, or to have someone she respected bear witness to a confession of inner torment, she wasn't sure. Might she return to her motor car less encumbered, or with a greater burden? Maisie suspected she might find herself somewhere in the middle – the lighter of step for having shared her concerns, but with a task adding weight to the thoughts she carried. She took a deep breath, and sighed.

'Can't turn around now, can I?'

She stepped from the motor car, which today did not have the roof set back, as there was little sun to warm her during the journey from London. Her shoes crunched against the gravel as she walked towards the heavy wooden doors. She rang a bell at the side of the door, and a few moments later a hatch opened, and the face of a young novice was framed against the ancient grain.

'I'm here to see Dame Constance,' said Maisie.

The nun nodded and closed the hatch. Maisie heard two bolts drawn back, and within a moment the door opened with a creaking sound, as if it were a sailing ship tethered to the dock, whining to be on the high seas once more.

The novice inclined her head, indicating that Maisie should follow her.

The small sitting room had not changed since her last visit. There was the rich burgundy carpet, threadbare in

places, but still comforting. A mouldering coal fire glowed in the grate, and a wing chair had been set alongside another hatch. Soon the small door would open to reveal a grille with bars to separate the Abbess from her visitor, and Dame Constance would offer a brief smile before bowing her head in a prayer. Maisie would in turn bow her head, listen to the prayer, and echo Dame Constance as she said, 'Amen.'

But first, before the Abbess could be heard in the room on the other side of the grille, when her long skirts swished against the bare floorboards with a sound that reminded Maisie of small waves drawing back against shingle at the beach, she would offer her own words to any deity that might be listening. She would sit in the chair, calm her breathing, temper her thoughts, and endeavour to channel her mind away from a customary busyness to a point of calm. It was as if she were emptying the vessel so that it could be filled with thoughts that might better serve her.

The wooden hatch snapped back, and when Maisie looked up she was staring directly at Dame Constance. The Abbess always seemed beyond age, as if she had transcended the years, yet Maisie remembered a time when her skin was smoother, her eyes wider, though they never lost an apparent ability to pierce the thoughts of one upon whom her attention was focused.

'Maisie. Welcome to our humble house. I wonder what brings a woman of such accomplishment to see an old nun.'

Maisie smiled. There it was, that hint of sarcasm on the edge of her greeting; a putting in place, lest the visitor feel above her station in a place of silent worship.

'Beneath the accomplishment is the same woman who was once the naive girl you taught, Dame Constance.'

The Abbess smiled. It was what might be called a wry smile, a lifting of the corner of the mouth as if to counter the possibility of a Cheshire cat grin.

'Shall we pray first?'

Dame Constance allowed no reply, but bowed her head and clasped her hands on the shelf before her, her knuckles almost touching the bars of the grille separating Maisie and herself. Maisie rested her hands on her side of the same shelf, feeling the proximity of fingers laced in prayer.

She recognised the words of Saint Benedict as Dame Constance began.

'*And let them pray together, so that they may associate in peace*.'

When the prayer was finished, when Maisie had echoed Dame Constance's resolute 'Amen', the Abbess allowed a moment of silence to envelop them as she folded her arms together within the copious sleeves of her black woollen habit.

'What brings you to me, Maisie Dobbs?'

Maisie tried not to sigh. She had anticipated that first question and had sampled her answer, aloud, a hundred times during the journey to Romney Marsh. Now it seemed trite, unworthy of the insight and intellect before her. Dame Constance waited, her head still bowed. She would not shuffle with impatience or sigh as a mark of her desire to be getting on with another task. She would bide her time.

'I am troubled . . . I feel . . . No. I have a desire to leave, to go abroad, but I am troubled by the needs of those to

whom I feel responsibility.' Maisie picked at a hangnail on her little finger. It was a childhood habit almost forgotten, but which seemed to claim her when she was most worried.

Dame Constance nodded. To one who had not known her, she may have seemed half asleep, but Maisie knew better, and waited for the first volley of response with some trepidation.

'Do you seek to leave on a quest to find? Or do you wish to run from some element of life that is uncomfortable?'

There it was. The bolt hit the target dead centre, striking Maisie in the heart. Dame Constance raised her eyes and met Maisie's once more, reminding her of an archer bringing up the bow, ready to aim.

'Both.'

Dame Constance nodded. 'Explain.'

'Last year . . .' Maisie stopped. Was it last year? Her mind reeled. So close in time, yet almost a lifetime ago. 'Last year my dear friend Dr Maurice Blanche died.' She paused, feeling the prick of tears at the corners of her eyes. She glanced at Dame Constance, who nodded for her to continue. 'He left me a most generous bequest, for which, I confess, I have struggled to . . . to . . . become a good and proficient steward.' She paused, choosing words as if she were selecting matching coloured pebbles from a tide pool at the beach. 'I have made some errors, though I have found ways to put them right, I think; however . . . however, in going through Maurice's papers, in reading his journals and the notes he left for me, I have felt in my heart a desire to travel, to go abroad. I believe it was in the experience and understanding of other cultures that Dr Blanche garnered the wisdom that stood him in

good stead, both in his work and as a much-respected friend and mentor to those whose paths he crossed. Of course, he came from a family familiar with travel, used to expeditions overseas. But I now have the means to live up to his example, so I have this desire to leave.'

'I see. And on the other hand?'

'My business. My employees. My father. And my . . . well, the man who loves me, who is himself making plans to travel to Canada. For an indefinite stay.'

Dame Constance nodded and was silent. Maisie knew it would not be for long. *She's just lining up the ducks to shoot them down, like a marksman at the fair.*

'What are you seeking?'

'Knowledge. Understanding. To broaden my mind. I . . . I think I am somewhat narrow-minded, at times.'

'Hmmm, I wouldn't doubt it, but we all suffer from tunnel vision on occasion, Maisie, even I.' Dame Constance paused. Again there was the catch at the corner of her mouth. 'And you think journeying abroad will give you this knowledge you crave?'

'I think it will contribute to my understanding of the world, of people.'

'More so than, say, the old lady who has lived in the same house her entire life, who has borne children both alive and dead? Who tends her soil; who sees the sun shine and the rain fall over the land, winter, spring, summer, and autumn? What might you say to the idea that we all have a capacity for wisdom, just as a jug has room for a finite amount of water – pouring more water in the jug doesn't increase that capacity.'

'I think there's room for improvement.'

'Improvement?'

Wrong word, thought Maisie. 'I believe I have the capacity to develop a greater understanding of people, and therefore compassion.'

'And you think people want your compassion? Your understanding?'

'I think it helps. I think society could do with more of both.'

'Then why not take your journey, your Grand Tour, to the north of England, or to Wales, to places where there is want, where there is a need for compassion and – dare I say it – some non-patronising, constructive help from someone who knows what it is to be poor? You have much to offer here, Maisie.'

'I take your point, truly I do – but I think going abroad is the right thing to do.'

'Then why ask me?'

'To align my thoughts on the matter.'

'I see.' Dame Constance paused. 'And what of those you say you cannot leave – your employees? Your father? The man who loves you? Maisie, I know you well enough to know that you could find new positions for your employees, if you wish. Your father, by your own account, is a fiercely independent man – though I could understand a certain reticence to leave, given his age. And your young man? Well, I suspect he's not so young, is he? I imagine he would want you to go with him, as his wife.'

Maisie nodded. 'Yes, he has made that known.'

'And you don't want to?'

'I want to take my own journey first.'

'Your pilgrimage.'

'My pilgrimage?'

'Yes, Maisie. Your pilgrimage. Where do you intend to go?'

'In reading Maurice's journals, it seems he spent much time in the Indian subcontinent. I thought I might travel there.'

'Do you know anyone there? Have you any associations?'

'I am sure there are people who knew Maurice, who would offer me advice.'

'"Pilgrimage to the place of the wise is to find escape from the flame of separateness."'

'I beg your pardon,' said Maisie.

'It's something written by the Persian poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, from a more recent translation, though most of his work remains in his original language.'

'But . . .'

'I believe the words you find most startling are "the flame of separateness".'

Maisie nodded.

'Then go. Go to find out who you are – *Know Thyself*, as written at the entrance to Delphi. Know thyself, Maisie Dobbs, for such knowledge is freedom. Extinguish the flame of doubt that has burned in you for so long, and which – I suspect – stands between you and a deeper connection to someone with whom you might spend the rest of your life.'

'There are more recent reasons for that separateness, Dame Constance. Matters of a confidential nature.'

'You would not have come had you not felt trust.'

'James – the man with whom I have been, to all intents and purposes, walking out with for some months now . . .' Maisie paused. *A year.* In truth a year had passed without engagement, cause for some gossip within their social circle. 'James is associated with certain men of influence and power, one of whom I have had cause to cross. I know the man orchestrated the death of another man – one I knew and had affection for – though it was not by his own hand, he has others to do his . . . dirty work. He is a powerful man who at the same time is serving our country in matters of international importance, and is therefore untouchable.'

Dame Constance bowed her head, then looked up at Maisie again.

'So, I suspect you feel compromised. I know of your work, and it would seem that you were powerless against a man who is beyond the law, so you have become disillusioned with the law.'

'Disillusioned with myself, I think. And though I grasp why James must follow this man, I find I admire him for wanting to be of service, yet sickened that it requires him to throw in his lot with such a person.'

'So, perhaps the leaving is to set this episode behind you, to distance yourself from the grief associated with death, and also with a feeling that you have failed because you could not win against those who ensure that this man you speak of will be able to evade justice. But remember this, Maisie – according to The Rule of Benedict, the fourth rung of humility requires us to hold fast to patience with a silent mind, especially when facing difficulties, contradictions – and even any injustice. It asks us to endure. Thus I would

suggest that you might well see justice done, in time. Patience, Maisie. *Patience*. Now go about your work. Seek the knowledge you crave, and remember this: you have expressed your desire, so be prepared for opportunity. It may come with greater haste than your preparations allow.' She paused, and there was silence for what seemed like a quarter of an hour, though it might only have been a minute. 'I am sure that, because you have voiced your desire to venture overseas, a direction will be revealed to you. Now, lest I be thought of as heathen, I should balance the esteemed Persian poet with our beloved Benedict.'

The Abbess met Maisie's gaze; neither flinched.

'Listen and attend to the ear of your heart, Maisie. Before you leave, let us pray together.'

And though it was not her practice to pray, Maisie bowed her head and clasped her hands, wondering how indeed she might best attend to the ear of her heart.