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ELEGY FOR EDDIE

A Maisie Dobbs Novel

JACQUELINE WINSPEAR

ONE

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Maisie Dobbs pushed her way through the turnstile at Warren Street station, then stopped when she saw Jack Barker, the newspaper vendor, wave to her.

‘Mornin’, Miss Dobbs. Paper today?’

‘Mr Barker, how are you this morning? It’s very close, isn’t it? Summer’s here before spring!’

‘At least it ain’t as hot as it is over there in America – people dying from the heat, apparently. Mind you, at least they can have a drink now, can’t they? Now that their Prohibition’s ended. Never could make that out.’

‘You know, you’re the only newspaper seller I know who reads every single one of his papers,’ said Maisie. She took a coin from her purse and exchanged it for the day’s *Times*. ‘And there’s been a lot to read this year already.’

‘Ever since all that business about the bodyline bowling

over there in Australia, it seems it's been one thing after another – and not very nice things, either. Not that I hold with bad tactics in cricket, whether it's ours or theirs, but I'm glad England kept the Ashes all the same. Mind you, not my sort of game, cricket.'

'Jack, I have to confess, I still don't know what that was all about. I never could quite understand cricket.'

Maisie's comment fell on deaf ears, as Jack Barker continued his litany of events that had come to pass over the past several months.

'Then there was all the noise about that Adolf Hitler, being made Chancellor in Germany. What do you reckon, Miss? Seems the bloke's got people either worried or turning cartwheels.'

'I think I'm on the side of the worried, Mr Barker. But let's just wait and see.'

'You're right, Miss Dobbs. Wait and see. Might never happen, as the saying goes. And then we'll all be doin' cartwheels, eh? At least we're not like them poor souls in Japan. I know it's a long way off, the other side of the world, and can't say as I've ever met one of them in my life – don't expect I ever will – but they say it was one of the worst earthquakes ever. Hundreds killed. Can't imagine what that would be like, you know, the ground opening up under your feet.'

'No, neither can I – we're lucky we live in a place where that sort of thing doesn't happen.'

'Oh, I reckon it happens everywhere, Miss Dobbs. I'm old enough to know it doesn't take an earthquake for the

ground to break apart and swallow you; you only have to look at all them who don't have a roof over their heads or a penny in their pocket to put some food on the table.'

Maisie nodded. 'Never a truer word said, Mr Barker.' She held up her newspaper by way of a wave and began to walk away. 'I'll look for the good news first, I think.'

Jack Barker called after her. 'The good news is that they reckon this weather will keep up, right until the end of the month.'

'Good,' Maisie called back. 'Makes a nice change.'

'Might be a few thunderstorms, though,' he added, laughing as he turned to another customer.

She was still smiling at the exchange when she turned into Fitzroy Square. Five men were standing at the foot of the steps leading up to the front door of the building that housed her office; one of them stepped forward as she approached.

'Miss Maisie Dobbs?'

'Yes, that's me, how can I – oh, my goodness, is that you? Mr Riley? Jesse Riley?'

The man doffed his cap and smiled, nodding acknowledgment.

'And Archie Smith—' She looked at the men in turn. 'Pete Turner, Seth Knight, Dick Samuels. What are you doing here?'

'We were waiting here for you, Miss Dobbs.'

'Well, come in then. You could have waited for me inside, you know.'

Maisie unlocked the door, wiped her feet on the mat,

and dropped her umbrella into a tall earthenware jar left alongside the door. The weather might be fine this morning, but she always took an umbrella with her when she left the house, just in case.

‘Follow me.’ She turned to speak again as she walked up the stairs. ‘Was there no one in to see you?’

‘Oh yes, Miss. Very nice young lady came to the door when we rang the bell. She said we could wait for you, but we didn’t want to be a nuisance. Then the gentleman came down and he said the same, but we told him we’d rather stand outside until you arrived.’

Maisie could not quite believe how the morning was unfolding. Here they were, five men she hadn’t seen since girlhood, waiting for her on the doorstep, all dressed in their Sunday best, in the flamboyant way of the cockney costermonger: a bright silk scarf at the neck, a collarless shirt, a weskit of wool and silk, and best corduroy or woollen trousers, all topped off with a jacket – second-hand, of course, probably even third- or fourth-hand. And each of them was wearing their best flat cap and had polished their boots to a shine.

Maisie opened the office door and bid her two employees good morning as she removed her hat and gloves. ‘Oh, and Billy, could you nip next door to the solicitor’s and ask if they can spare us a chair or two,’ she added. ‘We’ll need them for an hour at least, I would imagine.’ She turned to Sandra, who had stood up to usher the men into the room, which at once seemed so much smaller. ‘Oh, good, you’ve brought out the tea things.’

‘We told the gentlemen they could wait in here, Miss Dobbs.’

‘I know. It’s all right.’ She turned to her visitors. ‘I seem to remember this lot can be particularly proud, can’t you, Jesse?’

The man laughed. ‘Well. Miss D—’

Maisie cut him off. ‘I was Maisie to you when I was a girl, and I’m Maisie now. There’ll be no standing on ceremony. Ah, here we are, more chairs. Thank you, Billy.’ Maisie smiled at her assistant as he returned with several chairs stacked one on top of the other. ‘Come on, all of you, take a chair, sit yourselves down and tell me what this is all about – I can’t ever remember having a delegation of costers greet me, and at this time in the morning.’

Sandra had taken the tray with china and a teapot to the kitchenette along the corridor, and in the meantime, with the men seated around her, Maisie perched on the corner of her desk. She introduced each of the visitors to Billy and waited for Jesse to speak. He was about the same age as her father, but, unlike Frankie Dobbs, he still worked his patch of London streets, selling vegetables and fruit from a horse-drawn cart. She knew the reason for the visit must be of some import, for these men would have lost valuable income in giving up a few hours’ worth of work to see her.

‘We’ve come about Eddie. Remember Eddie Pettit?’

Maisie nodded. ‘Of course I remember Eddie. I haven’t seen him or Maudie for a few years, since I lived in Lambeth.’ She paused. ‘What’s wrong, Jesse? What about Eddie?’

‘He’s dead, Miss—I mean, Maisie. He’s gone.’

Maisie felt the colour drain from her face. ‘How? Was he ill?’

The men looked at each other, and Jesse was about to answer her question when he shook his head and pressed a handkerchief to his eyes. Archie Smith spoke up in his place.

‘He weren’t ill. He was killed at the paper factory, Bookhams.’ Smith folded his flat cap in half and ran his fingers along the crease. When he looked up, he could barely continue. ‘It weren’t no accident, either, Maisie. We reckon it was deliberate. Someone wanted to get rid of him. No two ways about it.’ He looked at the other men, all of whom nodded their accord.

Maisie rubbed her arms and looked at her feet, which at once felt cold.

‘But Eddie was so gentle. He was a little slow, we all knew that, but he was a dear soul – who on earth would want to see him gone?’ She paused. ‘Is his mother still alive? I remember the influenza just after the war had left her weak in the chest.’

‘Maudie’s heart is broken, Maisie. We’ve all been round to see her – everyone has. Jennie’s looking after her, but Wilf passed on a few years ago now. The grooms down at the bottling factory, the drivers at the brewery, everyone who looked after a horse in any of the boroughs knew Eddie, and they’ve all put something in the collection to make sure we give him a good send-off.’

‘Has he been laid to rest yet?’

‘This Friday. St Mark’s.’

Maisie nodded. ‘Tell me what happened – Seth, you start.’

Seth Knight and Dick Samuels were the younger men of the group; Maisie guessed they were now in their late forties. She couldn’t remember seeing them since they were young apprentices, and now they were men wearing the years on faces that were lined and grey, and with hands thick and calloused from toil.

Knight cleared his throat. ‘As you know, Eddie made a wage from the work he did with horses. There wasn’t a hot or upset horse in the whole of London he couldn’t settle, and that’s no word of a lie. And he earned well at times, did Eddie. Reckon this was after you left the Smoke, just before the war, but talk about Eddie’s gift had gone round all the factories and the breweries, and last year – honest truth, mind – he was called to the palace mews, to sort out one of His Majesty’s Cleveland Bays.’ He looked at Jesse, who nodded for him to continue. ‘But horses don’t have a funny turn every day of the week, so Eddie always made a bit extra by running errands at the paper factory. He’d go in during the morning, and the blokes would give him a few coppers to buy their ciggies, or a paper, or a bite of something to eat, and he’d write everything down and—’

‘Wait a minute.’ Maisie interrupted Knight. ‘When did Eddie learn to write?’

‘He’d been learning again for a while, Maisie. There was this woman who used to be a teacher at the school, she helped him. He’d found out where she was living – across the water – and he’d gone to her a while ago to ask

if she could give him lessons. I'm blessed if I can remember her name. Apparently, he'd been doing quite well with a new customer, and it'd finally got into his noddle that if he learnt to read and write he might be better off in the long run. He'd started to pay attention to money. I'd say it was all down to Maudie, pushing him a bit. In the past all he did was hand over the money to her, and she gave him pocket money to spend on himself, for his necessaries. She put the rest away for him – she always worried that he wouldn't be able to look after himself when she was gone, you see.'

Maisie nodded. 'I remember her being so attentive to him, always. I was in a shop once – I think it was Westons, the hardware store; I must have been sent on an errand by my mother. I was behind Eddie and his mum, and she made him ask for what they wanted, even though he didn't want to. She went stone silent until he'd asked for whatever it was, and then counted out the correct money. No one tried to hurry him along, because people knew Maud was teaching him to stand on his own two feet.'

Seth Knight went on. 'Well, Eddie seemed to have a little bit more about him lately, as if he'd been keeping us in the dark all along. He started asking questions about how to save his money so it was safe – of course, it was hard for him to understand, and he'd come and ask the same questions again, but all the same, he was trying. Anyway, it turns out this teacher – Miss Carpenter, that was her name – had always had a soft spot for him at school. When he turned up, that is. Trouble with Eddie, as you know, he'd

always been happier around horses, so even as a young boy, when he got a message to go and sort out a horse, Maudie never stopped him. And to be honest, they needed the money, being as it was only the two of them; Wilf and Jennie were there to help out, but Maudie always said they needed everything they had to take care of themselves, especially with Wilf coming home gassed after the war. He might as well have died at Plugstreet Wood, the way the pain took it out of him, after he came home – and he was older than most of them; he wasn't a young man when he went over there.' Seth took a deep breath and looked down at his hands, the palm of one rubbing across the knuckles of the other. 'Anyway, going back to Eddie, he'd started to write down the odd note when the blokes at the factory gave him their instructions, and I for one think he could understand more than anyone gave him credit for. In any case, he always came back with what they'd asked him to get for them, and he never made a mistake.'

There was silence for a few moments, and Maisie knew that everyone was likely thinking the same thing, that Eddie wasn't really gone, that he was as alive as the stories about him.

'Go on, Seth.'

'I don't know if you've ever been in Bookhams, but them rolls of paper are massive. They come out on a belt as wide as this room, and then they go straight onto the lorries – Bookhams are going over to lorries now.' He sighed and rubbed his forehead. 'But they've still got a few old horses there, stabled out the back, for when the lorries pack up

and won't go – which is more often than the horses went lame, and that's a fact.'

Maisie could see beads of perspiration forming on the man's forehead, and the other men changed position or folded their arms. 'Take your time, Seth,' she said.

Seth Knight pulled a handkerchief from his trouser pocket, and rubbed it across his brow. 'No one can say what happened, and no one can say the how or why of it, but Eddie was walking out of the factory floor to take a few lumps of sugar to the horses, them as are left, and the next thing you know, one of them big rolls had slid sideways off the belt and come crashing down. It was all over like that.' He snapped his fingers. 'Poor Eddie didn't stand a chance. Not a chance. He was crushed, Maisie. Crushed to death.'

'Oh dear Lord, what a terrible way to go.'

'That's not all of it – soon as it happened, the horses at the back, still in their stables, they all started going on. They knew, you see. They knew he'd gone. It was as if he was one of them. Always was like that, with him and horses.'

A choked cry caused Maisie to look back towards the door. Sandra had entered the room while Seth was speaking of Eddie's death. She was standing by the door, holding the tray with shaking hands as tears ran down her face. Only months before, the young woman had lost her husband in equally tragic circumstances. Maisie nodded to Billy, who gently took the tray from Sandra and began handing out cups of tea to the men. Maisie stood up to comfort the young woman, whispering that if she wanted she could leave the office to sit in the square for a while.

Jesse Riley drank back his tea, as if it were cold water quenching his thirst. He replaced the cup on the saucer and reached down to set it on the hearth. ‘So, we came to see you about Eddie, thinking you’d know what to do, Maisie. Your dad comes up here from the country every now and again and he tells us, you know, he tells us how proud he is of you, and that you’ve brought murderers to justice.’ He leant forward. ‘You see, Maisie, no one cares about Eddie ’cept us, and his mum and Jennie. The police didn’t give a tinker’s cuss about it, said it was a “regrettable accident”. Accident, my eye. It was a deliberate act of murder, that’s what it was.’

‘But why? Who would want to see Eddie dead?’

‘That’s just it,’ said Dick Samuels. ‘We don’t know. But we thought you might be able to find out.’ He looked across to Pete Turner. ‘Pete’s got our kitty, he can tell you about it.’

Turner leant forward to speak to Maisie. ‘We’ve had another whip-round, us and a few more costers at the market.’ He pulled out a drawstring bag. ‘We don’t want you to work for nothing – you’ve come up the hard way and earned every penny, so we don’t want favours – but we want you to find out about Eddie. We want you to find out who killed him.’

Maisie was aware that all eyes focused on her. Not only the men were waiting for her to answer, but Billy and Sandra, who had remained in the room.

‘Of course I will, but—’ Maisie was interrupted by a collective sigh of relief. She regarded each and every person present, then came back to Pete Turner. ‘But I don’t want

your money. Eddie was dear to all of us, so it's up to us to do right by him and find out the truth of what happened to cause his death. If it was an accident, well, I'll discover why it happened, and make sure it will never come to pass again. And if he was murdered, I'll find out who wanted him dead.'

At first the men smiled and nodded to one another. Then Jesse Riley spoke up.

'Maisie, I'm an old coster and it's not often I miss a trick. My mum, bless her, said that if you can't pay anything else in life, you can pay attention, and I just noticed that you said you'd find out who wanted him dead, not that you'd find whoever it was killed Eddie.'

Maisie stood up. 'I just can't imagine someone who knew Eddie, someone who saw him every day, wanting to do anything that might hurt him, which means that if his death was the result of a deliberate act, the person who wanted him dead might not have known him as we do. He had no means to protect himself, even as a boy. He was trusting, gentle and innocent. If he was killed intentionally, someone had a reason – and I can't imagine what that reason could be. But that's all speculation. In any case, my assistant, Mr Beale—' The men turned to look at Billy; Maisie continued. 'Mr Beale will begin by asking each of you a good many questions, so we can get to the bottom of what you know and who you think we should be talking to. And in the meantime, here's what I want you to do – I want you to rack your brains, think of anything unusual about Eddie in the weeks and months leading up to his death.'