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Written by Dinah Jefferies

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The Separation

DINAH JEFFERIES



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Prologue

1931: Weston-super-Mare, England

The man smoothed down the lion's paws with a sponge he'd dipped in a bucket of water, then withdrew a knife from a leather pouch at his waist. He glanced up at the waiting crowd, before bending his head and carefully sharpening the creature's claws.

The young girl, squatting a foot away, reached out to touch the lion's mane with her fingertips.

'No!' the man shouted, as he pushed the child away. 'Not yet.'

Her head hung for a moment, but then she glanced back over her shoulder, smiled shyly at the woman who stood watching, and swivelled back to keep her eyes on the creature.

A gust of wind lifted a layer of sand and sent a thousand grains dancing and whirling. The man reacted quickly, dampening down the surface of the beast before more could be whisked away.

The watching woman shivered. Her red-gold hair was cut close to her head, with a Marcel wave to keep it neat, and she wore a pale blue dress with darker blue cornflowers at the modest hemline, with only a thin white cotton cardigan to protect her from the sudden chill.

Once he had satisfied himself that the animal was complete, the sculptor bowed, then walked round the crowd, an upturned hat in his hand. The woman listened to the chink of coins and dipped into her purse.

The sound of horses' hooves rang on the cobbled road behind

the esplanade, but it was not they who drew the woman's attention. Her eyes remained fixed on the little girl, now kneeling on the sand, and gathering handfuls that glistened silvery-gold in the pale sunlight.

As the milling crowd dispersed, instead of their murmurs, or the noise of screaming seagulls and the waves of the ocean, the tap of hammer on metal filled the air. The woman glanced back at what had once been the grand pier, its elegant wrought iron-work bent out of shape by fire. She caught the scent of cockles in vinegar.

'Are you hungry?' she asked the child.

The little girl shook her head. There was hesitation, an uncertainty that revealed itself in the child's slight blush.

'What about a liquorice stick?'

The woman knelt down beside the child and drew close. Close enough to smell the sweetness of her hair. She took a long slow breath, and exhaled through lips that trembled only slightly. She stood, shook sand from the hem of her floral skirt, and took hold of the girl's hand.

'Let's run, shall we?'

A look passed between them and they raced along the beach, kicking up sand and shells and stumbling and slipping until they reached the waiting nun.

At heart the nun was not unfeeling, and with a kindly look she touched the woman's shoulder. Just a fleeting touch that ensured the exchange would be smooth, tears kept at bay, and emotion restrained. The child tipped back her head and turned her hazel eyes on the two women, then beyond them to where red and blue flags lined the sandy sweep of the bay.

For the woman, the day had begun with excitement and a sense of elation. Now it was almost over, she could not take her eyes from the child's sharp-angled, stick-thin body. She patted the little girl's auburn hair and fixed the moment in her memory.

But it would be different for the child. As *her* memory receded and blended into the past, she would doubt: wonder if the day,

the lion, and the woman existed only in her mind. She would seek to capture details of a time that could not be recovered. There would be resonance – a dress, a smile. Only that. And the woman would continue to stifle her sorrow.

‘Come along,’ the nun said, and took the child’s hand. ‘We need to get on that tram, or we won’t reach the railway station in time.’

The woman in the blue dress stepped away, then glanced back to look at the golden sand lion, aware the incoming tide would soon wash it away.

I

1955: *Malaya*

They couldn't see me beneath the house on stilts. But I spied on them. Our amah, and Fleur, my little sister. I heard sandals on the patio – flip-flop, flip-flop – and Fleur's sobs as she ran. Then the swish of her old pink rabbit, dragged by its ears over the pebbled path.

Amah's shrill Chinese voice came after. 'You come here now, Missy. You spoil rabbit. Carry him like that.'

'I don't care! I don't want to go,' Fleur shouted back. 'I like it here.'

'Me too,' I whispered, and sniffed a mix of dead lizards and daddy-long-legs. I didn't mind them.

Beyond my earthy hideout, past the end of the garden, was the long grass, where nobody dared go. But I wasn't scared of that either.

What I *was* scared of was leaving.

Later on, when the sky turned lavender, Daddy pointed out across the same view. Now, from an upstairs balcony, a Tiger beer in his hand, he looked past the lawns and over the hills. To England.

'It's never warm enough there in January,' he said, talking to himself and rubbing his jaw. 'With a raw wind that makes your cheekbones ache. Not like here. Nothing like here.'

'Daddy?'

I watched his bony face, the large Adam's apple and straight line of his mouth above. He swallowed, the apple rose and fell, and his eyes came back to me and Fleur, as if he'd just remembered us. He sort of smiled and gave us both a squeeze.

‘Come on, you two. No need to look so miserable. We’ll have a great life in England. You like swinging from trees, don’t you, Em?’

I nodded. ‘Well, yes, but –’

‘What about you, Fleur?’ he broke in. ‘Plenty of streams to paddle in.’

Fleur’s mouth remained turned down. I caught her eye and pulled a face; it sounded too much like the jungle to me.

‘Come on,’ Dad said. ‘You’re a big girl now, Emma. Nearly twelve. Set an example to your sister.’

‘But, Daddy,’ I tried to tell him.

He went to the door. ‘Emma, it’s settled. Sort out the books you want to take. That’ll keep you busy. Just a few, mind. Come along, Fleur.’

‘But, Dad.’

When he saw my tears, he paused. ‘You’ll love it, if that’s what’s bothering you. I promise.’

I felt very hot, and the thought of my mother made me catch my breath.

He opened the door.

‘But, Dad,’ I called after him, as he and Fleur went out. ‘Aren’t we going to wait for Mummy?’

Lydia dumped her dusty case. Out on the patio, her daughters' bikes lay abandoned beside the jacaranda tree.

'Emma, Fleur,' she called out. 'Mummy's home.'

She stepped from the patio to glance down the pebble path that led to the long grass. As the sky darkened, an enormous moth, from the fringes of the jungle, smacked her in the cheek. She brushed its black dust off, then ducked back inside to escape the oncoming rain.

'Alec?' she called again. 'I'm home.'

Her husband's clean-cut features came to mind, skin smelling strongly of soap from the Chinese market, light brown hair cut short back and sides. There was no reply.

She fought off a pang of disappointment in the too-silent house. She'd sent a telegram, just as he'd asked; so where were her family? It was too hot to have gone for a walk. Were they at the pool perhaps, or maybe Alec had taken the girls for tea at the club?

She climbed the stairs to her bedroom, glanced at a photo of Emma and Fleur on the bedside table, and felt such a surge of love. She had missed them.

After undressing, she ran her fingers through her shoulder-length auburn hair, and flicked on the fan. Tired from the journey, and a month looking after a sick friend, she really needed a bath. She pulled open the wardrobe doors, stopped short, frowned. Her breath caught – none of Alec's clothes were there. Throwing on her loosely woven kimono, she ran barefoot to her daughters' room.

Someone had left their wardrobe open, and she saw, straight-away, that it was practically empty. Just a few pairs of roughly

folded shorts on the top shelf, and crumpled paper on the one beneath. Where were all of their clothes?

What if, she thought, but the sentence died in her throat. She steadied her breathing. That's what they want: the men in the jungle. To frighten us. She imagined what Alec would say: *Hold your head up. Don't let them win.* But what can you expect to feel, when they throw a grenade into a marketplace packed with people?

She spun round at the sound of a cry, and ran to the window. Her shoulders slumped. Just the flying foxes hanging in the tree.

With one hand on her heart, she slid her fingers under the crumpled lining paper in the wardrobe and pulled out one of Em's notebooks, hoping for a clue. She sat on the camphor wood chest, sniffed the comforting familiar smell, and clasped the notebook to her. She took a deep breath, then opened the notebook to read:

The matriarch is a fat lady with a flabby neck. Her name is Harriet Parrott. She has raisin eyes and a shiny buttery nose which she tries to hide with powder. She slides on little feet in Chinese slippers, but wears long skirts, so you can only just see them at the edges.

Harriet. Had they gone to Harriet?

She stopped abruptly, grasped the edge of the chest, reeling from a rush of heat and the panic that was rising in her. Too much was missing. A note. Of course. He must have left a note. Or a message with the servants.

She ran downstairs two at a time, missing her footing, diving into the downstairs rooms: living rooms, kitchen, scullery, the covered corridor to the servants' day quarters, and the storehouses. Just a couple of abandoned crates remained, everywhere was dark and empty, the servants gone. No amah's rocking chair, no cook's day bed, all the gardener's tools removed. She scanned the room – no note.

She listened to the rain and, biting a fingernail, racked her

brain, hardly able to think for air so heavy it weighed her down. She pictured her journey back home, hours squashed against the jammed train window, a hand cupped over her nose. The pungent odour of vomit from a sickly Indian boy. The distant gunfire.

She doubled over, winded by their absence. Fought for breath. This couldn't be. She was tired. She wasn't thinking straight. There had to be a rational explanation. There had to be. Alec would have found a way to tell her if they'd had to leave. Wouldn't he?

She swivelled round and called their names, '*Emma, Fleur.*' She choked back a sob and pictured Fleur's dimpled chin, blue eyes, fair hair parted with a bow. Then, recalling the jungle mists that concealed desperate men, her worst fear overtook any remaining chance of rational hope. Sweat crawled under her kimono, her eyes began to smart and she covered her mouth with her palm.

With trembling hands she picked up the phone to dial Alec's boss. He'd know what had happened. He'd tell her what to do.

Then, she sat with the phone in her lap, sweat growing cold on her skin, flies humming overhead, the sound of the fan churning, click, click, click, and the flutter of a moth's wings beating the air. The line was dead.

In the taxi on our way to the port, I couldn't understand why Mum hadn't arrived home in time to come, even though Dad had said she would be back. On the last day at our house in Malacca, right up until the end, I'd hoped she would make it, kept rushing to the window to stare her home.

Dad was hopeless at domestic things, and as Mum wasn't there to organise the packing, I helped Amah do it. Fleur was only eight and would just get in the way.

First, I picked out the pink gingham party dress Mum made for me, and slipped it into the trunk. With a full skirt and little puffy sleeves, it was the only dress I loved. I had cried when I grew too big for it and Fleur got to wear it.

Dad came into our bedroom. 'You won't need party dresses,' he said.

'Don't they have parties in England?'

He sighed. 'Leave your Malayan clothes, that's all I mean. And we do need to get a move on.'

'What's going to happen to the things we're leaving. Shall I put them back in the wardrobe?'

'No need. Amah will take care of them.'

'How long are we going for then?'

My father cleared his throat but didn't speak.

I handed the dress to our amah, Mei-Lien, who added it to the growing pile of unwanted stuff.

'What about our Coronation clothes?'

I held up Fleur's white dress, decorated with red and blue braid, far too small now.

He shook his head, but I slipped my prized Coronation edition

of *Dandy* behind my back. With a golden horse and six white horses printed on the cover, it was too good to leave.

‘Where’s Fleur?’

Amah pointed outside.

‘Cartwheeling, I suppose,’ Dad said. ‘You two can manage on your own, can’t you?’

I nodded.

He was about to go, but glanced across at my bed and paused. ‘What’s that you’ve got?’

‘I’ve written to Mummy.’ I picked up the envelope for him to see.

‘Oh,’ he said, with raised brows. ‘What about?’

‘Just how much I miss her, and that I’m looking forward to seeing her in England.’

‘Okay. Give it to me.’

‘I wanted to leave it on the hall table.’

He held out his hand. ‘No need. I’ll take care of it.’

‘I wanted to do it myself.’

‘Emma, I’ve said I’ll take care of it.’

I had no choice.

‘Good girl,’ he said, and turned to leave.

‘Daddy, before you go.’ I picked up Fleur’s rabbit. ‘What about this? Shall I pack it, or will Fleur want to have it in the cabin?’

‘For heaven’s sake,’ he said. ‘I haven’t time for minor details. Big changes are on their way, Emma, big changes.’

I frowned, not so sure. It seemed to me *big changes* had already happened. More than three weeks before. That’s when they started, as far as I could tell.

We’d been on our way home after a wedding. A rainy dark evening. At the party Mum had danced in a bright yellow dress, and high-heeled, crocodile-skin shoes. Mum is younger than Dad, and really beautiful, with lovely pale skin and hazel eyes. Dad didn’t dance because of his wartime injury. But it didn’t seem to stop him playing tennis. Once in the car, Mum rubbed her

forehead with the tips of her fingers, and I knew *he* was angry.

‘Slow down, Alec!’ my mother yelled. ‘I know you’re upset, but you’re going too fast. It’s wet. For heaven’s sake, look at the water.’

I peeked out of the window. We were in the foothills and the road was swimming with water.

From behind I saw the veins stand out in his neck, and I noticed one of Mum’s lizard earrings drop as she reached across to grab the wheel. I tried to tell her, but the car whizzed off to the other side of the road. With his foot still on the accelerator, Dad tried to twist us back over to the right side of the road, but he raced forward round a bend, and had to slam on the brakes.

The car went over the edge with a loud bang, and wedged half-way into a storm ditch, beside a big clump of bamboo.

Mother’s voice cracked. ‘For Christ’s sake, Alec. You’re off your goddamn rocker. Look what you’ve bloody well done now.’

I knew we were in trouble because Mum didn’t swear, except when she thought we couldn’t hear, though I’d heard her swear when they’d both had too much to drink. I’d roll the sounds out, say them under my breath, daring to get a little bit louder each time and finding words to rhyme.

I heard Mum plead with my dad.

‘Don’t leave us here. What if there’s a road block?’ She sounded scared, but it didn’t stop Father.

‘Here. Use that if you need to,’ he said, and threw a pistol on the driver’s seat. ‘Emma. Look after Fleur.’

As soon as he left to get help, the jungle crept closer, with leaves the size of frying pans, and in the branches, eyes that blinked at you. Mum turned round and stopped sobbing, as if she’d suddenly remembered us sitting there, with our bare legs sticking to hot leather seats. ‘Emma, Fleur. Are you okay?’

‘Yes, Mummy,’ we both said, Fleur’s voice more tearful than mine.

‘It’s all right, darlings. Daddy’s just gone to get help.’ Her eyes flicked over us. She was trying to make it sound all right, but I

suspected it wasn't. I knew about terrorists in the jungle. They'd tie you to a tree, and chop off your head as soon as they clapped eyes on you. Then put it up on a pole. I squeezed my eyes shut, terrified of seeing a head grinning at me.

Mum started humming.

Soon it would be completely dark and the stars would come out, then it'd be better. Though on the subject of terror, Mother didn't know that I'd seen even worse at the waxwork museum. Just past the shrunken heads, there was a *Children Prohibited* section. I didn't stay. Only long enough to see tiny waxwork models of white women and children, pinned to the ground, still alive, their painted red mouths wide open in a scream. Coming towards them, driven by a Jap, was an enormous steamroller, normally used to flatten tarmac roads. Only this time it was being used to flatten those people. When I got outside I was sick in a rubbish bin.

Japs were bad. Our parents said so. Though the people in the jungle now, the ones they called terrorists, they were Chinese. I didn't understand. Our amah, Mei-Lien, was Chinese and I loved her. Why was it that Japs were bad before, but now Chinese people, though only some? It didn't make sense.

Our car was stuck well off the main road and almost where the bandits were. But even deeper in the jungle lived the spirits who ate children. Our gardener, whose mouth was red from chewing betel nut, told us.

'If you ever get lost in the jungle, watch out for the *hantu hantuan*,' he said. He narrowed his eyes in a scary way, but it was confusing because he never told us what they looked like.

'Emma, can you move your arms and legs?' Mum asked.

I wriggled them to show I could.

'Fleur?'

Fleur tried and could move her arms and her left leg; but when she moved the other, she cried out.

'It's probably bruised. Get her shoe off before it swells, Emma.'

I did it, though Fleur struggled. 'I don't like it. Where's Daddy?'

I told her she had to keep quiet and that Daddy had gone to get help. She sniffed a bit, made a few moany noises, and then stayed still.

It was evening time, but in the distance the sound of an explosion broke up the quiet.

‘Mummy!’ we both yelled.

‘Shhh! It’s nowhere near us.’

The sky started to turn brown, and white mist slid down from the mountaintop. But at least we weren’t properly in the hills. Because ‘*Ada bukit, ada paya*’ – where there are hills there are swamps. And they would swallow you whole.

Eventually Dad came back with an armoured truck that had been on its way back to Malacca. We had to get out while the soldiers pulled the car out of the storm ditch, and by the time we went to bed, it was much later than we’d ever been to bed before.

The next day, Mum didn’t pick us up from school. Dad did. With an *I’m not in the mood for questions* face, he ignored us when we asked where Mummy was. Just said we were going away to England.

Back home, we rushed upstairs to see if Mum was there. She wasn’t. I smelt the lemongrass outside our bedroom window and thought of her big smile and wavy hair. She’d pin it up, with an orange bird of paradise flower, but by lunch it all came tumbling down. And she was always singing, even first thing.

‘Come on, Em,’ Fleur said. ‘She’s not here. Let’s play outside.’

I shook my head.

Fleur went out to cartwheel, her ankle fine. She always made a fuss.

I brushed my hair. It’s curlier than Mum’s, and redder. Feral hair, Mum calls it. Then I felt under my pillow for my notebook. But as well as my notebook, an envelope came out, addressed to Fleur and me. What a funny place to leave a letter, I thought, as I tore it open.

Darlings, I read.

Suzanne phoned today. I am so sorry, but I have to go to help her. She's been diagnosed with a dreadful illness and just isn't able to cope on her own. Her husband, Eric, ought to be back from Borneo in a couple of weeks, so I shouldn't be awfully much longer than that. Take care of yourselves. Be good. Daddy and Mei-Lien know what to do about school. You can go on the bus. I know how you always want to. If you need any help, get Amah to call Cicely or Harriet Parrott. Their addresses are in the red book.

All my love, Mummy

I put it back under my pillow, and went out to hide under the house.

It was our last day, and more than three weeks since Mum had gone. Just before we left to go to the ship, Amah was still folding useful clothes into our trunk. Trousers, underwear, a sweater or two. I didn't really care. My pink gingham party dress sat on the pile of unwanted stuff, and I sat on the bed, thinking of the Holy Infant College, my school. Next to a row of palm trees, it was painted white, and there were add-on rooms, with no glass in the windows. Just bamboo shutters that got closed up when we went home.

I felt sad. We wouldn't be going to school there any more, but my biggest sadness was it looked like we'd be gone before Mum came home. Because if that happened, she'd come back to an empty house. I was pleased that, at least, she'd have my letter.

Mei-Lien picked up my school tunic. 'You want keep?'

I looked at it and shook my head. 'No point.'

'Daddy say we finish pack now. No daydream. Go now.'

I took the tunic, folded it neatly, and put it on top of the pile. I put Mum's note in the trunk, then slipped in a framed photo of her, hazel eyes all crinkled up. Last of all, I put Fleur's pink rabbit

in. If she had it in the cabin with her, it might get lost, or even end up overboard.

Half an hour later, we drove off without Mum. A lorry had come to take the trunks, and the taxi was taking Dad, Fleur, and me. As we left Malacca, I looked out at the sea, and wound down the window to smell the wild orchids. They were nice, but my mind was full of questions, and I had to pinch my skin really hard to stop the tears.