

LOUISE BRINDLEY

Autumn Comes to Mrs Hazell & View from a Balcony



**AUTUMN COMES
TO MRS HAZELL
and
VIEW FROM A BALCONY**

Louise Brindley

Pan Books

Autumn Comes to Mrs Hazell/View from a Balcony



Autumn Comes to Mrs Hazell first published 2000 by Severn House

View From A Balcony first published 2000 by Severn House

This edition published 2001 by Pan Books
an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Ltd
25 Eccleston Place, London SW1W 9NF
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.macmillan.com

ISBN 0 330 48670 5

Copyright © Louise Brindley 2000, 2001

The right of Louise Brindley to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or
transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written
permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized
act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal
prosecution and civil claims for damages.

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out,
or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

AUTUMN COMES TO MRS HAZELL

Prologue

Spring, 1971

"You mean to say this man you're thinking of marrying doesn't believe in God?" Aunt Grace stared at her niece disbelievingly.

Lisa had been dreading this moment; breaking the news that she and John wouldn't be having a church wedding. "I'm sorry, darling, but you had to know sooner or later. At least he has the courage of his conviction."

"*Conviction?* To admit that he believes in – nothing? And you brought up Church of England! I can't help thinking how pretty you looked in your confirmation dress. You wore a white veil, white shoes and socks, and carried a posy of lilies-of-the-valley."

"I know, but that was a long time ago."

"What has time to do with it? Or are you telling me that you have also stopped believing in God?"

"Of course not. It's simply a matter of – compromise."

"On your part, not his! Why couldn't *he* have done the compromising?"

They were at breakfast together that Sunday morning, Lisa and her Aunt Grace, seated at a table overlooking the back garden, an old familiar ritual, soon to end.

"Eat your egg before it gets cold," Lisa suggested quietly, determined not to quarrel.

"I don't want my egg! I'm too upset! This man, this John Hazell. What do you know about him when all is said and done? You've scarcely known him five minutes. You've had a dozen or more men friends in the past. What's so special about this one?"

Smiling, gazing out of the window at a blue-tit pecking nuts from a wire-container, Lisa said dreamily, "He reads poetry to me."

"*Poetry!* Well, now I've heard everything! Poetry indeed!" The old lady sniffed her contempt. "And what about all the shirts and socks he'll want washed; the food he'll want cooking when he's not reading poetry? And what about the age difference between you?"

"Please, Aunt Grace. I've already explained – the age difference is really no problem."

"Not now, perhaps, but it will be, in time, just you wait and see!"

"Don't you want me to be happy?"

Aunt Grace looked shocked. "How can you ask such a thing? Your happiness means everything in the world to me. You couldn't mean more to me if you were my own child. All these years I've taken care of you – ever since your parents died . . ."

"Please, darling, don't say any more. I know you love me, and I'm sorry if I've made you unhappy. It's just that I've never been in love before."

"It's come as a shock, that's all. You might at least have become engaged first; given me time to get used to the idea of your leaving me." Tears blurred the old lady's eyes. "We've been together for such a long time. I thought we'd go on being together. You seemed so happy; so settled in your new job. Then suddenly, out of the blue, you tell me you're getting married; going away to live."

"Oh please, love, don't cry!" Pushing back her chair, Lisa placed a protective arm about her aunt's shoulders. "It all happened so quickly. When John told me he was leaving

Wheatford, and asked me to marry him, I couldn't bear the thought of losing him. I *had* to say yes. Please try to understand."

"Oh, I understand well enough, and I'd rejoice in your happiness if I thought he was right for you. Oh, he's good-looking, and clever, I'll grant him that, but there's something about him I can't cotton on to. He's – *cold*, Lisa. Cold and calculating; lacking a sense of humour."

"No, honestly, you're wrong. He's just shy, a little unsure of himself at rock bottom. That evening he came to supper, he gave the wrong impression; sent out all the wrong signals, and he knew it. Come on, Aunt Grace, admit it! You had made up your mind beforehand not to like him, to find fault with him whatever he said or did. I'm right, aren't I?"

"I'd have disliked him even more had I known at the time he didn't believe in God," Aunt Grace said sharply. "But never mind that, and stop trying to strangle me! You know I can't bear being fussed!" Miss Grace French had a mind of her own, and a will to match. "Just tell me, where do you and your agnostic poet intend to live when you're married? Cloud Cuckoo Land?"

"Of course. Where else?" Laughter bubbled up in Lisa as she began clearing away the breakfast things. "John's found a cottage to rent not far from the school – at least, not far enough away from it to cause problems in the bad weather – just far enough away to ensure our privacy. It sounds idyllic. He described it in his last letter as being a fairy-tale cottage: long, low and rambling, with diamond-paned windows, ivied walls, and apple trees on the front lawn."

"In other words, Cloud Cuckoo Land!" Aunt Grace smiled wistfully. Rising stiffly to her feet, she said, "Well, Lisa, since there is obviously nothing I can say or do to make you see sense, I wish you all the luck in the world." She added ascerbically, "And believe me, you'll need it!"

Lisa said happily, piling the pots into the sink, "Trust you, Aunt Grace, to add the sting in the tail!"

"Ah well, my girl, I may be old, but I'm not daft. Far from. I know when it's time to stop beating my head against a stone wall."

Turning eagerly, "So you will come to my wedding?" Lisa asked.

"In lieu of the Lord and Creator of Mankind, you mean, in a register office, as a representative of the Church of England? No, Lisa, I'm sorry. All I can do is wish you luck, not give you a blessing! I'm a churchgoer, not a hypocrite! And that's where I'm going now: to church. I take it you'd rather not come with me?"

"No, Aunt, I'm sorry. I'd rather stay here; wash up the breakfast pots; prepare the lunch. Believe me, Aunt Grace, I really am desperately sorry," Lisa said quietly. "The last thing I want is to leave you. I love you so much, so very much, but what else can I do? This is my last chance of a home, a husband, possibly even a child to call my own. If our roles were reversed, what would *you* do, Aunt Grace? What would *you* do?"

"Why, the same as you, I imagine," the old woman admitted. "I'd follow my heart all the way home, as I did with you when you were just a small bewildered child in need of love and understanding after the death of your parents. Marriage is different, I know, but love remains the strongest force known to the human race, and if you really love John Hazell, who am I to stand in the way of your happiness?"

When the old lady had gone upstairs to get ready for church, her hands deep in washing-up water, Lisa thought about John Hazell, and the poem he had read to her the night he had asked her to marry him:

'A snake came to my water trough.
And I, in pyjamas for the heat,
To drink there'.

Afterwards, holding her, fondling her hair, he said, "You

mean that you're still a virgin, Lisa? That you have never had sex?"

"No, never," she answered, smiling, smoothing his cheek with her hand.

"Why not? Why haven't you?"

"Difficult to explain. Let's just say that I never felt inclined to give my body without the rest of me – my heart, mind and spirit."

"You're a strange mixture, Lisa. Young, old, foolish, wise . . ."

"Too old?" She had a sudden, odd premonition.

"Not for me. Heaven preserve me from my own generation."

"Heaven? But you don't believe in – heaven. And ten years, that's a big difference, John. Really a huge gap!"

"In which case, don't marry me! Let go of me now before it's too late."

"It's already too late so far as I'm concerned."

"So you will marry me, Lisa?"

"If you really want me."

"*Want* you? Oh, my darling, I want you and need you more than I have ever wanted or needed anyone in my life before."

"In which case, my love, I'm yours entirely from now on! Oh, Johnny, my darling Johnny, with all my heart and soul, I adore you!"

'And I have something to expiate –
A pettiness . . .'

Chapter One

Autumn, 1981

She hated having to wear glasses. Without them, she could not see properly to apply her mascara and eyebrow pencil. Eyeliner, she considered to be far too *outrée* for a plain everyday person such as herself. No way did she wish to resemble the Serpent of the Nile, or Theda Bara – the vamp of those 1920's silent movies seen occasionally on TV. Worse still, holding her glasses away from her face to gain a magnifying effect, she saw, with horror, the tiny lines round her eyes running together like tram-tracks to a terminus. What one might call a no-win situation.

And yet, if only she might have a little time to herself, thought Mrs Hazell, if she were free to run along the beach at early morning, as she had once done in the springtime of her life, the seagulls flying overhead, and the shining rock-pools at her feet, the tiny crabs, starfish, and the waving sea-anemones might suddenly, miraculously swim into focus without the aid of glasses.

Strange how she longed to be alone near the sea, when she was so often alone on the beach. But never in the way she envisaged, uplifted by a magical feeling of youth. Not now, not ever again. 'Youth's a stuff will not endure', as Shakespeare had it, and he was right. Youth melted away like mist on a summer morning, beyond recall.

Besides, staid middle-aged women who paid the earth to have their hair permed, set and lacquered, and wore headscarves to ensure that the perm didn't turn frizzy, did not seem to belong to the seashore. Not like girls in blue demins, lithe and lovely, their hair streaming back from their faces in the salt air, letting the sea wash over their feet.

Moreover, Mrs Hazell wasn't free any more, inasmuch as she had a job of work to do; money to earn – and she was expendable. Her boss, Mrs Fogarty, had made that abundantly clear to her.

Constantly came that carping voice of her employer, reminding everyone within earshot that members of staff who did not pull their weight at The Bay View Residential Hotel, faced instant dismissal.

"Mrs Hazell! Mrs Hazell!" There was Mrs Fogarty now, calling to her down the basement stairs.

In the hinterland between sleeping and waking, Lisa felt disorientated, uncertain of the time. How long had she been in her room? Not more than an hour. Surely not more than an hour? And this was her afternoon off.

Putting on her shoes, she struggled up from the armchair near the ancient gas-fire, smoothed her hair and went up to the kitchen.

Mrs Fogarty was there, thin-lipped, with shoulders like wire coathangers, peering into the bread bin.

"I want you to go to the shops for me," she said without preamble. "Fetch two large whites and two browns, and hurry! You know how quickly they sell out on a Saturday. And if the bakery *has* sold out, try the supermarket! Well, don't just *stand* there! *Hurry!*"

"Yes, Mrs Fogarty." No use reminding her employer that this was her afternoon off. Jobs were hard to come by, and Mrs Hazell desperately needed a roof over her head.

Unhooking two linen shopping bags from the store-room door, Lisa set off for the shops, leaving Bay View by the

basement door leading to the back gate set in a high red brick wall of Victorian vintage.

On the garden path, she paused suddenly to sniff the air – scenting that first, unmistakable tang of autumn in the rising smoke from a smouldering bonfire near the kitchen garden, where the ancient gardener was burning the summertime detritus of runner-bean stalks, spring-cabbage leaves, and the wizened fronds of the sweet-peas which, for a brief moment in time, had run riot in the other part of the garden, scenting the air with their fragrance.

Strange, this ability of hers to scent the seasons as they came and went, Lisa thought, remembering how, often, on cold winter mornings long ago, she had sensed the coming of spring, at the cottage, long before the daffodil buds appeared. It was to do with a subtle change in the atmosphere: a thread of birdsong from the tree-tops; a certain knowledge that, despite the winds and rains of winter, spring was here at last.

The cottage. Mrs Hazell's aching need of home, of belonging, tugged at her heartstrings as she hurried towards the busy shopping thoroughfare to buy bread for The Bay View Hotel.

This was just a small seaside resort, described in the travel guide as 'ideal for family holidays', which was the reason Lisa had come here after the death of her Aunt Grace – for the quiet charm of the place and its memories of childhood.

There were still visitors about, enjoying the warmth of early September. Soon they would all be gone, and the sea would wash away the last of the children's joyously-erected sandcastles.

Entering the bakery, she stood in the queue, wondering what she should do if left with the choice of bread rolls or butter-lumps when she reached the counter. The girl told Lisa she was lucky. Orders were supposed to be picked up by four o'clock at the latest on Saturdays. She could let

her have one large white, two browns and a French baton someone hadn't bothered to collect.

Gratefully, Lisa packed the bread into the shopping bags, and paid the assistant from her own purse, not thinking to ask for a receipt. Not thinking clearly at all because of her headache – a dull, throbbing pain at her temples.

Coming out of the bakery, standing near the pelican crossing, looking across the road, suddenly she saw John. There was no mistaking his walk, the way his hair fell across his forehead. How typical of her ex-husband that he should be leaving a newsagents.

Newspaper bills had been astronomical at the cottage. There had been papers everywhere: what she thought of as 'the heavies' strewn over chairs on wet Sunday afternoons; piles of papers to put out every week for the refuse collectors.

She watched him fold the newspaper he had just bought: saw him cross the pavement towards a dark-haired woman holding the handle of a push-chair in which lolled an equally dark-haired child. John's new wife wore navy slacks and a red cardigan. Her free hand held the child's bucket and spade. Her face was sharp and pointed, like a pixie's.

"Oh Christ," Lisa said aloud, as John and his family moved away together, heading for the beach. Her legs began to shake, tears to trickle down her face. She had come to terms with Linda's existence in John's life. The child was a different matter entirely. The child they had created together.

A man came up to her. "Excuse me. I couldn't help noticing. Are you feeling unwell?" he asked. "Do you need help?"

"No. I – I'm fine. Really."

The pain that engulfed her was worse than any she had known before. Oh, not physical pain, not of the kind she had endured when the gynaecologist had carried out his

initial internal examination to discover why she had not conceived. She could bear physical pain, but mental anguish was far worse.

"Excuse me." The man was at her side once more, persistent this time. "I can see you're not well. There's a café across the road. A cup of tea might help."

Clasping her firmly by the elbow, picking up the shopping bags which had fallen, unnoticed, to the pavement, he steered her across the road as the captain of a ship might steer a crippled vessel into harbour.

Any port in a storm, she thought inconsequentially as he led her to a table near the window, ordered tea for two, and offered her a cigarette.

"No, I don't, thanks."

"Mind if I do?"

"No. Why on earth should I?" She wondered if he was beginning to regret his rashness in hauling a strange woman into a tea-shop: involving himself in a situation which he could neither solve nor remedy.

"My name is Edward Miller," he said. "I hope the tea's all right. My wife says I never give it time to brew properly."

"It really doesn't matter one way or the other."

"Sugar?"

"No." My God, she thought, John is out there, and I am sitting here drinking tea with a complete stranger.

"My wife says I should use sweeteners," he said. "She thinks too much sugar is bad for me. Personally, I hate the damned things. They leave such a bitter taste on the tongue, don't you think?"

She didn't answer; simply wished that he would go away and stop bothering her.

"Feeling better now?" He had a pleasant, unspectacular face: brown hair, thinning slightly, greying at the temples; good teeth, a warm smile.

Lisa nodded. The urge to rush out of the café was

subsiding. Aunt Grace had been right, she thought, in saying that the marriage wouldn't work out. But never once, when she knew about the divorce, had she said, "I told you so."

"You're looking better at any rate," the man said.

One good thing about glasses, Lisa thought, wiping them on her pocket handkerchief: they saved the embarrassment of tears rolling down one's chin. They simply lodged on the lower rims.

Lighting another cigarette, he said apologetically, "My wife says I smoke too much."

"She's probably right." She glanced across at him. What a miserable life he must lead, she considered. The poor devil must feel guilty every time he opens a cigarette packet or puts sugar in his tea.

"I must go now," she said. "Sorry for causing you so much trouble. You have been very kind. Really, most kind . . ."

"No, please don't go just yet. There's another cup of tea in the pot."

"You don't understand. I must get back with the bread. Mrs Fogarty will be waiting for it."

"Mrs Fogarty? A friend of yours?"

"Hardly. I happen to work for her."

"Oh? Fond of bread, is she?"

Lisa smiled. "You know what they say - 'Six loaves a day keeps the doctor away'."

The man returned her smile. "You have a good sense of humour."

"A warped sense of humour," she replied bitterly.

"Who told you that?"

"Someone. I forget who."

"What does this Mrs Fogarty do exactly?"

"She owns The Bay View Residential Hotel. Like The Windmill, we never close."

"Closed. Past tense," he said.

"Are you a - schoolmaster?"

He laughed. "Good God no! Why do you ask?"

"Your preoccupation with tenses, I suppose."

"Oh, that. I'm sorry." His laughter dried up at source. "I didn't mean to offend you. It's just that my wife, Pamela, has a thing about correctness of speech, and - well they do say that if you live with someone long enough you grow to be like them. How odd, I'd never really thought about it before."

"It's true," she said. "Live with someone long enough and their outlook on life become one's own. Their guilt, your guilt! I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"I'm rather glad you did." He paused reflectively to stub out his cigarette.

John and his wife would be on the beach now, Lisa thought. Their child, released from his push-chair, would be standing on unsteady legs, experimentally hitting the sand with his spade, needing attention; sitting down abruptly, puckering up his face and beginning to cry because he was tired and hungry . . .

"So you take in visitors all the year round?" the man asked.

"Not visitors, exactly. We let rooms to elderly people on a permanent basis."

"That can't be very exciting."

"It isn't, believe me."

She imagined John picking up his son, drying his tears. "I really must go now," she said abruptly, getting up from the table.

The man paid the bill, lifted her shopping bags and carried them to the pavement. "My car's parked just round the corner," he said, "I'll give you a lift home if you like, Mrs . . ."

"Hazell," she said, "Lisa Hazell. Thank you, but that won't be necessary. I can manage perfectly well on my own, Mr . . . ?"