

Margaret Drabble

A Summer Bird-Cage

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Penguin Books

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Margaret Drabble was born in Sheffield in 1939 and went to Mount School, York, a Quaker boarding school. She won a Major Scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, where she read English and received a double first. She won a travel award in 1966 from the Society of Authors and received the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1973. Margaret Drabble has three children.

She has written many novels: *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), *The Garrick Year* (1964), *The Millstone* (1965, filmed as *A Touch of Love* in 1969), *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), *The Waterfall* (1969), *The Needle's Eye* (1972), *The Realms of Gold* (1975), *The Ice Age* (1977) and *The Middle Ground* (1980), all of which have been published in Penguins.

She has also published a short critical book on Wordsworth, a television play, and various articles, as well as *London Consequences* (1972, edited with B. S. Johnson), *Arnold Bennett, a biography* (1974), *The Genius of Thomas Hardy* (1976, edited), *For Queen and Country* (1978) and *A Writer's Britain* (1980).

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FOR CLIVE

'Tis just like a summer bird-cage in a garden:
the birds that are without despair to get
in, and the birds that are within despair and
are in a consumption for fear they shall never
get out.

John Webster

I The Crossing

I had to come home for my sister's wedding. Home is a house in Warwickshire, and where I was coming from was Paris. I was keen on Paris, but will refrain from launching into descriptions of the Seine. I would if I could, but I can't. I like the way things look, but can never remember them when I need to. So I'll leave Paris at that. I was leaving to go home to be a bridesmaid at the wedding of my sister Louise. And I didn't mind leaving, either: all the foreignness that seemed so enchanting when I first went in July had begun to drive me to distraction. Every time somebody pinched me on the Métro I felt like screaming, and as for things like the lavatory paper and the price of chocolate and the brisk, bare-kneed, smart little girls I used to take for English conversation – well, I felt I'd really had enough. I'd only been there for two months, but it seemed like far longer. So when the letter arrived from Louise asking me to go and bridesmaid, I heaved a sigh of relief and bought my ticket. Also, I felt that it was time I stopped wasting time. I don't know why I hate wasting time so much.

I hadn't really been doing anything in Paris. I had gone there immediately after coming down from Oxford with a lovely, shiny, useless new degree, in a *faute-de-mieux* middle-class way, to fill in time. To fill in time till what? What indeed? It was quite pleasant, teaching those birdy girls, but it wasn't serious enough for me. It didn't get me anywhere. So when Louise wrote, the thought of England rose before me, gloomy, cold, but definitely

serious. And as I wanted to be serious, I bought my ticket home, said goodbye to the girls and my landlady, and turned my thoughts to the Appointments Board, and National Insurance, and other such eminently serious subjects. I thought about them all the way to Calais, through the sandy flats, as I chewed a garlic-laden ham roll. I thought about jobs, and seriousness, and about what a girl can do with herself if over-educated and lacking a sense of vocation. Louise had one answer, of course. She was getting married. Moreover she was marrying a very wealthy and, in a minor way, celebrated man. It seemed to be one way of escaping the secretarial course-coffee bar degradation that had been creeping up on her ever since, two years ago, she too had left the esoteric masonic paradise of Oxford.

On the other hand I wouldn't have married Stephen Halifax had he been the last exit open to me. I didn't know why I disliked him so much: I wasn't even sure if what I felt was dislike. Perhaps it was partly fear. I was intimidated and inhibited by the fact that he was a novelist, with four novels to his credit, all of which had received rather flattering reviews. Success is always scaring, particularly to the ambitious. Also, I hated his books. They were horrible books, but good as well as horrible: if one hadn't known him one would have assumed that their author was sour, middle-aged and queer, whereas Stephen is sour, thirty, and married to my sister, whatever that may or may not mean. All four of them are full of social sneers and witty, thin-lipped observations. He never makes a joke. I dislike books without jokes. Even bad Victorian ones are better than nothing. I don't think Stephen likes jokes at all. The reviews say he is a social satirist, and talk about his delicate perception and keen wit, but for me they can keep them. He behaves like his books as well: when I talk to him, I always feel that I am badly dressed and have the wrong accent. I am sure

this is what he does think, but as he thinks the same about everyone, his opinion is hardly objective. Nobody escapes. Everyone is either ridiculously rich, or ridiculously poor, or ridiculously mediocre, or ridiculously classy. He leaves no possibility of being in the right, unless he means to leave himself as a standard, which would be logical, as he is almost entirely negative. He looks grey. It must be his skin, because his hair is a normal shade of brown. He looks very inconspicuous and distinguished and grey.

I couldn't imagine why Louise was marrying him. I knew she had been seeing quite a lot of him since she left Oxford and went to live in a flat off the Fulham Road, but I had never thought it would come to this. I could see that he was quite a nice sort of person to have dinner with from time to time, as one would be able to have all the expensive things on the menu, but as for marrying – and as for Louise marrying. My sister, I should say, is an absolutely knock-out beauty. She really is. People are silent when she enters rooms, they stare at her on buses, they look round as she walks down the street. I don't know where she gets it from. My mother is quite pretty, but in a twittering, soft sort of way, and so am I, I suppose, whereas Louise has a real old aristocratic predatory grandeur. As tags go, she is *grande dame* where I am *jeune fille*, and she leads all her life to match it. She has a very pale skin and fabulous eyebrows and black hair and a tall, stiletto sort of figure and so forth. I thought to myself, as the train went past all the back views of houses that mean Calais, that perhaps Stephen was marrying her because she never looked ridiculous. At the worst he could call her aquiline and intense, but even that sounds quite impressive. Perhaps he wanted a wife to be a figurehead to his triumphal car, a public admiring ornament to his house. A hostess. But I couldn't see what there was in that for her; she was never a great one for playing second fiddle. On the contrary, she was inclined to be ruthless about getting what she

wanted. I supposed it was possible that she wanted Stephen. It occurred to me as the train began to slow down that perhaps she was in love with Stephen, and then it occurred a second afterwards that since this was such an obvious explanation it would certainly have occurred earlier if true. So I discounted the concept of love.

At least with regard to old Louise. Love. Love. I thought idly of Martin who had bidden me farewell on the Gare du Nord at seven-thirty that morning. It was nice of him to have got up. I had been sorry to leave him, and we had both clung a bit, but not significantly. I was glad, really, that there was a certain amount of wrench involved in leaving. It made the fact that I was going seem more of a decision and less of a drift. I thought how much less impossible it was that I should marry Martin or almost anyone than it was that Louise should marry Stephen Halifax. What a name. Stephen Halifax. At least I would find out at this wedding whether it was a pseudonym or not. Louise said it wasn't but it didn't sound at all real to me.

The train stopped. With a rush I felt terribly sad about French trains and notices saying *Ne te penche pas au Dehors* (is that what they do say? *TE*? Why not *vous*?): and as immediately forgot my sadness in the wave of fury that overwhelms me during the pushing, banging, queueing and waiting that accompanies getting off the train, through the Customs and on to the boat. I never get a porter, mainly because I hate being parted from my luggage, and so suffer all the irritation of battered legs, aching arms and hair in my eyes with no hand free to push it out of the way. I don't know why I punish myself so, but I always do. I'm a menace on holidays or journeys, I can't enjoy myself unless I do everything the hard way. Perhaps I do it on purpose, because the feeling of relief and spaciousness that succeeds sweaty exhaustion the minute one gets on the boat is wonderful and can only be savoured after undergoing the full initiation of effort. Nothing

enchants me as much as the channel crossing. I hope they never make a tunnel. I've been across ten times now and each time I have been entranced and absorbed by everything, the harbour, the people, the inaudible announcements, the smell, the ladies' rooms, the bars with cheap cigarettes which I regret not wanting, and delicious chocolate. I buy French chocolate going out and English coming back. There is something so solid and homely about Cadbury's Milk in sixpenny blocks, and sixpence seems so extraordinarily little to pay for a whole bar.

I bought two and sat with them on the deck; it was a marvellous day, sunny and windy with lots of white clouds whipping across the sky. People kept being sick, which cheered me as I never am and I like feeling tougher than others. I sat and let the wind blow my hair about and remembered my last crossing which had been after a month in Italy and an unspeakable overnight journey on a students' train from Milan: apart from being totally unable to sleep or even doze off, I had also frozen to death as I had no coat of any sort with me, only a large jersey and thin cotton jeans, which, as the train rolled through the icy Alps and equally icy Strasbourg, *etcetera*, had proved alarmingly inadequate. In the end I had abandoned my seat and gone to sit in the corridor, where, by the dim light of passing stations and all-night factories, I read Plato's *Republic* on which I was due to write an essay the following week. On the boat Simon, who is somewhat of a *bon viveur* in a youthful way, had insisted that he and Kay and I should have a proper meal in the restaurant, and we had finished the chianti we had bought just before leaving Milan, and afterwards we sat below the deck, warm and sleepy, amongst a party of Chinese immigrants coming from God-knows-where. It had been charming, but it was also charming to sit alone in the wind eating chocolate and making eyes at passing men.

Folkestone looked so delightfully ugly when we arrived,

all the solid-fronted hotels and terrace houses. Oh, I felt so cheerful until I got on the train. I hate trains. I slept all the way to London, and woke up with a headache and a grudge against the whole journey. Honestly, I said to myself as I lugged my case along Charing Cross Station and on to a bus to Paddington, honestly, Louise is so selfish to drag me all the way home to this foul ugly country where people never smile at you or pinch your bottom in passing, where it rains all year round and the buildings are the most hideous in the world. I was really gloomy when I arrived at Paddington, especially as I found I had just missed a train, so I rang up home to inform them of my arrival without very much enthusiasm. When the 'phone was eventually picked up I said, 'Hello, this is Sarah, who's that?' and a cool voice said 'Louise.' Nothing else, nothing about how nice to have you home, just 'Louise.'

'Good heavens,' I said. 'How are you?'

'Fine. And you?'

'Fine too.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm at Paddington. I'll arrive at New Street at eight-five.'

'All right. Shall I come out and meet you?'

That really shook me. 'Oh, there's no need for that,' I said. 'I'm sure Daddy will if you ask him.'

'No, no, I'll do it. I wouldn't mind getting out for an hour.'

There was almost a gleam of expression in that last sentence, so I ventured on a question. 'How are things at home?' I asked.

She heaved a great sigh that rattled down the receiver. 'Oh, bloody,' she said. 'You know, people all over, presents, the hotel demanding numbers, letters to write, and old Daphne poking her nose in. She even comes into my bedroom,' said Louise, in tones of such disdain that she

might have been talking about an earwig, not a first cousin.

'Never mind,' I said. 'You'll be out of it soon enough.'

'That's what I tell myself.'

'Is my dress there?'

'Oh yes.'

'I hope it fits.'

'It won't be my fault if it doesn't. I told you to come home earlier to have it fitted. And as for sending your measurements in centimetres, Miss McCabe was quite out of her depth.'

'There aren't any inches in Paris.'

'Oh well, never mind, you can't look worse than Daphne anyway, can you?'

'Oh, Louise.'

'Well, it's true.'

'Where are they all at the moment?'

'Having tea.'

'Oh, I see. Well, you'd better go and join them.'

'See you,' said Louise, and rang off. Not for her a diminuendo of 'Well, it's been nice hearing you, and you too, thank you for ringing, good-bye, good-bye, good-bye, 'bye then, see you, 'bye then,' off.

I went and bought myself an *Evening Standard* and got on the train, where I read it and *Tender is the Night* (beta minus) and watched the monotonous countryside enlivened only by the occasional ancient church-spire. I began to get gritty and sticky and confused in my mind, and to think petty niggling thoughts about bridesmaids' dresses and our ghastly cousin Daphne and why on earth Louise was getting married at home instead of in London. I mean to say, why have hundreds of guests and white veils and champagne in Warwickshire? There must have been some point of etiquette involved too subtle for me to understand: Louise is a great one for etiquette.

So, my mind thus nastily occupied, I arrived at New

Street, and stoically, irritably, heaved my cases down from the rack and carried them along the platform. I was just about to think 'Of course she isn't on time' when I caught sight of her, with her back to the train and platform, playing with one of those letter-punching machines. She seemed dozing and abstracted. The usual envy filled me as I took note of her beautifully pinned and coiled hair, the clear beige and neatness of her jersey, and the uncreased look of her linen trousers. I was wearing linen trousers too, but mine were of the baggy at the knee variety, and I suddenly felt shabby and travel-stained, reduced to a schoolgirl with twisted belt, mac down to ankles, and one plait undone. She always does that to me. Always. I put my cases down, pushed the hair out of my eyes, and said 'Hi, Loulou.'

She turned round and said, 'Oh, there you are.' Then she turned back to her machine and pushed the button. A metal tag came out. She looked at it and dropped it on the platform. I glanced down at it. It said LOUISE BENNETT
XXXXXXXXX.

'I wondered if I'd got the right train,' she said.

'You certainly had,' I said. 'It was a horrible train. Thank heaven that's over, I'm fed up with travelling.'

'Well, come on then,' she said. 'Let's get a porter.'

Unprotesting, I let her collect one, which she did with ease as all the available ones were gaping at her anyway. Then she ambled off like an heiress, and I shuffled behind like Cinderella or rather one of her ugly sisters after the pumpkin episode. Louise didn't say anything till we got to the car (I had to tip the porter with one of my last shillings); there, she switched on the engine, looked at herself in the driving mirror with that withdrawn narcissistic nonchalance she has, adjusted it, and said, 'Well, what was Paris like?'

I wished she could manage to sound just a little more interested.

'I don't know,' I said. 'Pretty marvellous really, I suppose.'

She drove off. She drives quite well, I think.

'I suppose you associated with all those beatniks,' she said, after another long pause.

'Beatniks come from America,' I said. 'It's existentialists in Paris.'

'Still?'

'Why not?'

'Oh, I don't know.'

'Anyway, I didn't. I spent most of the time with some rather smart silly girls I was teaching, and a man called Martin who was working in a bookshop.' I thought back to Martin, and became expansive: I told her about how we used to meet for breakfast in the bar under my bed-sitter, and how he spoke such wonderful French that everyone thought he was, though he just learned it at school like everyone else, and about the day we went to Versailles and our train got stuck in a siding. I amused myself by recounting it, even though I didn't much amuse her. She gave very little in exchange - a few odd remarks about cousins Daphne and Michael and Aunt Betty, my mother's sad widowed sister, and about wedding presents. Not a word about Stephen. After a while we lapsed into silence.

I looked out of the window. The country looked so different from the car: it looked unique and beautiful, not flat and deadly. Once one gets through the industrial landscape, which I think very impressive and dignified, the rusticity is enchanting. It was getting towards dusk, and the autumnal colours were deeper and heavier in the sinking light: the fields of corn were a dark brown and gold, dotted ecstatically with poppies. I was moved by their intermingling tones. The sky was purplish, with breaks of light coming somehow closer in front of a sombre, solid background of clouds that looked like

plush. Oh, it was beautiful, very much England and beautiful. Why aren't they enough, why won't they do, things like that, rainbows and cornfields.

I always enjoy arriving home however much I hate it when I get there. Hope certainly springs eternal in the human breast, and I think after every absence that my family will have improved, though it never does. A faint warm and cosy feeling overcame me as we drove up the drive and saw Mama, who had heard the car, standing at the doorway. She was so delighted to see me, so touched and excited by my arrival, that I caught her enthusiasm. She always liked me best. I despise myself at times for giving in to the bargain comfort of meals provided and beds made, but she sees nothing wrong in it all. She doesn't think it's weak to like being looked after, she thinks it's natural, she thinks I'm mad to prefer the dirt and weariness and loneliness that I am prepared to suffer in order to gain a sense of hope. It always takes me a day or two, though, to realize why there is no possibility in my home, and so I sat down that evening quite comfortably amid the faces and furniture of the drawing-room to eat my plate of cold chicken, and thought how pleasant and unobjectionable fitted carpets and curtains with pelmets and wall-lights like candles and chiming doorbells really are. I persuaded my father to open the bottle of liqueur I had brought for him, and we drank it with the coffee, and told anecdotes and listened to wedding problems and looked at wedding presents. I had brought them each something – the Cointreau for Papa, perfume for Mama and Aunt Betty and Daphne, five yellow-backed books for Louise and a tie for Michael, not chosen by me. He seemed to like it: it was the only thing I had had doubts about. Some of Louise's wedding presents were wonderful, blissful glass objects and hot-plates and silver. But she didn't seem very interested in them herself. She didn't seem concerned.