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The Dark Flood Rises

Written by Margaret Drabble

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The Dark Flood Rises

MARGARET DRABBLE



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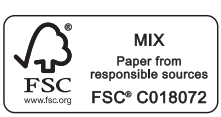
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To Bernardine Bishop
1939–2013

Piecemeal the body dies, and the timid soul
has her footing washed away, as the dark flood rises.

D. H. Lawrence, 'The Ship of Death'

THROUGH winter-time we call on spring,
And through the spring on summer call,
And when abounding hedges ring
Declare that winter's best of all;
And after that there's nothing good
Because the spring-time has not come –
Nor know that what disturbs our blood
Is but its longing for the tomb.

W. B. Yeats, 'The Wheel'

She has often suspected that her last words to herself and in this world will prove to be 'You bloody old fool' or, perhaps, depending on the mood of the day or the time of the night, 'you fucking idiot'. As the speeding car hits the tree, or the unserviced boiler explodes, or the smoke and flames fill the hallway, or the grip on the high guttering gives way, those will be her last words. She isn't to know for sure that it will be so, but she suspects it. In her latter years, she's become deeply interested in the phrase 'Call no man happy until he is dead'. Or no woman, come to that. '*Call no woman happy until she is dead*.' Fair enough, and the ancient world had known women as well as men who had met unfortunate ends: Clytemnestra, Dido, Hecuba, Antigone. Though of course Antigone, one must remember, had rejoiced to die young, and in a good (if to us pointless) cause, thereby avoiding all the inconveniences of old age.

Fran herself is already too old to die young, and too old to avoid bunions and arthritis, moles and blebs, weakening wrists, incipient but not yet treatable cataracts, and encroaching weariness. She can see that in time (and perhaps in not a very long time) all these annoyances will become so annoying that she will be willing to embark on one of those acts of reckless folly

that will bring the whole thing to a rapid, perhaps a sensational ending. But would the rapid ending cancel out and negate the intermittent happiness of the earlier years, the long struggle towards some kind of maturity, the modest successes, the hard work? What would the balance sheet look like, at the last reckoning?

It was the obituaries of Stella Hartleap that set her thoughts in this actuarial direction, as she drove along the M1 towards Birmingham, at only three or four miles above the speed limit.

The print obituaries had been annoying, piously annoying, in a sexist, ageist, hypocritical, mealy-mouthed manner, reeking of *Schadenfreude*. And just now, yet another mention of Stella on the car radio, in that regular Radio 4 obituary slot, has revived her irritations. She hadn't known Stella very well, having met her late in the day in Highgate through Hamish, but she'd known her long enough to recognise the claptrap and the bullshit. So, Stella had died of smoke inhalation, having set her bedclothes on fire while smoking in bed in her remote farmstead in the Black Mountains, and having just polished off a tumbler of Famous Grouse. So what? A better exit than dying in a hospital corridor in a wheelchair while waiting for another dose of poisonous chemotherapy, which had recently been her good friend Birgit's dismal fate. At least Stella had nobody to blame but herself, and although the last minutes couldn't have been pleasant, neither had Birgit's. Not at all pleasant, by all accounts, and without any complementary frisson of autonomy.

Birgit wouldn't have approved of Stella Hartleap's end. She might even have been censorious about it. She had been a judgmental woman. But that was neither here nor there. We don't have to agree with anyone, ever.

Her new-old friend Teresa, who is grievously ill, wouldn't be censorious, as she is never censorious about anyone.

I am the captain of my fate, I am the master of my soul. A Roman, by a Roman, valiantly vanquished.

There is a truck, too close behind her, she can see its great dead smeared glass underwater eyes looming at her in her driving mirror. In the old days, Hamish used to slam on his brakes in situations like this, as a warning. She'd always thought that was dangerous, but he'd never come to any harm. He hadn't died at the wheel. He'd died of something more insidious, less violent, more cruelly protracted.

She chooses the accelerator. It's safer than the brake. Her first husband Claude had believed in the use of the accelerator, and she was with him on that.

Francesca Stubbs is on her way to a conference on sheltered housing for the elderly, a subject pertinent to her train of thought, but not in itself heroic. Fran is something of an expert in the field, and is employed by a charitable trust which devotes generous research funds to examining and improving the living arrangements of the ageing. She's always been interested in all forms of social housing, and this new job suits her well. She's intrigued by the way more and more people in England opt to live alone, in the early twenty-first century. Students don't seem to mind cohabitation, even like it, and cohabitation is forced upon the ill and the elderly, but more and more of the able-bodied in their mid-life choose to live alone. This is making demands on the housing stock which successive governments are unable and possibly unwilling even to try to satisfy.

Fran is in favour of a land tax. That would shake things up a bit. But the English are extraordinarily tenacious of land. They hate to relinquish even a yard of it. The word 'freehold' has a powerful resonance.

No, there is nothing heroic about the housing stock and planning policy, subjects which currently occupy her working life, but old age itself is a theme for heroism. It calls upon courage.

Fran had from an unsuitably early age been attracted by the heroic death, the famous last words, the tragic farewell. Her parents had on their shelves a copy of Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, a book which, as a teenager, she would morbidly browse for hours. One of her favourite sections was 'Dying Sayings', with its fine mix of the pious, the complacent, the apocryphal, the bathetic and the defiant. Artists had fared well: Beethoven was alleged to have said 'I shall hear in heaven'; the erotic painter Etty had declared 'Wonderful! Wonderful this death!'; and Keats had died bravely, generously comforting his poor friend Severn.

Those about to be executed had clearly had time to prepare a fine last thought, and of these she favoured the romantic Walter Raleigh's, 'It matters little how the head lies, so the heart be right'. Harriet Martineau, who had suffered much as a child from religion, as Fran had later discovered, had stoically remarked, 'I see no reason why the existence of Harriet Martineau should be perpetuated', an admirably composed sentiment which had caught the child Fran's attention long before she knew who Harriet Martineau was. But most of all she had liked the parting words of Siward the Dane who had commanded his men: 'Lift me up that I may die standing, not lying down like a cow'. She didn't know why this appealed to her so strongly, as she was herself very unlikely to die on a battlefield. Maybe it meant she had Danish blood? Well, she probably had, of course, as many, perhaps most of us in England have. Or maybe she had liked the mention of the cow, which she heard as strangely affectionate, not as contemptuous.

She was much more likely to die on a motorway than on a battlefield.

The Vikings hadn't approved of dying quietly and comfortably in bed. Unlike her first husband Claude, who was currently making himself as comfortable as he could.

She has pulled away from the truck, and is now overtaking a dirty maroon family saloon with an annoying sticker about its 'Baby on Board'. There is an anonymous dirty white van just behind her now. It isn't raining, but it's dirty weather, and there's grimy February splatter and spray on her windscreen. There's worse weather on the way, the forecast warns, but it hasn't reached her yet. It's been a grim winter so far.

Why the hell is she driving, anyway? Why hadn't she taken the train? Because, like all those people who insist on living alone when they don't have to, she *likes* being on her own, in her own little space, not cooped up with invasively dressed strangers eating crisps and sandwiches and clutching polystyrene coffee and obesely overflowing their seat space and chattering on their mobiles. She is hurtling happily along to the car park of a Premier Inn on the outskirts of Birmingham, guided by her satnav, and looking forward to her evening meal. Some of the other delegates will be staying at the Premier Inn, and she is looking forward to seeing them. She'll be able to get away from them if she wants to and take herself off to her anonymous bedroom to watch some regional TV.

Fran loves regional TV. You find out a lot of odd things, watching regional TV up and down the land. She's glad she's still got the energy and the will to drive around England, looking at housing developments and care homes. She's a lucky woman, lucky in her work. Sometimes, in her more elevated moments, she thinks she is in love with England, with the length and breadth of England. England is now her last love. She wants to see it all before she dies. She won't be able to do that, but she'll do her best.

The charity that employs her doesn't cover Scotland and Wales.

She wouldn't mind dying on the road, driving around the country, though she wouldn't want to take any innocent people with her.

The dirty white van is far too close. The bad name of white van drivers is well deserved, in Fran's opinion.

There'd been another section in Brewer's, called 'Death from Strange Causes'. It wasn't as good as 'Dying Sayings', but it had its charms. Memorable recorded deaths, most of them occurring in antiquity, had involved the swallowing of goat-hairs, grape stones, guineas and toothpicks. According to Pliny, Aeschylus had been killed by a falling tortoise. Many have been killed by pigs. Some choke to death with laughter. Nobody, as far as she knows, has yet thought to keep the white van tally, which must be high.

She is looking forward to seeing her colleague Paul Scobey again. As she checks in at the Premier Inn reception desk, having parked in the allotted space in the subterranean metal car cage, there he is, sitting on an orange and purple couch in the foyer, nursing half a pint and watching a super-coloured soccer match on a giant overhead TV. He waves when she spots him, and she goes over to say hello, begging him not to interrupt his viewing. Paul is her friend and ally. He is far too young to share her first-hand empathetic familiarity with some of the needs of the elderly, but he has a pleasantly sardonic manner, a detachment that she finds enabling. He doesn't expect people to want what they ought to want. So many in the geriatric business can't understand the perversity of human beings, their attachments to or impatience with irrational aspects of their old homes and neighbourhoods, their sudden detestations of members of their family with whom they had rubbed along without protest for years, their refusal to admit that they were old and would soon be incapable. Paul seems unusually accepting of the changing vagaries of human need. He's in favour of community living and co-operative schemes, but he understands those who refuse to downsize and need at the end to die alone in a five-storey building, fixing the threat of a mansion tax with a cold eye.

Carrots and sticks, says Paul. If you want to get them out, you have to tempt them out.

Fran doesn't like that phrase, 'carrots and sticks'. Old people aren't donkeys. But he's got the right ideas.

He has a mother living stubbornly alone in the house where he had been born, in the low-rise Hagwood 1950s estate on the western edge of Smethwick. He speaks of her sometimes, but not very often. He talks more about the merits and failings of corporation and council housing than he speaks of his mother, but Fran knows that thoughts of his mother inform his thinking. And he also has an elderly and long-demented aunt, his mother's older sister Dorothy, living very near to where they are now. A visit to see her is on his two-day agenda, and Fran has agreed to accompany him, to see the small care home where she has lived for years. This was his neck of the woods, not Fran's, although he himself now lives down south in Colchester.

Paul pats the couch by him, suggests she sit, and she sits. The leathery fireproof hollow-fill foam of the couch sinks deeply under her modest weight. She'll have to struggle to get up.

Paul is a gingery fellow, sandy-haired and lashed, lightly freckled, strikingly pale-skinned, pleasantly featured in a snub-nosed boyish way, in his mid forties she supposes, a little younger than her son Christopher. Hazel eyes, not Viking blue. He had wanted to be an architect but the qualifications took too long, he'd needed to start earning, and he had settled for planning and housing. His views on aesthetics (not often requested) are surprising. He has a nostalgic private weakness for Modernism, but recognises that most old people in England detest Modernism (not that they get asked much about their preferences) and prefer a post-modern pseudo-cottage, bungalowesque, mini-Tesco mix. You can get all those features into a housing estate quite easily, as he knows from the avenues and crescents of Hagwood.

His expertise lies in adaptation. He really knows, or thinks he knows, how features of a dwelling space ought to be adapted to the ageing and disabled, to the increasingly ageing and increasingly disabled. He relies on Fran, who is well ahead of him on the road of ageing (though as yet far from disabled) to advise him and offer him her insights. He had been fascinated by her account of the woman who had died because she hadn't been able to open the bathroom door. There was nothing much wrong with her, apart from her loss of grip. She'd been unable to turn the doorknob, couldn't get out to the phone to dial 999 after a very minor stroke, and had passed away on her cold bathroom floor.

If she'd had a lever-type doorknob instead of an old-fashioned screw doorknob, she'd have been alive today. If she hadn't shut the door after herself (and what on earth was the point in doing that, as she lived alone?), she'd have been alive today.

Killed by a doorknob.

For the lack of a nail the battle was lost.

You have to be careful, when you're old.

And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.

Fran declines a beer. I'll see you down here at seven, she says. And up she goes to her room, to kick off her boots and lie on her bed and gaze at the rich daily life of the Black Country and the West Midlands. It's on the chilly side in her bedroom, there must be a thermostat somewhere, but she can't find it. Never mind, you can't die of hypothermia in a Premier Inn.

She likes her bedroom. She likes the whiteness of the pillows, and the rich loud purple of the Inn's informative boasts about its reliable facilities and its notable breakfasts. It's very purple, the Premier Inn branding.



There are several items of soothingly mild interest on the regional news – a promotional chat by some staunchly upbeat florists about a Valentine's Day event, an interview with a volunteer at a food bank, a report of a non-fatal knifing at a bus stop in Bilston, and, most unexpectedly, an item about a small earthquake which had hit Dudley and its neighbourhood at dawn that day. It had caused little consternation and most people had not even noticed it, although one or two said their breakfast crockery had rattled or a standard lamp had fallen over. Cats and dogs and budgerigars hadn't liked it, and had wisely seen it coming, or so their owners said. This was routine stuff, but Fran's attention is caught by a lively account by an unlikely young woman who claims that she had been rocked on her moored narrow boat by a not-so-small and inexplicable wave. 'It wasn't a *tsunami*,' says this spirited red-cheeked person, posing picturesquely and entirely unselfconsciously in a purple woolly hat, a padded red jacket and cowboy boots on the wharf just along the canal from the Open Air Museum, 'but it was definitely a *wave*, and *I* thought it was coming out of the limestone caverns, I thought the quarry sides had given way, or the mining tunnels had collapsed, or maybe a great river beast was making its way out of there, been there for millennia waiting just for me!'

Fran likes this person very much, she admires her relish and her imagination and her Wolverhampton accent, and she admires the interviewer and the cameraman for realising how eccentrically photogenic she is. 'To tell you the truth,' says this robust young person, 'I'm always hoping something really really terrible is about to happen, like the end of the world, you know what I mean? And that I'll be right there? You know what I mean?' And she smiles, gaily, and then pronounces, 'But it was only a very small earthquake, they say it was very low on the Richter scale, so it's not the end of Dudley after all! I'm not

saying I *wanted* a bigger one, but it would have been interesting. You know what I mean?'

Fran does know exactly what she means. She too has often thought it would be fun to be in at the end, and no blame attached. One wouldn't want to be *responsible* for the end, but one might like to be there and know it was all over, the whole bang stupid pointless unnecessarily painful experiment. An asteroid could do it, or an earthquake, or any other impartial inhuman violent act of the earth or the universe. She can't understand the human race's desire to perpetuate itself, to go on living at all costs. She has never been able to understand it. Her incomprehension isn't just a sour-grapes side effect of ageing. She is pleased to see that this healthy and happy young person shares some of her metaphysical defiance. It is an exoneration.

One wouldn't mind dying of a cataclysm, but one doesn't want to die young by mistake, or possibly by human error, as her son's latest partner had recently done. Untimely death is intermittently on Fran's mind, alongside housing for the refusing-to-die elderly and her more-or-less-bedridden ex-husband's dinners. Christopher's glamorous new love Sara had died aged thirty-eight of a rare medical event and Christopher believes that the doctors had done her in. Fran is not to know if this is true or not, as she has never heard of the rare condition that had killed Sara, but she feels that Christopher's current mindset of blame is doing him no good. Maybe he needs it to get by. It is not much comfort to reflect that, like Antigone, Sara has escaped getting old by dying young, and she has not offered this palliative reflection to Christopher. It does not seem appropriate. She had not disliked Sara, but could not disguise from herself the knowledge that it is Christopher she grieves for, not Sara.

So it is, with degrees of kinship and of mourning. If her son

Christopher, bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh, had died, that would have been another matter.

She had not been confident that Christopher and Sara had a long future together, but had not expected it to be quite so brief. Their mutual past had also been brief. They hadn't been together for long.

Fran doesn't meddle with her children's lives, but she'd liked what she'd seen of Sara. Though she suspects that in Christopher's life Sara had embodied something of what we now call a mid-life crisis. Mid-life crises, in Fran's ageing view, are a luxury compared with what she has seen of end-of-life crises. But Sara hadn't even had time for a mid-life crisis.

Sara had been taken ill very suddenly in a very large bed in a large luxury hotel on the Costa Teguise on the island of Lanzarote. Christopher had been in bed with her and had witnessed the crisis and been landed with the consequences. She had been rushed to hospital in Arrecife, then flown back to a private hospital in South Kensington, where she had died twenty-four hours later, having been given, according to Christopher, the wrong medication. If she had stayed in Lanzarote, where he was told the medical services were first class, he believed she would not have died. The wrong decision had been made in repatriating her. He had not trusted the good advice offered by the islanders.

Sara and Christopher had not been on holiday in the Canaries, as most visitors to those tourist islands are. They had been working, but who would believe that? Well, all those who knew the serious-minded and ambitious Sara would have known it, but it was true that Christopher had been there on a semi-freebie, as a freeloading partner, while Sara was engaged with her team in research for a documentary film about illegal immigration from North Africa. And, more or less fortuitously and it had at the time seemed fortunately, she had hoped to record an

interview about the political goals of a woman from the Western Sahara who happened to be on hunger strike on the polished tiles of the departure lounge of Arrecife airport when they arrived. She was a surprising sight, holding court in the departure lounge, and was a gift to a film-maker. Or so Christopher had told his mother.

Christopher had been keeping Sara company, being himself temporarily unemployed, and his presence in that bed that night during her attack had been for her a blessing, in its way. It would have been worse for her had she been alone. But on paper his role could not look heroic.

Fran knows that Christopher is shortly to return to the Canaries, to find out what has happened to the Western Saharan contingent, to tie up loose ends, to sort out questions of medical insurance, to see some of the ex-pats who, he said, had gone out of their way to help in the crisis. She gathers that there was one elderly couple who, in the emergency, had been more than kind. Theirs was the advice he should have followed and did not.

Fran had not at first been able to follow the politics of Christopher's confusing account of the Sahrawi woman's airport protest, which she was holding against the allegedly brutal Moroccan domination of a largely unrecognised North African state which called itself the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Fran had never heard of this state, and finds it hard to retain its name, but it does indeed exist. She has looked it up. It is a cause of little interest to the British or, initially, to Fran, but after Sara's death, out of respect to Sara and Christopher, Fran has tried to get to grips with its unrecognised existence. It is a story of nationalism and political activism, and the heroine of it is a Sahrawi woman called Ghalia Namarome who is fighting for the independence of her homeland. Christopher's film-maker partner Sara, who specialised in human rights documentaries

for an independent company called Falling Water, had been taken by the manner in which Namarome had materialised at the airport before her very eyes.

Fran's son Christopher, when he is in work, is, more frivolously, a television arts presenter, known for his colourful clothing and his idiosyncratic manner, which had, of late, gone a bit too far.

How Namarome had landed up in Lanzarote airport was a convoluted tale, involving the confiscation of her passport and her deportation from the airport of her home town of Laayoune. On arriving at Laayoune on her return from the US, where she had been presented with some kind of peace prize, she had refused to tick the citizenship box that said 'Morocco'. She identified herself as Sahrawi and Western Saharan and would not acknowledge the Moroccan label. So she sat there in limbo, in the Spanish Canary Islands, in a modern holiday airport in no man's land, this stylish protesting woman in her large dark glasses, with her shimmering headscarves and robes of turquoise and pink and gold, amidst the red-faced sunburnt British and German and Scandinavian tourists in khaki shorts and cotton dresses, queuing as they waited to check in for their flights home. She sat there, on a mosaic of patterned oriental carpets, of less than magic carpets, refusing to budge and accepting no sustenance but sweetened water.

Namarome was the same age as Sara. Sara, although British-born, was of émigré Egyptian descent and spoke Arabic. Sara had been struck by the would-be martyr and her passive resistance. They had, Christopher told his mother, conversed, and Sara had managed to film a brief interview. They had spoken of the Oasis of Memory, the Wall of Shame. Apparently, Fran had learnt from Christopher, there is a great dividing wall of sand and berm and brick built across North Africa, rather like the barrier wall that separates Israel from the West Bank

but much much longer. Few in the West know or care about it.

It is ironic that Sara, who had seemed to be in such good health, was now dead of a rare tumour of the nervous system, whereas Namarome was courting a public death by hunger strike. No, 'ironic' is too light a word for the contrast.

Fran is not at all sure how Christopher's relationship with Sara had been faring before this abrupt end. He'd been with her, on and off, and a little tempestuously, for a couple of years: his first lengthy and publicly admitted affair since he and his long-term wife Ella had split up. But something in his most recent communications, both before and now after her death, had suggested they were already drifting apart.

Christopher doesn't talk to Fran all that much about his emotional life, but he drops hints, makes black jokes. She'd sensed he wasn't very happy before Sara's death, but he must surely be even more unhappy now.

The melodrama of the present situation is unpleasing, distressing. Sudden death and a hunger strike. Fran is more at home with the real low-key daily world of sheltered housing, and yet she cannot deny that she had also been morbidly attracted by the aspect of public martyrdom attached to the Western Sahara case. Was Namarome preparing, had she perhaps already uttered her last words to the press? Would they rival those of Walter Raleigh, of Danton?

She's worried about Christopher, she's upset about Christopher, but she's not sure how deep her sorrow goes. She keeps forgetting about it. She can't tell whether that's good or bad, natural or unnatural.

Some believe that our emotions thin out as we grow old, that we are pared back to the thin dry horn, the cuttlebone of selfishness. That is one well-recognised theory of ageing. Fran often wonders if this will happen to her, if it is already happening

without her marking it. It seems to have happened to Christopher's father Claude, Claude, her first husband, but that for him is excusable, in his present slowly deteriorating physical condition. Claude has retreated into comfort and laziness and selfishness. Into the search for comfort, which he cannot always find, though he does better than most of his age. He's lucky not to be in pain. He knows he's lucky.

Claude does not seem to have fully grasped what has happened to Christopher, and he never really took in the colourful but distanced existence of Sara.

Cuttlebone isn't a good metaphor for Claude as he is now quite plump, but that's partly the steroids.

Occasionally Fran exercises herself by trying to recall the passionate and ridiculous emotions of her youth and her middle age, the expense of spirit in a waste of shame. Or in a waste of embarrassment, or of envy, or of anxiety, or of wounded vanity. The attempt to cheat in the sack race, the red bloodstain on the back of the skirt, the fart on the podium, the misunderstanding about the ten-pound note, the arriving too early at the airport, the mistake over the visa, the table where there was no place name for her, the overheard remark about the inappropriate cardigan, the unforgivable forgetting of a significant name. She doesn't worry about some of the things she used to worry about (she doesn't need to worry about bloodstains on the skirt, though she worries now about the soup stains on her cardigan, the egg yolk on the dressing-gown lapel), but she certainly hasn't achieved anything resembling peace of mind. New torments beset her. Her relentless broodings on ageing, death and the last things are not at all peaceful. Lines of Macbeth, from *Macbeth*, repeat themselves to her monotonously, even though they are not particularly applicable to her lowly estate:

> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have.

I must not look to have.

What comfort would they be to her: honour, love, obedience and troops of friends: as night fell?

La notte è vicina per me.

Those were the words that an elderly Italian woman, an old crone who swept the stairs, had uttered to Fran when she was working as an au pair girl in Florence, a hundred years ago.

La notte è vicina per me.

But old age has its comforts, its recognitions.

Fran's Freedom Pass is a comfort, but they are threatening to take that away from her. She values it disproportionately. It is a validation of work, of worth, of survival, of taxes gladly paid over a lifetime. It is her Golden Bough, her passport from the world of work to the uselessness of old age.

Venerable old age. *Valued* old age.

My God, the bullshit and the claptrap.

Honour, love, obedience, troops of friends.

I must not look to have.

La notte è vicina per me.

The egg yolk on the dressing-gown lapel.

