

CHAPTER ONE

England, England

By JULIAN BARNES

'What's your first memory?' someone would ask.

And she would reply, 'I don't remember.'

Most people assumed it was a joke, though a few suspected her of being clever. But it was what she believed.

'I know just what you mean,' sympathizers would say, preparing to explain and simplify.

'There's always a memory just behind your first memory, and you can't quite get at it.'

But no: she didn't mean that either. Your first memory wasn't something like your first bra, or your first friend, or your first kiss, or your first fuck, or your first marriage, or your first child, or the death of your first parent, or your first sudden sense of the lancing hopelessness of the human condition — it wasn't like any of that. It wasn't a solid, seizable thing, which time, in its plodding, humorous way, might decorate down the years with fanciful detail — a gauzy swirl of mist, a thundercloud, a coronet — but could never expunge. A memory was by definition not a thing, it was ... a memory. A memory now of a memory a bit earlier of a memory before that of a memory way back when. [...] Martha Cochrane was to live a long time, and in all her years she was never to come across a first memory which was not in her opinion a lie.

So she lied too.

Her first memory, she said, was of sitting on the kitchen floor, [...] and there, spread out on the matting, was her Counties of England jigsaw puzzle, and Mummy had decided to help her by doing all the outside and the sea to begin with, which left this outline of the country in front of her, this funny-shaped piece of raffia floor, a bit like a bulgy old lady sitting on a beach with her legs stretched out — the legs being Cornwall, though of course she hadn't thought that at the time, she didn't even know the word Cornwall, or what colour the piece was, and you know what children are like with jigsaws, they just pick up any old piece and try to force it into the hole, so she probably picked up Lancashire and made it behave like Cornwall.

Yes, that was it, her first memory, her first artfully, innocently arranged lie. And there was often someone else who had had the same jigsaw as a child, and a passage of soft competitiveness would ensue, about which piece they would do first — it usually was Cornwall, but sometimes it was Hampshire, because Hampshire had the Isle of Wight attached to it and stuck out into the sea and you could match the hole easily, and after Cornwall or Hampshire it might be East Anglia, because Norfolk and Suffolk sat on top of one another like brother and sister, or clutched one another like husband and wife, lying fatly coupled, or made the two halves of a walnut. Then there was Kent pointing its finger or its nose out at the Continent in warning — careful, foreigners over there; Oxfordshire playing spoons with Buckinghamshire and squashing Berkshire flat; Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire like side-by-side carrots or pinecones; the smooth, sea-lion curve of Cardigan. They would remember how most of the large, clear counties were round the edge, and when you'd put them in it left an awkward muddle of smaller, odd-shaped counties in the middle, and you could never remember where Staffordshire went. And then they would try to recall the colours of the pieces, which had seemed so important at the time, as important as the names, but now, so long afterwards, had Cornwall been mauve, and Yorkshire yellow, and Nottinghamshire brown, or was it Norfolk that was yellow — unless it was its sister, Suffolk? And these were the sorts of memories which, even if wrong, were less untrue.

But this, she thought, might be a true, unprocessed memory: she had progressed from the floor to the kitchen table, and her fingers were swifter with the counties now, neater

and more honest — not trying to force Somerset to be Kent — and she would usually work her way round the coastline — Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Monmouthshire, Glamorgan, Carmarthen, Pembrokeshire (because England included Wales — that was the bulgy old lady's stomach) — all the way back to Devon, and then fill in the rest, leaving the messy Midlands till last, and she would get to the end and a piece would be missing. Leicestershire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Warwickshire, Staffordshire — it was usually one of them — whereupon a sense of desolation, failure, and disappointment at the imperfection of the world would come upon her, until Daddy, who always seemed to be hanging around at this moment, would find the missing piece in the unlikeliest place. What was Staffordshire doing in his trouser pocket? How could it have got there? Had she seen it jump? Did she think the cat put it there? And she would smile her Nos and head-shakes at him, because Staffordshire had been found, and her jigsaw, her England, and her heart had been made whole again.

This was a true memory, but Martha was still suspicious; it was true, but it wasn't unprocessed. She knew it had happened, because it had happened several times; but in the resulting amalgamation the distinguishing marks of each separate time — which she would now have to make up, like when her father had been out in the rain and gave Staffordshire back to her damp, or when he bent the corner of Leicestershire — had been lost. Memories of childhood were the dreams that stayed with you after you woke. You dreamed all night, or for long, serious sections of the night, yet when you woke all you had was a memory of having been abandoned, or betrayed, caught in a trap, left on a frozen plain; and sometimes not even that, but a fading after-image of the emotion stirred by such events.

And there was another reason for mistrust. If a memory wasn't a thing but a memory of a memory of a memory, mirrors set in parallel, then what the brain told you now about what it claimed had happened then would be coloured by what had happened in between. It was like a country remembering its history: the past was never just the past, it was what made the present able to live with itself. The same went for individuals, though the process obviously wasn't straightforward. Did those whose lives had disappointed them remember an idyll, or something which justified their lives ending in disappointment? Did those who were content with their lives remember previous contentment, or some moment of well-arranged adversity heroically overcome? An element of propaganda, of sales and marketing, always intervened between the inner and the outer person.

A continuing self-deception as well. Because even if you recognized all this, grasped the impurity and corruption of the memory system, you still, part of you, believed in that innocent, authentic thing — yes, thing — you called a memory. At university Martha had made friends with a Spanish girl, Cristina. The common history of their two countries, or at least the contentious part, lay centuries back; but even so, when Cristina had said, in a moment of friendly teasing, 'Francis Drake was a pirate,' she had said No he wasn't, because she knew he was an English hero and a Sir and an Admiral and therefore a Gentleman. When Cristina, more seriously this time, repeated, 'He was a pirate,' Martha knew that this was the comforting if necessary fiction of the defeated. Later, she looked up Drake in a British encyclopaedia, and while the word 'pirate' never appeared, the words 'privateer' and 'plunder' frequently did, and she could quite see that one person's plundering privateer might be another person's pirate, but even so Sir Francis Drake remained for her an English hero, untainted by this knowledge.

[...]

At school they had chanted. [...] Each day would begin with the chants of religion, falsified by Martha Cochrane. Later came the dry, hierarchical chants of mathematics, and the dense chants of poetry. Stranger and hotter than either were the chants of history. Here

they were encouraged to an urgency of belief out of place at morning Assembly. The chants of religion were said in a hurrying mumble; but in history Miss Mason, hen-plump and as old as several centuries, would lead them in worship like a charismatic priestess, keeping time, guiding the gossellers.

55BC (clap clap) Roman Invasion
1066 (clap clap) Battle of Hastings
1215 (clap clap) Magna Carta
1512 (clap clap) Henry the Eighth (clap clap)
Defender of Faith (clap clap)

She'd liked that last one: the rhyme made it easier to remember. Eighteen fifty *fower* (clap clap) Crimean *Wower* (clap clap) — they always said it like that, no matter how many times Miss Mason corrected them. And so the chant proceeded, down to

1940 (clap clap) Battle of Britain
1973 (clap clap) Treaty of Rome

Miss Mason would lead them down the ages and then return them, from Rome to Rome, back to the beginning. This was how she warmed them up and made their minds supple. Then she would tell them tales of chivalry and glory, plague and famine, tyranny and democracy; of royal glamour and the sturdy virtues of modest individualism; of Saint George, who was patron saint of England, Aragon and Portugal, as well as protector of Genoa and Venice; of Sir Francis Drake and his heroic exploits; of Boadicea and Queen Victoria; of the local squire who went to the Crusades and now lay in stone beside his wife in the village church with his feet on a dog. They listened, the more intently because if she was satisfied Miss Mason would end the class with more chanting, but different this time. There would be actions which called for dates; variations, improvisations and tricks; the words would duck and dive while they all clung to a scrap of rhythm. Elizabeth and Victoria (clap clap clap clap), and they would reply 1558 and 1837 (clap clap clap clap). Or (clap clap) Wolfe at Quebec (clap) and they would have to answer (clap clap) 1759 (clap). Or instead of cueing them in with Gunpowder Plot (clap clap), she would switch it to Guido Fawkes Caught Alive (clap clap), and they would have to find the rhyme, 1605 (clap clap). She led them in and out of two millennia, making history not a dogged progress but a series of vivid and competing moments, beans on black velvet. Much later, when everything that would happen in her life had happened, Martha Cochrane could still see a date or a name in a book and hear Miss Mason's clappy response in her head. Poor Old Nelson Not Alive, Trafalgar 1805. Edward Eight Lost the Nation, 1936 Abdication.

[...] In any case, building her character was not her chief priority at this time. Three days after the Agricultural Show — and this was a true, single, unprocessed memory, she was almost sure of that — Martha was at the kitchen table; her mother was cooking, though not singing, she remembered — no, she knew, she had reached the age where memories harden into facts — her mother was cooking and not singing, that was a fact, Martha had finished her jigsaw, that was a fact, there was a hole the size of Nottinghamshire showing the grain of the kitchen table, that was a fact, her father was not in the background, that was a fact, her father had Nottinghamshire in his pocket, that was a fact, she looked up, that was a fact, and the tears were dripping off her mother's chin into the soup, that was a fact.

Secure within her child's logic, she knew not to believe her mother's explanations. She even felt slightly superior before such incomprehension and tears. To Martha it was perfectly simple. Daddy had gone off to find Nottinghamshire. He thought he had it in his pocket, but when he looked it wasn't there. That was why he wasn't smiling down at her and blaming the cat. He knew he couldn't disappoint her, so he'd gone off to hunt for the

piece and it was just taking longer than he'd imagined. Then he'd be back and all would be well again.

Later — and later came all too soon — a terrible feeling entered her life, a feeling she did not yet have words to describe. A sudden, logical, rhyming reason (clap clap) why Daddy had gone off. *She* had lost the piece, *she* had lost Nottinghamshire, put it somewhere she couldn't remember, or perhaps left it where a thief could come and steal it, and so her father, who loved her, who said he loved her, and never wanted to see her disappointed, never wanted Miss Mouse to stick out her lip like that, had gone off to find the piece, and it would be a long, long search if books and stories were anything to go by. Her father might not come back for years, by which time he would have grown a beard, and there would be snow in it, and he would look — how did they put it? — emaciated by malnutrition. And it was all her fault, because she'd been careless or stupid, and she was the cause of her father's disappearance and her mother's misery, so she must never ever be careless or stupid again, because this was the sort of thing that happened afterwards.

[...] But there was one thing, one tiny yet ineradicably painful thing for which she could never find the cure. She had left university and come to London. She was sitting in her office, pretending to be excited about her job; she had heart trouble, nothing too serious, just a man, just the usual mild catastrophe; she had her period. She remembered all that. The phone went.

`Martha? It's Phil.'

`Who?' Someone over-familiar in red braces, she thought.

`Phil. Philip. Your father.' She didn't know what to say. After a while, as if her silence doubted his identity, he reconfirmed it. `Daddy.'

He wondered if they could meet. What about lunch one day. [...]

He told her a story. She absented herself from judging its truth. He had fallen in love. It had just happened. He didn't say that to justify himself. He had thought at the time a clean break was fairer all round. Martha had a half-brother, name of Richard. He was a nice boy, though he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. Normal enough at that age, probably. Stephanie — the name was spilt suddenly into Martha's half of the table, like a knocked-over wine glass — Steph had died three months ago. Cancer was a brute of an illness. She'd been diagnosed first five years ago, then there'd been a remission. Then it came back. It's always worse when it comes back. It just takes you.

This all seemed — what? — not untruthful, but irrelevant, not a way of filling the exact, unique, fretsaw-cut hole within her. She asked him for Nottinghamshire.

`Sorry?'

`When you went off, you had Nottinghamshire in your pocket.'

`I thought that's what you said.'

`I was doing my Counties of England jigsaw.' She felt awkward as she said it; not embarrassed, but as if she were showing too much of her heart. `You used to take a piece and hide it, then find it in the end. You took Nottinghamshire with you when you left. Don't you remember?'

He shook his head. `You did jigsaws? I suppose all kids love them. Richard did. For a while, anyway. He had an incredibly complicated one, I remember, all clouds or something — you never knew which way up it was until you were half finished ...'

`You don't remember?'

He looked at her.

`You really, really don't?'

She would always blame him for that. She was over twenty-five, and she would go on getting older than twenty-five, older and older and older than twenty-five, and she would be on her own; but she would always blame him for that.