1: ENGLAND

'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. So people assertively remembered a face, a knee that bounced them, a springtime meadow; a dog, a granny, a woollen animal whose ear disintegrated after wet chewing; they remembered a pram, the view from a pram, falling out of a pram and striking their head on an upturned flower-pot which their brother had placed to climb up on and view the new arrival (though many years later they would begin to wonder if that brother had not wrenched them out of sleep and dashed their head against the flower-pot in a primal moment of sibling rage . . .). They

remembered all this confidently, uncontradictably, but whether it was the report of others, a fond imagining, or the softly calculated attempt to take the listener's heart between finger and thumb and give it a tweak whose spreading bruise would last until love had struck – whatever its source and its intent, she mistrusted it. 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, which was covered in loosely woven raffia matting, the sort with holes in, holes she could poke a spoon into and make bigger and get smacked for – feeling safe because her mother was singing to herself in the background – she always sang old songs when she cooked, not the ones she liked listening to at other times – and even today when Martha turned on the radio and heard anything like 'You're the Top' or 'Shall We Gather at the River' or 'Night and Day' she would suddenly smell nettle soup or frying onions, wasn't that the strangest thing? – and that was another, 'Love Is the Strangest Thing', which always meant the sudden cut and seep of an orange for her – 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 pine-cones; 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.

When she looked back, then, she saw lucid and significant memories which she mistrusted. What could be clearer and more remembered than that day at the Agricultural Show? A day of frivolous clouds over serious blue. Her parents took her softly by the wrists and swung her high into the sky, and the clumpy grass was a trampoline when she landed. The white marquees with striped porticos, as solidly built as vicarages. A rising hill behind, from which careless, scruffy animals looked down on their pampered, haltered cousins in the show ring below. The smell from the back entrance to the beer tent as the day's heat rose. Queuing for the portable toilets, and the smell not much different. Cardboard badges of authority dangling from buttons on shirts of Viyella check. Women grooming silky goats, men trundling proudly on veteran tractors, children in tears slipping from ponies while in the background swift figures repaired the shattered fences. St John's Ambulance men waiting for people to faint or fall over guy-ropes or have heart attacks; waiting for things to go wrong.

But nothing had gone wrong, not that day, not in her memory of that day. And she had kept the book of lists for many decades, knowing most of its strange poetry by heart. The District Agricultural and Horticultural Society's Schedule of Prizes. Just a couple of dozen pages in a red paper cover, but to her much more: a picture book, though it contained only words; an almanac; an apothecary's herbal; a magic kit; a prompt-book of memory.

Three Carrots – long
Three Carrots – short
Three Turnips – any variety
Five Potatoes – long
Five Potatoes – round
Six Broad Beans
Six Scarlet Runners
Nine Dwarf Beans
Six Eschalots, large red
Six Eschalots, small red
Six Eschalots, large white
Six Eschalots, small white
Collection of Vegetables. Six distinct kinds. Cauliflowers, if included, must be shown on stalks.
Tray of vegetables. Tray may be dressed, but only parsley may be used.
20 ears of wheat
20 ears of barley
Sward of Re-seeded pasture in Tomato Box
Sward of Permanent pasture in Tomato Box
Scheme goats must be halter led and there must be a two-yard space *maintained at all times* between them and non-scheme goats.
All goats entered shall be female.
Goats entered as Classes 164 and 165 shall have borne a kid.
A Kid is defined as birth to 12 months.

Jar of Marmalade
Jar of Soft Fruit Jam
Jar of Lemon Cheese
Jar of Fruit Jelly
Jar of Pickled Onions
Jar of Salad Cream
Friesian Cow in milk
Friesian Cow in calf
Friesian Heifer in milk
Friesian Heifer Maiden not showing more than 2 broad teeth
Attested cattle must be halter led and there must be a three-yard space *maintained at all times* between them and non-attested cattle.

Martha did not understand all the words, and very few of the instructions, but there was something about the lists – their calm organization and their completeness – which satisfied her.

Three Dahlias, decorative, over 8" – in three vases
Three Dahlias, decorative, 6"–8" – in one vase
Four Dahlias, decorative, 3"–6" – in one vase
Five Dahlias, miniature ball
Five Dahlias, Pompom, under 2" diameter
Four Dahlias, Cactus, 4"–6" – in one vase
Three Dahlias, Cactus, 6"–8" – in one vase
Three Dahlias, Cactus, over 8" – in three vases

There was the whole world of Dahlias accounted for. None missing.

She was swung up to the sky by her parents' safe hands. She walked between the two of them on duckboards, under canvas, through hot, grassy air, and she read from her booklet with a creator's authority. She felt as if the items laid out before them could not truly exist until she had named and categorized them.

'So what do we have here, Miss Mouse?'

'Two seven oh. Five Cooking Apples.'

'That looks about right. Five of them. Wonder what sort they are.'

Martha looked at the booklet again. 'Any variety.'

'Right-oh. Any Variety Cooking Apples – we must look out for them in the shops.' He would pretend to be serious, but her mother would laugh and fiddle with Martha's hair quite unnecessarily.

They saw sheep clamped between the legs of sweating, big-biceped men and slipped out of their woolly car-coats in a whirr of buzzing clippers; wire cages held anxious rabbits so large and laundered they did not seem real; then there was the Parade of Stock, the Mounted Fancy Dress Competition and the Terrier Racing. Inside hot marquees were lardy cakes, drop scones, eccles cakes and flapjacks; Scotch eggs halved like ammonites; parsnips and carrots a yard long, tapering to the thinness of a candlewick; slick onions with their necks bent over and tied into submission with twine; clusters of five eggs, with a sixth broken into a judging dish beside them; beetroot cut to show rings like trees.

But it was Mr A. Jones's beans that glowed in her mind – then, later, and later still – like holy relics. They gave out red cards for first prize, blue for second prize, and white for commended. All the red cards on all the beans belonged to Mr A. Jones. Nine Runner Beans Any Variety, Nine Climbing Beans Round, Nine Dwarf Beans Flat, Nine Dwarf Beans Round, Six Broad Beans White, Six Broad Beans Green. He also won Nine Pods of Peas and Three Carrots Short, but these interested her less. For Mr A. Jones also had a trick with his beans. He laid them out on pieces of black velvet.

'Looks like a jeweller's window, eh, love?' her father said. 'Pair of earrings, anyone?' He reached towards Mr A. Jones's Nine Dwarf Beans Round, her mother giggled, and Martha said, 'No,' quite loudly.

'Oh, all right then, Miss Mouse.'

He shouldn't have done that, even if he hadn't meant it. This wasn't funny. Mr A. Jones could make a bean look perfect.

Its colour, its proportions, its evenness. And nine beans that much more beautiful.

At school they had chanted. They sat four abreast in their green uniforms, beans in a pod. Eight legs round, eight legs short, eight legs long, eight legs any variety.

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 gospellers.

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.

Jessica James, friend and Christian, sat behind her in history. Jessica James, hypocrite and betrayer, sat in front of her during Assembly. Martha was a clever girl, and therefore not a believer. In morning prayers, her eyes tight shut, she would pray differently:

Alfalfa, who farts in Devon,
Bellowed be thy name.
Thy wigwam come.
Thy swill be scum
In Bath, which is near the Severn.
Give us this day our sandwich spread,
And give us our bus-passes,

As we give those who bus-pass against us,
And lead us not into Penn Station,
Butter the liver and the weevil.
For thine is the wigwam, the flowers and the story,
For ever and ever ARE MEN.

She was still working on one or two lines, which needed improvement. She didn't think it was blasphemous, except perhaps for the bit about farting. Some of it she thought was rather beautiful: the bit about the wigwam and the flowers always made her think of Nine Climbing Beans Round, which God, had He existed, would presumably have approved of. But Jessica James had denounced her. No, she'd done something cleverer than that: arranged for Martha to denounce herself. One morning, at a signal from Jessica, everyone nearby had fallen silent, and Martha's solo voice could be clearly heard intently urging the significance of sandwich spread, liver and weevils, at which point she had opened her eyes to meet the swivelled shoulder, hennish bosom and Christian glare of Miss Mason, who sat with their class.

For the rest of the term she had been made to stand apart and lead the school in prayer, forced to articulate clearly and to counterfeit an ardent faith. After a while, she found she did it rather well, a born-again convict assuring the parole board that he was now washed free of his sins and would they kindly think of letting him out. The more suspicious Miss Mason became, the more it pleased Martha.

People began to take her on one side. They would ask her what she meant by being so contrary. They would tell her that there was such a thing as being too clever by half. They would advise her that cynicism, Martha, is a very lonely virtue. They would hope she was not pert. They would also hint, in less or more obvious ways, that Martha's home was not as other homes, but that trials were there to be overcome, just as character was there to be built.

She did not understand about building character. It was

surely something you had, or something that changed because of what happened to you, like her mother being brisker and more short-tempered nowadays. How could you build your own character? She looked at village walls for bewildered comparison: blocks of stone, and mortar in between, and then a line of angled flints which showed that you were grown-up, that you had built your character. It made no sense. Photographs of Martha would show her frowning at the world, pushing out a lower lip, her eyebrows clenched. Was this disapproval of what she saw, was it showing her unsatisfactory 'character' – or was it merely that her mother had been told (when she was a child) that you should always take pictures with the sun coming over your right shoulder?

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 sure of that, 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.

In the corridor off the kitchen she had found an oak leaf. Her father was always bringing leaves in on his feet. He said it was because he was in such a hurry to get back and see Martha. Mummy used to tell him in an irritated voice to stop being so plausible, and that Martha could very well wait until he had wiped his feet. Martha herself, afraid of provoking similar disapproval, always wiped her shoes carefully, feeling rather smug as she did so. Now she held an oak leaf in her palm. Its scalloped edge made it seem like a piece of jigsaw, and for a moment her heart lifted. It was a sign, or a coincidence, or something: if she kept this leaf safe as a reminder of Daddy, then he would keep Nottinghamshire safe, and then he would come back. She didn't tell her mother, but tucked the leaf into the little red booklet from the Agricultural Show.

As for Jessica James, friend and betrayer, the chance for revenge presented itself in time, and Martha accepted it. She was not a Christian, and forgiveness was a virtue others practised. Jessica James, pig-eyed and pious, with a voice like morning service, Jessica James, whose father would never

disappear, began seeing a tall, gawky boy whose red hands had the damp and flabby inarticulacy of a boned joint. Martha quickly forgot his name but always remembered the hands. Had she been older, Martha might have thought the cruellest thing to do was let Jessica James and her smirking courtier continue in knees-together smugness until the day they walked up the aisle past the Crusader with his feet on the dog and into the sunset of the rest of their lives.

But Martha was not yet so sophisticated. Instead, Kate Bellamy, friend and conspirator, let the boy know that Martha might possibly be interested in going out with him if he was thinking of trading up. Martha had already discovered that she could make almost any boy fancy her as long as she didn't fancy him. Various plans now had to be discussed. She could simply steal the boy, flaunt him for a while and humiliate Jessica James before the entire school. Or they might organize a little dumb-show: Jessica James would be taken for an innocent walk by Kate, and chance would lead her to a place where her prim little heart would be shredded by the sight of a porky hand clamped to a mild breast.

Martha, however, settled for the cruellest revenge, and the one in which she had to do the least. Kate Bellamy, innocent of voice, duplicitous of heart, convinced the boy that Martha might truly learn to love him – once she got to know him – but that since she was serious in matters of love, and all else that love meant, he would have to break irrevocably and publicly with Miss Piety before he stood a chance. After a few days' thought and lust, the boy did so, and Jessica James was duly seen in gratifying tears. More days passed, Martha appeared everywhere in laughing profile, and yet no message came. Anxiously, the boy approached her co-conspirator, who played dumb and said he must have misunderstood: Martha Cochrane go out with *him*? The very idea of it. Furious and humiliated, the boy waylaid Martha after school; she mocked his presumption in anticipating her feelings. The boy would recover; boys did. As for Jessica James, she never identified the

engineer of her misery, which pleased Martha until the day she left school.

As winters passed, it slowly became clear to Martha that neither Nottinghamshire nor her father was going to return. She still believed they might as long as her mother wept, used one of the bottles from the high shelf, hugged her too tightly and told her that all men were either wicked or weak and some of them were both. Martha cried as well on these occasions, as if their joint tears might bring her father back.

Then they moved to another village, one further from school, so that she had to take the bus. There was no high shelf for bottles; her mother stopped weeping and had her hair cut short. No doubt she was building her character. In this new house, which was smaller, there were no photographs of her father. Her mother told her less often that men were either wicked or weak. She told her instead that women had to be strong and look after themselves because nobody else could be relied upon to do it for them.

In response to this, Martha made a decision. Each morning, before leaving for school, she pulled the jigsaw box from beneath her bed, opened the lid with her eyes closed, and took out a county. She never looked in case it was one of her favourites: Somerset or Lancashire perhaps. Of course she recognized Yorkshire as the one she could hardly get her fingers round, but then she'd never had particularly strong feelings about Yorkshire. On the bus, she would reach behind her and push the county down the back of the seat. Once or twice, her fingers encountered another county clamped between the tight upholstery, one she had left there days or weeks before. There were about fifty counties to dispose of, and so it took her almost the whole term. She threw the sea and the box into the dustbin.

She did not know whether she was meant to remember or to forget the past. As this rate she would never build her character. She hoped there was nothing wrong with thinking so much about the Show; in any case, she could not stop it glowing in her mind. Their last outing as a family. Swung high to the

heavens in a place where, despite the noise and the pushing, there was order, and rules, and wise judgment from men in white coats, like doctors. It seemed to her that you were often wrongly judged at school, as you were at home, but that at the Show a superior justice was available.

She did not, of course, put it like that. Her immediate apprehension, when she asked if she could go in for the Show, was that her mother might be cross, and that the Schedule of Prizes might be confiscated for having 'given her ideas'. This was another of childhood's sins which she could never quite anticipate. Are you being pert, Martha? Cynicism is a very lonely virtue, you know. And what's been giving you ideas?

But her mother just nodded and opened the booklet. The oak leaf fell out. 'What's that?' she asked.

'I'm keeping it,' replied Martha, fearing rebuke, or recognition of motive. But her mother merely tucked the leaf back into the pages, and with the new briskness she was using nowadays began to look up categories in the Children's Section.

'A Scare Crow (maximum height 12")? An article made from Salt Dough? A Greetings Card? A Knitted Hat? A Face Mask made from any material?'

'Beans,' said Martha.

'Let's see, there's Four Shortbread Biscuits, Four Butterfly Cakes, Six Marzipan Sweets, A Pasta Necklace. That sounds nice, A Pasta Necklace.'

'Beans,' repeated Martha.

'Beans?'

'Nine Climbing Beans Round.'

'I'm not sure you can go in for that. It's not in the Children's Section. Let's look at the regulations. Section A. Open to Householders and Allotment Holders within a radius of 10 miles of the Show Site. Are you a Householder, Martha?'

'What about an allotment?'

'There aren't any around here, I'm afraid. Section B. Open to All. Ah, that's just flowers. Dahlias? Marigolds?' Martha shook her head. 'Section C. Confined to gardeners residing

within 3 miles of the Show Site. I don't see why we don't qualify. Are you a gardener, Martha?'

'Where do we get the seeds?'

Together they dug up a patch of ground, put in some horse manure, and built two wigwams. Then it was up to Martha. She worked out how many weeks before the Show to plant her seed, pushed in the beans, watered them, waited, weeded, watered, waited, weeded, lifted clumpy bits of soil away from where they might be coming up, saw the glistening, whippy sprouts break from the soil, encouraged the tendrils in their spiralling climb, saw the red flowers form and break, watered just as the tiny pods appeared, watered, weeded, watered, watered, and there, an exact few days before the Show, she had seventy-nine Climbing Beans Round to choose from. When she got off the bus from school she would go straight out to examine her plot. For thine is the wigwam, the flowers and the story. It didn't seem blasphemous at all.

Her mother praised Martha's cleverness and green fingers. Martha pointed out that her beans didn't look much like those of Mr A. Jones. His had been flat and smooth, and the same colour green all over, as if they'd been sprayed. Hers had regular bumps like bunions where the beans were, and speckly yellow bits on the skin here and there. Her mother said this was just the way they grew. The way they built their character.

On the Saturday of the Show they got up early and her mother helped pick the beans at the top of the wigwam. Then Martha made her selection. She had asked for black velvet but the only piece in the house was still attached to a dress, so instead there was black tissue paper which her mother ironed, though it still looked rather crumpled. She sat in the back of somebody's car, thumbs on tissue paper, watching the beans stir and roll across the plate as they went round corners.

'Not so fast,' she said sternly at one point.

Then they bumped their way over a furrowed car-park and she had to rescue her beans yet again. In the horticultural tent a man with a white coat gave her a form with just a number

on it so that the judges wouldn't know who she was, and showed her to a long table where everybody else was laying out their beans as well. Ancient gardeners with jolly voices said, 'Look who's here!' even though they'd never met her, and 'Have to look to your laurels now, Jonesie!'. She couldn't help noticing that no-one else's beans looked like hers, but that must have been because they were growing different varieties. Then they all had to leave because it was time for the judging.

Mr A. Jones won. Somebody Else was second. Somebody Else was commended. 'Better luck next time!' everyone said. Enormous hands with knotted knuckles solemnly reached down to console her. 'Have to look to our laurels next year,' the old men repeated.

Later, her mother said, 'Still, they taste very nice.' Martha didn't reply. Her lower lip stuck out, wet and stubborn. 'I'll have yours, then,' said her mother, and a fork reached towards her plate. Martha was too miserable even to join in the game.

Men with cars would sometimes come for her mother. They couldn't afford a car themselves, and to see her mother taken away so quickly – a wave, a smile, a toss of the head, and then her mother turning to the driver before the car was even out of sight – to see this happen always made Martha think of her mother disappearing as well. She didn't like the men who came to call. Some tried to ingratiate themselves, patting her as if she were the cat, and others stared from a distance, thinking there's a pot of trouble. She preferred the men who saw her as a pot of trouble.

It wasn't just about being left. It was about her mother being left. She looked at these occasional men, and whether they squatted on their haunches to ask her the usual questions about homework and television, or whether, standing, they jiggled their keys and muttered, 'Let's be off,' she saw them all in the same way: as men who would hurt her mother. Perhaps not tonight, or tomorrow, but some time, without any doubt. She was skilled at developing fevers and aches and menstrual pain of a kind which demanded her mother's attendance.

'You're a proper little tyrant, you are,' her mother would say, in tones ranging from affection to exasperation.

'Nero was a tyrant,' Martha would reply.

'I'm sure even Nero let his mum go out once in a while.'

'Actually, Nero had his mum killed, Mr Henderson told us.' Now that, she knew, was being pert.

'I'm the one more likely to poison *your* food if this goes on,' said her mother.

One day they were folding sheets, air-dried from the line. Suddenly, as if to herself, but loud enough for Martha to hear, her mother said, 'This is the only thing you need two people for.'

They carried on in silence. Stretch wide (arms not long enough yet, Martha), up, grip at the top, drop the left hand, catch without looking, stretch sideways, pull, over and again and catch, then pull, pull (harder, Martha), then across to meet, up to Mummy's hands, down and pick up, one last pull, fold, hand it over and wait for the next.

The only thing you needed two people for. When they pulled, there was something which ran through the sheet which wasn't just pulling the creases out of the sheet, it was more, something between the two of them. A strange sort of pulling, too: you pulled first as if wanting to get away from the other person, but the sheet held you, and then seemed to yank you back off your heels and towards one another. Was that always there?

'Oh, I didn't mean *you*,' said her mother, and suddenly hugged Martha.

'Which one was Daddy?' asked Martha later that day.

'What do you mean, which one? Daddy was . . . Daddy.'

'I mean, was he wicked or weak. Which one?'

'Oh, I don't know . . .'

'You said they were one or the other. That's what you said. Which one was he?'

Her mother looked at her. This obstinacy was something new. 'Well, I suppose if he was one or the other, then he was weak.'

'How can you tell?'

'That he was weak?'

'No, how can you tell if they're wicked from if they're weak?'

'Martha, you're not old enough for things like that.'

'I need to know.'

'Why do you need to know?'

Martha paused. She knew what she wanted to say, but feared it. 'So that I won't make the same mistakes as you.'

She had paused because she expected her mother to cry. But that part of her mother had gone away. Instead, she gave the dry laugh she specialized in nowadays. 'What a wise child I've given birth to. Don't get old before your years, Martha.'

That was a new one. Don't be pert. What's been giving you ideas? Now it was, Don't get old before your years.

'Why won't you tell me?'

'I'll tell you all I know, Martha. But the answer is, you don't know until it's too late, if my life's anything to go by. And you won't make the same mistakes as me because everyone makes different mistakes, that's the rule.'

Martha looked at her mother carefully. 'That's not much help,' she said.

But it was in the long run. As she grew up, as her character was built, as she became headstrong rather than pert, and clever enough to know when to hide her cleverness, as she discovered friends and social life and a new kind of loneliness, as she moved from country to town and began amassing her future memories, she admitted her mother's rule: they made their mistakes, now you make your mistakes. And there was a logical consequence of this, which became part of Martha's creed: after the age of twenty-five, you were not allowed to blame anything on your parents. Of course, it didn't apply if your parents had done something terrible – had raped and murdered you and stolen all your money and sold you into prostitution – but in the average course of an average life, if you were averagely competent and averagely intelligent, and more so if you were more so, then you were not allowed to blame your parents. Of course you did, there were times when it was just too tempting. If only

they'd bought me roller-skates like they promised, if only they'd let me go out with David, if only they'd been different, more loving, richer, cleverer, simpler. If only they'd been more indulgent; if only they'd been more strict. If only they'd encouraged me more; if only they'd praised me for the right things . . . None of that. Of course Martha felt it, some of the time, wanted to cuddle such resentments, but then she would stop and give herself a talking-to. You're on your own, kid. Damage is a normal part of childhood. Not allowed to blame anything on them any more. Not allowed.

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 knew a place he thought she might like, and she suppressed the question, 'How the hell would you know?' He said there was a lot to talk about, he didn't think they should either of them get their expectations up too high. She agreed with him about that.

She asked her friends for advice. Some said: say what you feel; tell him what you think. Some said: see what he wants; why now rather than before? Some said: don't see him. Some said: tell your mother. Some said: whatever you do, don't tell your mother. Some said: make sure you get there before him. Some said: keep the bastard waiting.

It was an old-fashioned, oak-panelled restaurant, with elderly waiters who took world-weariness close to sardonic inefficiency. The weather was hot, but there was only heavy, clubman's food

on the menu. He urged her to have as much as she wanted; she ordered less. He suggested a bottle of wine; she drank water. She answered him as if filling in a questionnaire: yes, no, I expect so; very much, no, no. He told her she had grown into a most attractive woman. It seemed an impertinent remark. She did not want to agree or disagree, so she said, 'Probably.'

'Didn't you recognize me?' he asked.

'No,' she replied. 'My mother burnt your photographs.' It was true; and he deserved that wince, if nothing more. She looked across the table at an elderly, red-faced man with thinning hair. She had deliberately tried not to expect anything; even so, he looked shabbier than she would have thought. She realized that all along she had been working on a false assumption. She'd been imagining for the last fifteen or more years that if you disappeared, if you abandoned a wife and child, you did so for a better life: more happiness, more sex, more money, more of whatever was missing from your previous life. Examining this man who called himself Phil, she thought he looked as if he'd had a worse life than if he'd stayed at home. But maybe she wanted to believe that.

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.