

just follow their own logic. How do you cut the knot? Perhaps by forgetting words. Let the words run out, Martha . . .

Into her mind came an image, one shared by earlier occupants of these pews. Not Guiliamus Trentinus, of course, or Anne Potter, but perhaps known to Ensign Robert Timothy Pettigrew, and Christina Margaret Benson, and James Thoroughgood and William Petty. A woman swept and hanging, a woman half out of this world, terrified and awestruck, yet in the end safely delivered. A sense of falling, falling, falling, which we have every day of our lives, and then an awareness that the fall was being made gentler, was being arrested, by an unseen current whose existence no-one suspected. A short, eternal moment that was absurd, improbable, unbelievable, true. Eggs cracked from the slight concussion of landing, but nothing more. The richness of all subsequent life after that moment.

Later the moment had been appropriated, reinvented, copied, coarsened; she herself had helped. But such coarsening always happened. The seriousness lay in celebrating the original image: getting back there, seeing it, feeling it. This was where she parted company from Dr Max. Part of you might suspect that the magical event had never occurred, or at least not as it was now supposed to have done. But you must also celebrate the image and the moment even if it had never happened. That was where the little seriousness of life lay.

She placed new flowers on the altar and took away last week's, which were crusted and fragile. She pulled the heavy door awkwardly shut, but did not lock it in case there were others. For thine is the wigwam, the flowers and the story.

3: ANGLIA

WITH A SERIES of wristy, metallic swipes Jez Harris sharpened his scythe. The vicar owned an ancient, petrol-driven Atco, but Jez preferred to do things properly; besides, the slewed headstones were planted in a deliberate clutter, as if to defy any mechanical mower. From across the churchyard, Martha watched Harris bend down and tighten his leather knee-straps. Then he spat on his palms, uttered a few invented oaths, and began to attack the couch-grass and rosebay willow-herb, the cornflowers and the straggling vetch. Until the weeds grew back again, Martha would be able to read the incised names of her future companions.

It was early June, a week before the Fête, and the weather was giving a false impression of summer. The wind had dropped, and slow bumblebees nosed through the scent of baked grass. A silver-washed fritillary exchanged carefree flight-paths with a meadow brown. Only a hyperactive chiff-chaff, scavenging for insects, displayed an intrusive work-ethic. The woodland birds were bolder than they had been in her childhood. The other day Martha had seen a hawfinch crack a cherry-stone right at her feet.

The churchyard was a place of informality and collapse, of time's softer damage. A cloudburst of old-man's-beard concealed the perilous lean of a flinty wall. There was a copper beech, two of whose tiring branches were propped with wooden crutches, and a lych-gate whose circumflex roof leaked. The licheny slats of the bench on which Martha sat complained even at her cautiously applied weight.

'The chiff-chaff is a restless bird, which does not form in flocks.' Where had that come from? It had just entered her head. No, that was wrong: it had always been in her head, and had taken this opportunity to flit across her mind. The operation of memory was becoming more random; she had noticed that. Her mind still worked with clarity, she thought, but in its resting moments all sorts of litter from the past blew about. Years ago, in middle age, or maturity, or whatever you called it, her memory had been practical, justificatory. For instance, childhood was remembered in a succession of incidents which explained why you were the person you had turned out to be. Nowadays there was more slippage – a bicycle chain jumping a cog – and less consequence. Or perhaps this was your brain hinting at what you didn't want to know: that you had become the person you were not by explicable cause-and-effect, by acts of will imposed on circumstance, but by mere vagary. You beat your wings all your life, but it was the wind that decided where you went.

'Mr Harris?'

'You can call me Jez, Missie Cochrane, like others do.' The farrier was a burly fellow whose knees cracked as he straightened himself. He wore a countryman's outfit of his own devising, all pockets and straps and sudden tucks, which had hints of both Morris dancer and bondage devotee.

'I think there's a redstart still sitting,' said Martha. 'Just behind that old-man's-beard. Mind you don't disturb her.'

'Will do, Miss Cochrane.' Jez Harris yanked at a loose strand of hair over his forehead, with possible satiric intent. 'They say redstarts bring luck to them as don't disturb their nests.'

'Do they, Mr Harris?' Martha's expression was disbelieving.

'They do in this village, Miss Cochrane,' replied Harris firmly, as if her comparatively recent arrival gave her no right to question history.

He moved off to hack at a patch of cow parsley. Martha smiled to herself. Funny how she couldn't bring herself to call him Jez. Yet Harris was no more authentic. Jez Harris, formerly

Jack Oshinsky, junior legal expert with an American electronics firm obliged to leave the country during the emergency. He'd preferred to stay, and backdate both his name and his technology: nowadays he shod horses, made barrel hoops, sharpened knives and sickles, cut keys, tended the verges, and brewed a noxious form of scrumpy into which he would plunge a red-hot poker just before serving. Marriage to Wendy Temple had softened and localized his Milwaukee accent; and his inextinguishable pleasure was to play the yokel whenever some anthropologist, travel writer or linguistic theoretician would turn up inadequately disguised as a tourist.

'Tell me,' the earnest hiker with the give-away new boots might begin, 'does that clump of trees over there have a special name?'

'Name?' Harris would shout back from his forge, wrinkling his brow and banging a vermilion horseshoe like a manic xylophonist. 'Name?' he would repeat, glaring at the investigator through matted hair. 'That be Halley's copse, half-drowned dog know that.' He would toss the shoe contemptuously into a pail of water, the fizzle and fume dramatizing his rebuke.

'Halley's copse . . . You mean . . . like Halley's comet?' Already the disguised sipper and browser of retarded humanity would be regretting that he couldn't take out notebook or recorder.

'Comet? What comet's that? No comet's round here betimes. Ain't never heard of Edna Halley then? No, reckon it's not what folk hereabouts like to tell of. Rum business, if you ask me, rum business.'

Whereupon, with studied reluctance, and after making signs of hunger, Harris the farrier né Oshinsky the legal draughtsman would allow himself to be treated to a steak-and-kidney pudding at the Rising Sun, and with a pint of mild-and-bitter at his elbow would hint, without ever quite confirming, at tales of witchcraft and superstition, of sexual rites beneath a glowing moon and the tranced slaughter of livestock, all not so very long in the past. Other drinkers in the snug would hear phrases

side, not particularly. Or on everyone's side. Whichever you prefer, really.'

'Oh dear,' said Mr Mullin. 'You see, I thought you were one of us.'

'Perhaps I've known too many us-es in my lifetime.'

The schoolmaster looked at her as if she were somehow disloyal, quite possibly unpatriotic. In the schoolroom he was keen to ground his pupils. He taught them local geology, popular ballads, the origin of place-names, the migratory patterns of birds, and the Kingdoms of the Heptarchy (so much easier, thought Martha, than the Counties of England). He would take them to the northern edge of the Kimmeridgean formation, and demonstrate old-fashioned wrestling holds illustrated in encyclopaedias.

It had been Mr Mullin's idea to revive – or perhaps, since records were inexact, to institute – the village Fête. One afternoon an official delegation of schoolmaster and vicar had called on Martha Cochrane. It was known that she, unlike most of the village's current occupants, had actually grown up in the countryside. Over mugs of chicory and shortbread biscuits they petitioned her for memories.

'Three carrots long,' she had answered. 'Three carrots short. Three carrots any variety.'

'Yes?'

'Tray of vegetables. Tray may be dressed, but only parsley may be used. Cauliflowers, if included, must be on stalks.'

'Yes?'

'Six broad beans. Six scarlet runners. Nine dwarf beans.'

'Yes?'

'Jar of marmalade. All goats entered shall be female. Jar of lemon cheese. Friesian Heifer Maiden not showing more than two broad teeth.'

She fetched a booklet with a faded red cover. Her visitors looked through it. 'Three Dahlias, Cactus, 6"-8" – in one vase,' they read. Then: 'Five Dahlias, Pompom, under 2" diameter.' Then: 'Five Dahlias, miniature ball.' Then: 'Three

Dahlias, decorative, over 8" – in three vases.' The frail book of lists seemed like a potsherd from an immensely complicated and self-evidently decadent civilization.

'Mounted Fancy Dress Competition?' the Reverend Coleman mused. 'Two covered coat hangers? An article made from Salt Dough? Best Child Handler under 15 years of age? Dog the Judge would like to take home?'

Despite his respect for book-learning, the schoolmaster was unconvinced. 'Perhaps on the whole we'd better start from scratch.' The vicar nodded agreement. They left behind the District Agricultural and Horticultural Society's Schedule of Rules.

Later, Martha had flicked through it, remembering yet again the smell of a beer-tent, sheep being sheared, and her parents swinging her up up into the sky. Then there was Mr A. Jones and the way his beans had gleamed on black velvet. A lifetime on, she wondered if Mr A. Jones had ever cheated to arrive at such perfection. No means of knowing: he had become manure himself by now.

Pages fell from the booklet's rusted staples; then a dried leaf. She laid it, stiff and grey, against her palm; only its scalloped edge told her it was from an oak. She must have picked it up, all those years ago, and kept it for a specific purpose: to remind herself, on just such a day as this, of just such a day as that. Except, what was the day? The prompt did not work: no memory of joy, success or simple contentment returned, no flash of sunlight through trees, no house-martin flicking under eaves, no smell of lilac. She had failed her younger self by losing the priorities of youth. Unless it was that her younger self had failed by not predicting the priorities of age.

Jez Harris crept past the cascade of old-man's-beard, leaving the redstart undisturbed, and bringing himself luck, according to his own new lore. His scything and lopping left the churchyard looking attended to, rather than actually neat; birds and butterflies continued their lives. Martha's eye, and then her mind, followed a skimming brimstone southwards, across

downland, over water, and past chalky cliffs to another burial ground, a place of bright drystone walls and laundered turf. There wildlife would be discouraged; if it were possible, earthworms would be banned, and so would time itself. Nothing must be allowed to disturb the resting-place of the first Baron Pitman of Fortuibus.

Even Martha did not begrudge Sir Jack his grand isolation. The Island had been his idea and his success. The Peasants' Revolt of Paul and Martha had proved a forgettable interlude, long written out of history. Sir Jack had also dealt swiftly with the subversive tendency of certain employees to over-identify with the characters they were engaged to represent. The new Robin Hood and his new Merrie Men had brought respectability back to outlawry. The King had been given a firm reminder about family values. Dr Johnson had been transferred to Dieppe Hospital, where both therapy and advanced psychotropic drugs had failed to alleviate his personality disorder. Deep sedation was prescribed to control his self-mutilating tendencies.

Paul had lasted a couple of years as CEO, which was longer than Martha had predicted; then, with professions of reluctance and great age, Sir Jack had taken up the reins once more. Shortly after this, a special vote by both Houses of Parliament created him first Baron Pitman of Fortuibus. The motion had been passed *nem con*, and Sir Jack conceded that it would have taken an arrogant man to refuse the honour. Dr Max elaborated a plausible family tree for the new baron, whose mansion began to rival Buckingham Palace in both splendour and Visitor throughput. Sir Jack would gaze down the Mall from the opposite end, reflecting that his last great idea, his Ninth Symphony, had brought him merited wealth, world fame, market applause, and a fiefdom. Truly was he acclaimed as both innovator and ideas man.

Yet even in death he had remained rivalrous. The idea of sharing common ground with lesser players seemed a little unworthy when the Island's founder came to designate his final resting-place. St Mildred's, Whippingham, the estate church

for Osborne House, was taken down and reassembled high on Tennyson Down, whose popular expanses might in future years perhaps be renamed, though of course only in response to a firm expression of Island will. The two acres of churchyard were enclosed by a drystone wall set with marble tablets bearing some of Sir Jack's more eternal *dicta*. In the centre, on a slight rise, was the Pitman mausoleum, necessarily ornate yet essentially simple. Great men should be modest in death. All the same, it would be negligent to ignore Visitor requirements at a future hotspot of England, England.

Sir Jack had divided his last months between architects' drawings and the weather forecast. Increasingly he believed in signs and portents. The mighty William had somewhere remarked that noisy laments from the sky frequently betokened the passing of great men. Beethoven himself had died while a thunderstorm crashed overhead. The last words he spoke had been in praise of the English. 'God bless them,' he had said. Would it be vain – or might it not be truly humble? – to say the same when the heavens protested at his own going hence? The first Baron Pitman was still ruminating his farewell epigram when he died, gazing complacently out at a blue and settled sky.

The funeral was an affair of orotundity and black-plumed horses; some of the grief was real. But Time, or, more exactly, the dynamics of Sir Jack's own Project, had their revenge. In the first months, Premier Visitors came to pay their homage at the mausoleum, to read Sir Jack's wall-wisdom, and depart thoughtfully. Yet they also continued to tour the Pitman mansion at the end of the Mall, if anything in larger numbers. Such loyal enthusiasm pointed up the emptiness and melancholy of the building after its proprietor's death, and it seemed to both Jeff and Mark that there was a difference between making your Visitors reflective and making them depressed. Then the logic of marketing flamed like a message on Belshazzar's wall: Sir Jack must live again.

The auditions had their disconcerting moments, but they found a Pitman who, with a little coaching and research, was

as good as new. Sir Jack – the old one – would have approved the fact that his successor had played many leading Shakespearean roles. The replacement Sir Jack swiftly became a popular figure: descending from his landau to plunge into the crowds, lecturing on the history of the Island, and showing key leisure-industry executives round his mansion. The Pitman Dining Experience at the Cheshire Cheese proved a jolly Visitor option. The only marketing downside to all this was that throughput at the mausoleum dropped as fast as Betsy's egg-basket – on certain days Visitors were outnumbered by gardeners. It seemed to most people in dubious taste to smile at a man in the morning and attend his grave in the afternoon.

The Island had been on its third Sir Jack by the time Martha returned to Anglia after her decades of wandering. She stood on the foredeck of the quarterly Le Havre ferry, hooting its uncertain way into Poole harbour; as a fine spray refreshed her face, she wondered what sort of a berth she herself would find. Ropes were thrown and tightened; a gangway was hauled into place; upturned faces looked for people other than her. Martha was the last to disembark. She was wearing her oldest clothes; but even so, the mutton-chopped customs officer saluted her as she stood before his polished oak bag-table. She had retained her Old English passport, and also secretly paid taxes. These two precautions put her in the rare category of Permitted Immigrant. The customs officer, his thick blue serge suit disappearing into stout Wellington boots, pulled out the gold half-hunter strung across his belly, and timed her repatriation in a sheepskin ledger. He was certainly younger than Martha, but looked at her as if she were a long-lost daughter. 'Better one that hath strayed, if I might make so bold, Ma'am.' Then he handed back her passport, saluted again, and whistled up an urchin to carry her bags to the horse-taxi.

What had surprised her, watching from afar, was how quickly the whole thing had unravelled. No, that was unfair, that was how *The Times of London* – still published from Ryde – would have put it. The official Island line, loyally purveyed by Gary

Desmond and his successors, was gloatingly simple. Old England had progressively shed power, territory, wealth, influence and population. Old England was to be compared disadvantageously to some backward province of Portugal or Turkey. Old England had cut its own throat and was lying in the gutter beneath a spectral gas-light, its only function as a dissuasive example to others. From Dowager to Down-and-Out, as a *Times* headline had sneeringly put it. Old England had lost its history, and therefore – since memory is identity – had lost all sense of itself.

But there was another way of looking at things, and future historians, whatever their prejudice, would no doubt agree on identifying two distinct periods. The first began with the establishment of the Island Project, and had lasted for as long as Old England – to adopt the term for convenience – had attempted to compete with England, England. This was a time of vertiginous decline for the mainland. The tourist-based economy collapsed; speculators destroyed the currency; the departure of the Royal Family made expatriation fashionable among the gentry; while the country's best housing stock was bought as second homes by continental Europeans. A resurgent Scotland purchased large tracts of land down to the old northern industrial cities; even Wales paid to expand into Shropshire and Herefordshire.

After various attempts at rescue, Europe declined to throw good money after bad. There were some who saw a conspiracy in Europe's attitude to a nation which had once contested the primacy of the continent; there was talk of historical revenge. It was rumoured that during a secret dinner at the Elysée the presidents of France, Germany and Italy had raised their glasses to the words, 'It is not only necessary to succeed, it is necessary that others fail.' And if this were not true, there were enough documents leaking from Brussels and Strasbourg to confirm that many high officials regarded Old England less as a suitable case for emergency funding than as an economic and moral lesson: it should be portrayed as a wastrel nation

and allowed to continue in free-fall as a disciplinary example to the overgreedy within other countries. Symbolic punishments were also introduced: the Greenwich Meridian was replaced by Paris Mean Time; on maps the English Channel became the French Sleeve.

Mass depopulation now took place. Those of Caribbean and Subcontinental origin began returning to the more prosperous lands from which their great-great-grandparents had once arrived. Others looked to the United States, Canada, Australia and continental Europe; but the Old English were low on the list of desirable immigrants, being thought to bring with them the taint of failure. Europe, in a sub-clause to the Treaty of Verona, withdrew from the Old English the right to free movement within the Union. Greek destroyers patrolled the Sleeve to intercept boat people. After this, depopulation slowed.

The natural political response to this crisis was the election of a Government of Renewal, which pledged itself to economic recovery, parliamentary sovereignty and territorial reacquisition. Its first step was to reintroduce the old pound as the central unit of currency, which few disputed as the English euro had ceased to be transferable. Its second step was to send the army north to reconquer territories officially designated as occupied but which in truth had been sold. The *blitzkrieg* liberated much of West Yorkshire, to the general dismay of its inhabitants; but after the US backed the European decision to upgrade the Scottish Army's weaponry and offer unlimited credits, the Battle of Rombalds Moor led to the humiliating Treaty of Weeton. While attention was diverted, the French Foreign Legion invaded the Channel Islands, and the Quai d'Orsay's resuscitated claim was upheld by the International Court at The Hague.

After the Treaty of Weeton a destabilized country burdened with reparations discarded the politics of Renewal – or at least, what had traditionally been understood as Renewal. This marked the start of the second period, over which future historians would long disagree. Some asserted that at this point the country simply gave up; others that it found new strength

in adversity. What remained incontestable was that the long-agreed goals of the nation – economic growth, political influence, military capacity and moral superiority – were now abandoned. New political leaders proclaimed a new self-sufficiency. They extracted the country from the European Union – negotiating with such obstinate irrationality that they were eventually paid to depart – declared a trade barrier against the rest of the world, forbade foreign ownership of either land or chattels within the territory, and disbanded the military. Emigration was permitted; immigration only in rare circumstances. Diehard jingoists claimed that these measures were designed to reduce a great trading nation to nut-eating isolationism; but modernizing patriots felt that it was the last realistic option for a nation fatigued by its own history. Old England banned all tourism except for groups numbering two or less, and introduced a Byzantine visa system. The old administrative division into counties was terminated, and new provinces were created, based upon the kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy. Finally, the country declared its separateness from the rest of the globe and from the Third Millennium by changing its name to Anglia.

The world began to forget that 'England' had ever meant anything except England, England, a false memory which the Island worked to reinforce; while those who remained in Anglia began to forget about the world beyond. Poverty ensued, of course; though the word meant less in the absence of comparisons. If poverty did not entail malnutrition or ill health, then it was not so much poverty as voluntary austerity. Those in search of traditional vanities were still free to emigrate. Anglians also discarded much of the communications technology that had once seemed indispensable. A new chic applied to fountain-pens and letter-writing, to family evenings round the wireless and dialling 'O' for Operator; then such fashionable habits acquired authentic strength. Cities dwindled; mass transit systems were abandoned, though a few steam trains still ran; horses bossed the streets. Coal was dug again, and

the kingdoms asserted their differences; new dialects emerged, based on the new separations.

Martha had not known what to expect when the cream-and-plum single-decker bus deposited her in the mid-Wessex village which had accepted her as a resident. The world's media had always followed *The Times of London's* lead in depicting Anglia as a place of yokeldom and willed antiquarianism. Grindingly satirical cartoons showed bumpkins being hosed down at the hand-pump after over-dosing on scrumpy. Crime was said to flourish despite the best efforts of the bicycling policeman; even the reintroduction of the stocks had not deterred malefactors. Meanwhile, inbreeding was supposed to have produced a new and incomparably brain-free species of village idiot.

Of course, no-one from the Island had visited the mainland for years; though it had been a fashion for the Battle of Britain squadron to fly mock reconnaissance missions over Wessex. Through perspex goggles, and with period static in their ears, 'Johnnie' Johnson and his sheepskin-jacketed heroes would peer down in astonishment at what wasn't there: road traffic and power-lines, street-lights and billboards, the vital ductwork of a nation. They saw dead, bulldozed suburbs, and four-lane highways petering out into woodland, with a gypsy caravan titupping over the lurched, volcanic tarmac. Here and there were patches of bright reforestation, some with nature's original straggleness, others with the sharp lines of human intention. Life below seemed slow and small. Comfortably large fields had been redivided into narrow strips; wind-pumps turned industriously; a reclaimed canal offered up a reflection of painted traffic and straining barge-horses. Occasionally, away on the horizon, lingered the terrestrial vapour trail of a steam locomotive. The squadron liked to fly low and buzz a sudden village: scared faces turning up their inkwell mouths, a stallion shying on a toll-bridge, its rider waving a hopeless fist at the sky. Then, with superior chuckles, the heroes would give a Victory roll, tap the fuel gauge with a fraying gauntlet, and set fresh course for base.

The pilots had seen what they wanted to see: quaintness,

diminution, failure. Quieter changes evaded them. Over the years the seasons had returned to Anglia, and become pristine. Crops were once again the product of local land, not of air-freight: spring's first potatoes were exotic, autumn's quince and mulberry decadent. Ripeness was acknowledged to be a hazardous matter, and cold summers meant much green tomato chutney. The progress of winter was calibrated by the decay of racked apples and the increasing audacity of predators. The seasons, being untrustworthy, were more respected, and their beginnings marked by pious ceremonies. Weather, long since diminished to a mere determinant of personal mood, became central again: something external, operating its system of rewards and punishments, mainly the latter. It had no rivalry or interference from industrial weather, and was self-indulgent in its dominance: secretive, immanent, capricious, ever threatening the miraculous. Fogs had character and motion, thunder regained its divinity. Rivers flooded, sea-walls burst, and sheep were found in treetops when the waters subsided.

Chemicals drained from the land, the colours grew gentler, and the light untainted; the moon, with less competition, now rose more dominantly. In the enlarged countryside, wildlife bred freely. Hares multiplied; deer and boar were released into the woods from game farms; the urban fox returned to a healthier diet of bloodied, pulsing flesh. Common land was re-established; fields and farms grew smaller; hedgerows were replanted. Butterflies again justified the thickness of old butterfly books; migratory birds which for generations had passed swiftly over the toxic isle now stayed longer, and some decided to settle. Domestic animals grew smaller and nimbler. Meat-eating became popular again, as did poaching. Children were sent mushrooming in the woods, and the bolder fell stupefied from a tentative nibble; others dug esoteric roots, or smoked dried-fern roll-ups and pretended to hallucinate.

The village where Martha had lived for five years was a small agglomeration where the road forked towards Salisbury. For decades, lorries had stirred the cottages' shingly foundations and

fumes darkened their rendering; every window was double-glazed and only the young or the drunk crossed the road unnecessarily. Now the split village had recovered its wholeness. Hens and geese wandered proprietorially across cracked tarmac on to which children had chalked skipping games; ducks colonized the triangular village green and defended its small pond. Washing, hung on rope lines by wooden pegs, flapped dry in the clean wind. As roof-tiles became unavailable, each cottage returned to reed or thatch. Without traffic, the village felt safer and closer; without television, the villagers talked more, even if there seemed less to talk about than before. Nobody's business went unobserved; pedlars were greeted warily; children were sent to bed with tales of highwaymen and gypsies rustling their imaginations, though few of their parents had seen a gypsy, and none a highwayman.

The village was neither idyllic nor dystopic. There were no outstanding idiots, despite the best mimicry of Jez Harris. If there was stupidity, as *The Times of London* insisted, then it was of the old kind, based on ignorance, rather than the new, based on knowledge. The Reverend Coleman was a well-intentioned bore whose clerical status had arrived by post; Mr Mullin the schoolmaster a half-respected authority. The shop opened at irregular intervals designed to fox even the most loyal customer; the pub was tied to a Salisbury brewery and the publican's wife unfit to make a sandwich. Opposite the house of Fred Temple, saddler, cobbler and barber, there was a pound for stray animals. Twice weekly a throbbing bus took villagers to the market town, passing the cottage hospital and the mid-Wessex lunatic asylum; the driver was invariably addressed as George, and was happy to do errands for stay-at-homes. There was crime, but in a culture of voluntary austerity it did not rise to much above theft of the occasional pullet. Villagers learned to leave their cottages unlocked.

At first Martha had been sentimental, until Ray Stout the publican – formerly a motorway toll-collector – leaned across the bar of the snug with her gin-and-tonic and the words, 'I

suppose you find our little community *rather amusing?*' Later she was depressed by the incuriosity and low horizons, until Ray Stout challenged her with 'Missing the bright lights by now, I dare say?' Finally, she became accustomed to the quiet and necessary repetitiveness, the caution, the incessant espionage, the helpfulness, the mental incest, the long evenings. She made friends with a pair of cheese-makers, former commodity traders; she sat on the parish council and never failed the church flower roster. She walked the hills; she borrowed books from the mobile library which parked on the green every other Tuesday. In her garden she grew Snowball turnips and Red Drumhead cabbage, Bath cos, St George cauliflower and Rousham Park Hero onions. In memory of Mr A. Jones, she grew more beans than she needed: Caseknife and Painted Lady, Golden Butter and Scarlet Emperor. None of them, to her eye, looked worthy of laying on black velvet.

She was bored, of course; but then, she had returned to Anglia as a migrant bird rather than a zealot. She fucked no-one; she grew older; she knew the contours of her solitude. She was not sure if she had done right, if Anglia had done right, if a nation could reverse its course and its habits. Was it mere willed antiquarianism, as *The Times* alleged – or had that trait been part of its nature, its history, anyway? Was it a brave new venture, one of spiritual renewal and moral self-sufficiency, as political leaders maintained? Or was it simply inevitable, a forced response to economic collapse, depopulation and European revenge? These questions were not debated in the village: a sign perhaps that the country's fretful, psoriatic self-consciousness had finally come to an end.

And eventually she herself fitted into the village, because she herself no longer itched with her own private questions. She no longer debated whether or not life was a triviality, and what the consequences might be if it were. Nor did she know whether the stillness she had attained was proof of maturity or weariness. Nowadays she went to church as a villager, alongside other villagers who stooked their umbrellas in the leaky

porch and sat through inoffensive sermons with stomachs calling out for the joint of lamb they had given the baker to roast in his oven. For thine is the wigwam, the flowers and the story: just another pretty verse.

Most afternoons Martha would unlatch the back door, stir the ducks to fussy flapping as she crossed the green, and take the bridle path to Gibbet Hill. Hikers – or at least, real ones – were rare nowadays, and the sunken track was overgrown again each springtime. She wore an ancient pair of jodhpurs against the briars, and kept a hand half-raised to repel the flailing hawthorn hedge. Here and there a stream trickled into the path, making the flints shine indigo beneath her feet. She climbed with a patience discovered late in life, and emerged on to a stretch of common pasture surrounding the stand of elms on Gibbet Hill.

She sat on the bench, her windcheater snagging a dulled metal plaque to a long-dead farmer, and looked down over the fields he must once have ploughed. Was it the case that colours dimmed as the eye grew elderly? Or was it rather that in youth your excitement about the world transferred itself on to everything you saw and made it brighter? The landscape she surveyed was buff and bistre, ash and nettle, dun and roan, slate and bottle. Against this backdrop moved a few fawn sheep. The little evidence of human presence also accorded to the natural laws of discretion, neutrality and fade: farmer Bayliss's purple barn, once the subject of aesthetic debate among the parish council's planning committee, was now easing to a gentle bruise.

Martha recognized that she was fading too. It had come as a shock one afternoon when she gave little Billy Temple a good telling-off for decapitating one of the vicar's hollyhocks with his willow switch, and the boy – hot-eyed, defiant, socks rolled down – stood his ground for a moment and then, as he turned to run, shouted, 'My Dad says you're an old maid.' She went home and looked at herself in the mirror: hair blown loose from her clips, plaid shirt beneath a grey windcheater, complexion whose ruddiness had finally asserted itself against

decades of skin-care, and what seemed to her – though who was she to tell? – a mildness, almost a milkeness to her eyes. Well then, old maid, if that's what they saw.

Yet it was a strange trajectory for a life: that she, so knowing a child, so disenchanting an adult, should be transformed into an old maid. Hardly one of the traditional kind, who acquired the status by lifelong virginity, the dutiful care of ageing parents, and a tutting moral aloofness. She remembered when there had been a fashion among Christians, often quite young ones, to declare themselves – on what possible authority? – born again. Perhaps she could be a born-again old maid. And perhaps it was also the case that, for all a lifetime's internal struggling, you were finally no more than what others saw you as. That was your nature, whether you liked it or not.

What did old maids do? They were solitary, yet took part in village affairs; they had good manners, and appeared unaware of the entire history of sexuality; they had, sometimes, their own story, their own lived life, whose disappointments they were reluctant to divulge; they went for healthy walks in all weathers, knew about mustard baths, and brought nettle soup to invalids; they kept small souvenirs whose poignancy evaded the comprehension of outsiders; they read the newspaper.

So Martha seemed to be obliging others as well as pleasing herself when, each Friday, she boiled some milk for her morning chicory and settled down to the *Mid-Wessex Gazette*. She looked forward to its concentrated parochiality. It was better to commune with the reality you knew; duller, perhaps, but also more fitting. For many years mid-Wessex had been free of air crashes and political coups, massacres, drug hauls, African famines and Hollywood divorces; so such matters were not reported. Nor would she read anything about the Isle of Wight, as it was still referred to on the mainland. Some years previously Anglia had renounced all territorial claim to Baron Pitman's fiefdom. It had been a necessary casting-off, even if few had been impressed. *The Times of London* had mockingly commented that this was the action of a bankrupt parent

exasperatedly declaring that it would no longer underwrite the bills of its millionaire child.

There were still magazines where you could read of grosser excitements beyond the coastline; but not in the *Mid-Wessex Gazette*, or any of its stablemates. It was truly called a gazette, since it was not a paper containing novelties; rather, it was a listing of what had been agreed, and what had finished happening. The price of livestock and feed; the market rates for vegetables and fruit; proceedings from assize courts and small-claims tribunals; details of chattels sold by auction; golden, silver, and merely hopeful weddings; fêtes, festivals, and the opening of gardens to the public; sports results from school, parish, district and mid-kingdom; births; funerals. Martha read every page, even – especially – those in which she had no obvious interest. She avidly scanned lists of items sold by the hundredweight, stone and pound for amounts expressed in pounds, shillings and pence. This was hardly nostalgia, since most of these measures had been abolished before she was sentient. Or perhaps it was, and nostalgia of a truer kind: not for what you knew, or thought you had known, as a child, but for what you could never have known. So, with an attention which was artificial without being specious, Martha noted that beetroot were holding steady at thirteen and sixpence the hundredweight, while burdock had dropped a shilling in the week. She was not surprised: what on earth made people think burdock was worth eating? In her opinion, most of these retroveg were consumed not for reasons of nutrition, or even necessity, but out of fashionable affectation. Simplicity had become confused with self-mortification.

The *Gazette* reported the outside world in only a contingent fashion: as a source of weather, as the destination of migratory birds currently quitting mid-Wessex. There was also a weekly chart of the night sky. Martha examined this as closely as she did the market prices. Where Sirius might be glimpsed, what dull red planet blinked near the eastern horizon, how to recognize Orion's Belt. This, she thought, was how the human spirit

should divide itself, between the entirely local and the nearly eternal. How much of her life had been spent with all the stuff in the middle: career, money, sex, heart-trouble, appearance, anxiety, fear, yearning. People might say it was easier for her to renounce all this having once tasted it; that now she was an old woman, or maid, and that if she were obliged to lift fields of beetroot rather than idly monitor its price she might have more regrets over what she had renounced. Well, that too was probably the case. But everyone must die, however much they distracted themselves with the stuff in the middle. And how she readied herself for an eventual place in the newly-scythed churchyard was her business.

The village Fête took place on one of those gusty Anglian days in early June, when a fine spray of rain constantly threatens, and urgent clouds are late for their appointment in the next kingdom of the heptarchy. Martha looked out of her kitchen window at the sloping triangular green where a stained marquee was chivvying its guy-ropes. Harris the farrier was checking their tension and banging in tent-pegs more deeply with a wooden mallet. He did this in a showy, proprietorial manner, as if generations back his family had been granted letters patent to perform this valiant ritual. Martha was still bemused by Jez: on the one hand his inventions seemed so obviously fraudulent; on the other, this city-bred American with a joke accent made one of the most convincing and devoted villagers.

The marquee was secure; and here, riding towards it, wind in her hair, was Jez's blonde niece Jacky Thornhill. Jacky was to be Queen of the May, though as someone pointed out it was now early June, which as someone else pointed out was irrelevant because May was the tree not the month, or at least they thought so, which sent them to consult Mr Mullin the schoolmaster who said he'd look it up, and when he had he reported back that it referred to the may blossom which the Queen traditionally wore in her hair, though this must come to the same thing because presumably the may tree blossomed

in May, but in any case Jacky's Mum had made her a coronet out of gold-painted cardboard, and that was what she wore, and there the story ended.

It was the vicar's right and duty to open the Fête. The Reverend Coleman lived in the Old Rectory, next to the church. Previous vicars had lived on a plaster-board estate which had long since been bulldozed. The Old Rectory had fallen vacant when its last lay owner, a French businessman, had returned to his own country during the emergency measures. It seemed natural to villagers that the vicar should live in the rectory, just as a pullet should live in a henhouse; but the vicar was not allowed to get above himself any more than a hen should presume to be a turkey. The Reverend Coleman was not to conclude, just because he was back where his predecessors had lived for centuries, that God was back in his church or that Christian morality was the law of the village. In fact, most parishioners did live according to an attenuated Christian code. But when they came to church on Sunday it was more from a need for regular society and a taste for tuneful hymns than in order to receive spiritual advice and the promise of eternal life from the pulpit. The vicar knew better than to use his position to propose any coercive theological system; while he had soon learnt that moralizing sermons were paid for on the silver plate with a trouser button and a valueless euro.

So the Reverend Coleman did not even allow himself a ritual remark about the Good Lord making the sun to shine upon the village for this special day. Ecumenically, he even made a point of shaking hands with Fred Temple, who had come dressed as a scarlet devil. When the *Gazette* photographer made them pose together, he slyly stamped on Fred's articulated tail, while ostentatiously – even paganly – crossing his fingers. Then he made a short speech mentioning almost everyone in the village by name, declared the Fête open, and made a snappy, take-it-away gesture to the four-piece band parked next to the scrumpy tent.

The band – tuba, trumpet, squeezebox and fiddle – began

with 'Land of Hope and Glory', which some villagers thought a hymn in deference to the vicar, and others an old Beatles song from the last century. An impromptu procession then toured the green at unsynchronized speeds: Jacky the May Queen, awkwardly athwart a shampooed shire horse, its mane and anklets feathering more spectacularly in the breeze than Jacky's home-permed ringlets; Fred Temple, scarlet tail wrapped round his neck, at the controls of a farting traction engine, all belts and clatter; Phil Henderson, chicken farmer, mechanical genius and suitor of blonde Jacky, at the wheel of his open-top Mini-Cooper, which he had found abandoned in a barn and converted to run off bottled domestic gas; and finally, after some satirical urging, PC Brown on his bicycle, drawn truncheon aloft, left thumb on tinkly bell, cycle clips at the ankles, false moustache on the lip. This unequal quartet lapped the green half-a-dozen times, until even close family saw no more point in cheering.

There were lemonade and ginger-beer stalls; skittles, bowling-for-a-pig and guess-the-weight-of-the-goose; a coconut shy at which, in deference to long tradition, half the coconuts were glued to the cups and sent the wooden balls ricocheting back at the thrower; a bran-tub, and ducking for apples. Rickety trestle-tables were stacked with seed cake and preserves: jams, jellies, pickles and chutneys. Ray Stout the publican, cheeks rouged and turban awry, revealing his widow's peak, crouched in a crepuscular booth offering fortunes from lime tea-leaves. Children could play pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey and have their faces bearded with burnt cork; then for a halfpenny they could enter a tent containing three antique distorting mirrors which rendered small preeners helpless with disbelief.

Later, as the afternoon drew on, there was a three-legged race, won by Jacky Thornhill and Phil Henderson, whose deftness at this disharmonious event prompted wisecracs to observe that they were well fitted for marriage. Two embarrassed youths in stout, loosely-cut linen jackets gave a demonstration of Cornish wrestling; as one prepared to try a flying mare he kept

half an eye on Coach Mullin, who refereed with an open encyclopaedia in hand. For the dressing-up competition Ray Stout, retaining his crimson slap but reorganizing his turban, came as Queen Victoria; also present were Lord Nelson, Snow White, Robin Hood, Boadicea and Edna Halley. Martha Cochrane, for what it mattered, had decided to give her vote to Jez Harris's Edna Halley, despite her eerie kinship with Ray Stout's Queen Victoria. But Mr Mullin sought the farrier's disqualification on the grounds that contestants had been required to dress as real people; so an *ad hoc* meeting of the parish council was called to discuss the question of whether or not Edna Halley was a real person. Jez Harris counterclaimed by challenging the real existence of Snow White and Robin Hood. Some said you were only real if someone had seen you; some that you were only real if you were in a book; some that you were real if enough people believed in you. Opinions were offered at length, fuelled by scrumpy and ignorant certainty.

Martha was losing interest. What held her attention now were the children's faces, which expressed such willing yet complex trust in reality. As she saw it, they had not yet reached the age of incredulity, only of wonder; so that even when they disbelieved, they also believed. The tubby, peering dwarf in the distorting mirror was them and wasn't them: both were true. They saw all too easily that Queen Victoria was no more than Ray Stout with a red face and a scarf round his head, yet they believed in both Queen Victoria and Ray Stout at the same time. It was like that old puzzle from psychological tests: is this a goblet or a pair of profiles facing one another? Children could switch from one to the other, or see both at the same time, without any trouble. She, Martha, could no longer do that. All she could see was Ray Stout making a happy fool of himself.

Could you reinvent innocence? Or was it always constructed, grafted on to the old disbelief? Were the children's faces proof of this renewable innocence – or was that just sentimentality? PC Brown, drunk on scrumpy, was circling the village green again, thumb tinkling his bell, saluting all he passed with his

truncheon. PC Brown, whose two months' training had been done long ago with a private security firm, who was attached to no police station, and hadn't caught a single criminal since his arrival in the village; but he had the uniform, the bicycle, the truncheon and the now-loosening moustache. This seemed to be enough.

Martha Cochrane left the Fête as the air was becoming thicker and the dancing more rough-and-ready. She took the bridle path to Gibbet Hill and sat on the bench looking down at the village. Had there really been a gibbet up here? Had corpses swung while rooks pecked out their eyeballs? Or was that in turn the fanciful, touristy notion of some Gothic vicar a couple of centuries back? Briefly, she imagined Gibbet Hill as an Island feature. Clockwork rooks? A bunjee jump from the gallows to know what it felt like, followed by a drink with the Hooded Hangman? Something like that.

Below her, a bonfire had been lit, and a conga line was circling, led by Phil Henderson. He was waving a plastic flag bearing the cross of St George. Patron saint of England, Aragon and Portugal, she remembered; also protector of Genoa and Venice. The conga, national dance of Cuba and Anglia. The band, fortified with more scrumpy, had begun to slew through its programme yet again, like a looped tape. 'The British Grenadiers' had given way to 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles'; next, Martha knew without thinking, would come 'Penny Lane' followed by 'Land of Hope and Glory'. The conga line, a panto caterpillar, adjusted its swaying stride to each change of tune. Jez Harris began to set off jumping jacks, which chased the children into shrieks and laughter. A slow cloud teasingly released a gibbous moon. There was a rustle at her feet. No, not a badger, despite the farrier's decorative claims; just a rabbit.

The moon went in again; the air grew cold. The band played 'Land of Hope and Glory' for the last time, then fell silent. All she could hear now was the occasional bird-impersonation of PC Brown's bell. A rocket staggered diagonally into the sky. The conga line, reduced to three, circled the weakening fire.

It had been a day to remember. The Fête was established; already it seemed to have its history. Twelve months from now a new May Queen would be proclaimed and new fortunes read from tea-leaves. There was another rustle nearby. Again, not a badger but a rabbit, fearless and quietly confident of its territory. Martha Cochrane watched it for a few seconds, then got to her feet, and began to descend the hill.